

# Parents and Teachers

## Living with Prosopagnosia



Prosopagnosia, commonly known as face blindness, is a neurological disorder, that affects an individual's ability to recognise familiar faces, such as those of teachers, friends, famous people, and even close family members. Research shows that face blindness affects around 1 in 50 of the population, so that perhaps 300,000 children in the UK are struggling to recognise faces.

Children (and adults) are unlikely to realise that the way they recognise people differs from that of others. However, the condition may be picked up by adults who notice the impact:



- Children may mistake similarly dressed people.
- Have difficulty making friends.
- Feel anxious and stressed in social situations.
- Avoid using people's names and avoid eye contact.
- Have difficulty following characters in a film.
- Be seen as inattentive or distractible.

Some children may be labelled as ADHD or autistic. While a child may find ways of coping at primary school, the move to secondary school with larger numbers of students in different class groupings, can be very challenging.

## About face blindness

Face blindness can be acquired through brain injury or illness, but is more usually developmental (i.e. present from birth), and often seems to run in families. People are affected to different degrees, and most of those with developmental prosopagnosia are not diagnosed until later life, since coping strategies often mask their difficulty and its severity.

People affected make use of things other than faces to identify people, such as mannerisms, gait, voice, clothing or hair styles. Using these, plus clues in conversations and the context, can be effective, but requires conscious effort (and a good memory) and is quite unlike the automatic recognition others rely on without thinking.

The strategies people use to cope in social situations may range from greeting everyone to avoiding eye contact. Face blind children can be seen as lacking social skills, or as withdrawn

or distracted, when in fact they may be busy thinking around the situation in an attempt to appear normal. They may actually be very attentive and observant - of everything except faces!

Fast moving situations, may be particularly difficult. Students with prosopagnosia will find some tasks particularly difficult, e.g. taking a message to someone, handing back homework or selecting team members. Such situations are likely to produce significant anxiety.

## Identifying & Supporting Prosopagnosic Children

Awareness of the condition and developing an understanding of its impact is the first step, without this a child may be misdiagnosed or their particular social strategies misinterpreted. Bournemouth University lists common symptoms of prosopagnosia in children:

<https://prosopagnosiaresearch.org/face-blindness/children>

Formal diagnosis is often best sought by contacting one of the University Research Centres.

**Practical Help** - A register at the beginning of class will help the child to identify who's sitting where. A photo-board may help children to 'learn' the faces of others, but depends on the severity of their face blindness. On outings, a student with face blindness may be particularly vulnerable, it can help if the adults (as well as the children) wear something distinctive. Drama may be used to help children build their self-confidence and explore social skills in a secure environment, using props, costumes or masks to distinguish people.



**Coping Strategies** - Children can be supported in using certain strategies to manage social situations, from adopting generic greetings to noting identifying features. Bournemouth University have produced a list of coping strategies employed by adults with prosopagnosia.

<https://prosopagnosiaresearch.org/face-blindness/coping-strategies>

Whether or not to tell other children may need careful consideration, but may help them to understand when a fellow student fails to recognise a close friend. Both teachers and fellow students can help to provide invaluable prompts in everyday situations.

## Rights, Advice & Information

Face blindness has now been the subject of research into neurodiversity for the last 20+ years. It is gradually being included in training programmes for professionals, and work to increase awareness and understanding of the condition is gathering momentum.

As educational psychologists, teachers and lecturers working with children and young people, become aware of face blindness, they can identify those who may be affected by the condition and start to address the particular needs of face blind students.

Since prosopagnosia affects around 2% of the population, there will be staff in some schools and colleges who are face blind themselves, though they may be unaware of the condition. Employers need to work with them to find positive solutions to the challenges the condition may present for a particular job or role, as part of their duty of care and equal opportunities commitment.

*For more information on prosopagnosia please email [info@faceblind.org.uk](mailto:info@faceblind.org.uk)*

**Face Blind UK - [www.faceblind.org.uk](http://www.faceblind.org.uk)**

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