

# Back to School

by Dr. Kathy Kapp-Simon

Fall is here and many school doors are opening for the new year. This is a time of anticipation and excitement for many; apprehension and worry for some. What this experience is like for your child in many ways is out of your control; however, there are ways that you can help your child make a good adjustment.

Before sending your child to school, educate her about her facial difference. This education is best carried out in the context of a childhood where talking about your child's specific facial difference is as natural as talking about the color of her hair or which outfit she will wear to school. In my experience, the common thread seen in families where the child has done well is the family's ability to view the facial difference as one characteristic of the child, which is no more important than any other. A child who can look in the mirror and point to his nose, mouth, cleft lip scar, and hair with equal comfort will be more at ease when faced with a question about his lip from a classmate. Thus the emotional "weight" that is given to discussions of facial difference is critical in influencing the attitude that your child develops regarding her facial characteristics. Feelings of shame or pity have no place when discussing these issues.

All children, regardless of age, need to have a simple reply to the question, "what happened to your face (lip, nose, cheek, etc)?" How children answer that question sets a tone for their interaction with peers. An unself-conscious reply that provides simple but accurate information is the best strategy. Confidence is reflected in your child's ability to make eye contact, his tone of voice, and his ability to convey an appreciation of the other child's interest in him. Educating your child in a matter-of-fact manner about the importance of his being a "teacher" with the other children will help ease his self-consciousness. He should be taught that many children are unfamiliar with his medical condition and questions are often asked out of curiosity, not malice. You also model appropriate responses each time you respond to question from a teacher, an acquaintance, or someone in the supermarket.

Success in school is at least in part related to a child's feeling of social acceptance. A child who has experienced acceptance and respect within her own family is more likely to exhibit self-confidence in social situations. This acceptance starts with a recognition and validation

of your child's feelings even when they are different from your own. If your child is fearful of attending school, you will be most helpful if you acknowledge that fear and communicate that you accept the fear as reasonable. A simple statement such as, "Meeting the new kids at school is kind of scary," validates your child's feelings and lets her know that that you understand where she is coming from. Repeated validation of a child's feelings enhances self-esteem because it allows a child to believe that her perceptions of the world are rational. Feelings of esteem in turn foster self-confidence and enable your child to engage her peers in positive social interactions.

Despite our best efforts most children, whether or not they have a facial difference, encounter some teasing during their school years. A self-confident child will recognize that this teasing occurs because of the other child's needs and weaknesses rather than allow the teasing to impact his own self-esteem. As parents we foster this perception by teaching our child ways of responding to the teasing that both preserve self-worth and increase our child's feelings of confidence. To this end, teach your child that teasers are generally looking for a reaction. They want the teased child to feel bad, to entertain the teasers friends through a reaction, or to behave in a way that gets the teased child in trouble. Your child can deflect the teasing by refusing to give the desired response and instead reacting in an unexpected way. Generally this means teaching your child to look at the teaser directly and letting him know how he feels about the teasing. Body language and tone of voice are very important when delivering a response—often more important than the words that are used. A statement such as "I don't like being called names; I have better things to do than listening to your taunts" delivered in a calm, but firm tone of voice that demands respect and followed by your child's determined movement toward a group of friendly classmates will often deter the teaser. To be effective, children need to practice responding to teasing in a safe environment, either at home or with a trusted teacher or counselor at school.

*Kathy Kapp-Simon, Ph.D. is a pediatric psychologist who currently works with the Northwestern University Cleft and Palate Institute. She has worked with children who have facial differences for 25 years.*