

The psychosocial impact of living with visible Differences as a teenager

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Teenagers live in a society obsessed with appearance and are particularly vulnerable to social and cultural pressures to conform to often unrealistic beauty ideals. During this time, they experience developmental changes, which can lead to an increased awareness and focus on appearance. In addition, they can be sensitive about aspects of their appearance they believe sets them apart from their peers (Williamson, 2014).

Around 2.5% of adolescents are living with a condition or injury that results in an altered or different appearance (e.g. a cleft lip and/or palate, eczema or scarring), often called a visible difference (Changing Faces, 2010). The psychosocial impact of looking "different" in a world where an attractive appearance is

highly valued is well documented (Smolak, 2012). Given variations in cause, body parts affected, and whether the condition is permanent or not, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the nature of this impact. However, the common difficulties reported usually relate to negative self-perceptions and difficulties with social interaction.

For many young people, feeling or thinking they do not match up to beauty ideals can lead to body dissatisfaction and feelings of low self-worth, this is particularly the case among those with a visible difference. This is an issue, as satisfaction with appearance has been found to be a major factor influencing self-esteem during adolescence, which can have implications for other areas of their lives (e.g. education). Living with a visible difference as a teenager can result in difficulties with social interaction and some will have to deal with staring and unwanted questioning or comments about their appearance (Rumsey et al, 2004). Some experience teasing, bullying and rejection from their peers, or have trouble making friends or forming romantic relationships, all of which require social confidence (Hearst et al; 2008). All these factors have the potential to lead to feelings of isolation from their peer group and wider society (Williamson, 2014).

However, not all young people living with a visible difference struggle and some consider it to have a positive impact on their lives (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2007). Many factors can positively influence how well someone adjusts. Research typically finds that the severity, cause and location of a visible difference does not predict distress (Feragen, 2012). Rather, possessing a well-rounded self-concept, valuing aspects of oneself other than appearance (e.g. determination and kindness) and having good social support from family members, friends and health professionals, are much better predictors of how well someone copes (APPG on Body Image, 2012). Positive attitudes, values and behaviours of family members are particularly influential, because young people tend to model their behaviour on their parents (Williamson, 2014).

The psychological and social difficulties that some young people with a visible difference encounter, in addition to requests from young people and health professionals for easy to access psychosocial support, led researchers at the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England to develop a multi-media website called YP Face IT.

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YP Face IT provides support and advice for any young person aged 12-17 who has worries or is unhappy because they have an appearance-altering condition. The program was designed by experts in the field of appearance psychology and young people living with a range of appearance-altering conditions. The intention is for YP Face IT to be widely available via healthcare practitioners and charitable organisations. You can read more about YP Face IT on the website (www.yfaceit.co.uk) or follow the Centre for Appearance Research on Facebook or Twitter to find out more about the types of research they do.



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