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Talking to your child about the cleft they were born with

The Welsh Centre for Cleft Lip and Palate

Cleft Psychology Service

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www.wales.nhs.uk/cleft-team

Introduction

Parents of children born with a cleft lip and/or palate are sometimes unsure about how to talk to their child about their cleft. This leaflet aims to give you some ideas about talking to and supporting your child as they grow older.

Talking to your child about having being born with a cleft

Talking to your child about having been born with a cleft can seem like a difficult prospect. However, talking openly and honestly can help your child to feel accepted and build their self esteem. By talking to your child you can also help them to prepare for potential comments and questions from others.

The most important thing about talking to young children is to keep your explanations simple. Giving matter-of-fact explanations can reassure your child that there is nothing to worry about. For example:

Linking feelings to your child's behaviour and body language can help him/her to learn how to identify and express emotion:

“You seem really mad. You are stamping your feet and shouting. I know you don't want to do what Mummy says.”

As your child grows and develops, it can also be important to give them opportunities to express their feelings. It will be comforting for your child to know that they can share their feelings with someone who they trust and who is open to listening. This can be particularly helpful if children feel unhappy with some aspect of their appearance or speech because of having been born with a cleft (although it is important to remember that this will not be case for many children).

In this situation, helping your child to be specific about what they don't like can be helpful. For example, being able to say “I don't like it when people stare at my lip scar” or “I get frustrated when people don't understand me” allows your child to say exactly what they don't like. This is much better than it becoming “I don't like myself because people stare/don't understand me”. This can also help your child to consider what he or she doesn't like at the same time as considering all the things they do like about themselves.

Getting help from a Psychologist

Psychologists in the cleft team can help with all of the strategies mentioned in this booklet and can support you if you are finding the reactions of others difficult. If you have any further questions or would like an appointment, please contact the Cleft Psychology Service.

Positive self talk

Sometimes children can become upset if they think that they look or sound different and because people ask them questions. In these situations, teaching your child to say positive things to themselves can help them to cope if they're finding things difficult. Here are some examples of 'positive self talk':

- "My family like me the way I am"
- "People ask questions because they want to know about me"
- "How I look/sound doesn't matter. I am good at lots of things like drawing and football"
- "That other little boy was just curious. He was not trying to be nasty or to upset me"

Talking about feelings

Experiencing a wide variety of feelings including anger, sadness and irritation is part of life and it is important for children to learn how to name these feelings, talk about them, respond to them and express them appropriately. A good way to start with this, is to name feelings in your child and yourself:

"You are so happy today"

- "That is your lip scar"
- "Your lip has a red mark from where the doctor's fixed it when you were a baby"
- "You were born with a cleft. It's fixed now"
- "It's hard for you to make some sounds. The doctor's are going to do an operation to make it easier for you"
- "When you were in mum's tummy before you were born, the roof of your mouth didn't join together properly. The doctor's did an operation to fix this when you were a baby"

How you talk to your child is also important as young children can learn a lot from our body language and tone of voice. Showing that you are calm and comfortable when talking about your child's cleft can reassure them that being born with a cleft is not a problem.

Rather than sitting down and having a long discussion with your child, short explanations and descriptions can be used in daily activities. For example, explanations can be given in a matter-of-fact way when playing with your child, in the bath or when waiting in the car for an older sibling.

Talking to your child in this way can help them to understand that having a cleft is a small part of who they are. Considering this in the context of their positive personality traits, talents, likes and dislikes can help them develop a positive self image and cope with life's inevitable ups and downs.

Talking to siblings

It's natural for siblings to be curious or concerned about their brother or sister having been born with a cleft. Older siblings will be aware of visits to hospital, comments and questions from others and may be asked questions by other children.

It is important that siblings are given simple explanations about their brother or sister's cleft from early on. This will help them to feel reassured about their sibling having been born with a cleft. It can also help siblings to feel confident in responding to questions and comments from others.



Helping your child to deal with comments and questions

Children are naturally curious, so if your child looks or sounds different, other children may ask your child questions. You can help your child to deal with these kinds of questions by encouraging him or her to give a quick and simple explanation to other children.

One way of doing this is to help your child to practise a sentence explaining about the cleft and then reassuring the other child that this is not a big deal. Here are some examples:

- "I had a poorly lip when I was born. The doctor's fixed it and it's fine now."
- "That's just my cleft scar, it's not a big deal/it doesn't hurt."
- "Some words are hard for me to say. I like talking to you though."
- "I was born with a cleft and sometimes I sound different. The doctors are going to do an operation to help with this."

