

## The School Years: An Introduction to Psychology

### 1. What is Psychology?

Clinical psychologists use playing and ‘talking’ therapies to help children feel better, behave differently or think in a more helpful way. They are not psychiatrists and do not prescribe medication.

### 2. Why might a child with a cleft lip and/or palate need psychology?

Children with a cleft lip and/or palate may face some or all of the following challenges: looking different, speech difficulties, hearing impairments, having to deal with staring, comments or questions, having to cope with regular hospital appointments and worries about operations, bullying or teasing. These can make a child feel different to their peers and in turn may result in poor self confidence and low self-esteem, difficulty making friends and behaviour problems.

There are times when a child with a cleft lip and/or palate may be more vulnerable than others. These include times of change (moving up an academic year or changing schools) and before operations.

**However it is important to remember that many children with a cleft lip and/or palate do well at school and do not need to see a psychologist.**

### 3. What’s involved?

This varies from child to child but will generally involve the following:

**Step One** The child and family will be invited to meet the psychologist for an assessment. This is an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other and to explore any issues or difficulties. It may also involve filling out questionnaires and the psychologist may need to contact your child’s school.

**Step Two** Once the assessment is complete the psychologist puts it all together to try to understand what is causing and maintaining the difficulties.

**Step Three** Once they have collated all the information the psychologist decides what therapy to use. It may include working with the child to help them feel better about themselves, teaching strategies to deal with questions or to manage teasing or bullying, or putting children in touch

with each other. The psychologist may also work with the family e.g. developing parenting techniques to help manage behaviour difficulties.

#### **4. How can school support the child?**

##### **Good Communication**

It is important that the school is aware of any potential difficulties that may arise. It can help if you communicate with your child's teacher regularly to keep them updated about their cleft treatment. It is especially important to advise the school if your child is experiencing any difficulties (like hearing difficulties or worries about speaking out in class) so that they are aware and can support your child should any issues arise in class. You can use the 'About me' document to help with this at the beginning of each year.

#### **5. Helping with school change**

When changing schools it can help to visit the new school and practice the journey before term begins. Practice your child's explanation with them (see 6.) so that they won't be upset if faced with questions. Encourage them to use confident body language (smile, head up, shoulders back) as this will help them to make friends. Remind yourself and your child that it is normal to feel nervous when changing schools and it will soon become familiar.

#### **6. Dealing with comments and questions**

Young children are naturally curious and will often stare or ask questions. This is more likely to occur during playtime and when the child comes into contact with children from different classes. A short simple answer will satisfy most young children. Each child deals with comments and questions in a different way and it is important that teachers and staff who are on playground duty are aware of your child's way of dealing with them and, if they choose to answer questions, what they say.

For example Michael and his family have decided to use the following strategies to deal with comments and questions:

**1. Explain** "I was born with a gap in my mouth and the doctors sewed it up when I was a baby."

**2. Reassure** "It doesn't hurt."

**3. Change the subject** "Do you want to play football?"

If Michael is ever upset by questions his teachers have been asked to do the same thing (Explain using Michael's phrase, reassure and move the conversation on).

Or

**1. Explain** "I was born with a cleft lip. That scar is where it was sewn up when I was a baby."

**2. Reassure** "It doesn't hurt."

**3. Change the subject** " Have you done your maths homework?"

Use the 'About me' document to tell the teacher about the phrase that you have developed with your child.

### **7. Teasing or Bullying**

Most schools have procedures for dealing with bullying. Any sudden change in behaviour may be due to bullying. Signs include becoming withdrawn or distressed, bedwetting, unexplained bruises, scratches or cuts or a deterioration in school work. The clinical psychologist may work with your child to help them cope and manage bullying. They may wish to liaise with the school to support your child. The charity Kidscape ([www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)) offer advice on how to recognise that a child is being bullied and suggest useful ideas and strategies for children, parents and schools to deal with it.

### **8. Helping with friendships and self esteem**

Children with low self-esteem may have low expectations of themselves. This can affect how they participate or behave in class and how well they do academically. They may behave in ways that can be seen as difficult such as refusing to do tasks, being disruptive or aggressive. Children with low self esteem can benefit from help in recognising their abilities and encouragement in developing these. Children often become aware of these abilities for the first time by having it named and being able to talk about it.

For those activities where children are assigned to pairs or groups, teachers could help with the grouping rather than allow children to select each other based on popularity. You can also help your child by encouraging out of school activities/clubs or arranging play dates. The Changing Faces literature offers helpful advice on helping with self-esteem (see page our 'Useful Contacts' document for details.)