

I have been asked to chat to you all briefly from the perspective of a parent who has a child with a visible difference and my concerns for my child's future school years.

INTRODUCING <Child's Name> & CMN

This is old news for some; however, many of you are not aware of *Child's Name* condition so I feel it is worth repeating. *Child's Name* is my eldest daughter; she is 4 and is in *name of class*. She was born with a rare skin condition known as Congenital Melanocytic Naevus, CMN for short. It is essentially a giant mole which is dark brown, lumpy and hairy and covers 65% of her body capacity, running from her shoulder blades down her back to her knees and wrapping around her tummy. She also has over a hundred smaller CMN which look like moles, all over. You may not have already noticed *Child's Name* CMN yet as it is not really visible when she is fully clothed but will be noticeable during the summer and when changing for PE.

WHAT ARE THE MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES?

CMNs pose significant medical problems. The affected skin can be very lumpy, hairy, dark in colour and more fragile than normal skin. Patients often experience dryness and itchiness which can affect sleep. Around 20% of children with large CMNs can have abnormalities in the brain and spinal cord. The most common problem is pigment-containing cells (like a CMN) in the substance of the brain. There is also a low but significant risk of malignant melanoma (skin cancer).

The challenges of growing up with a visible difference can be significant. The obvious psychological and sociological developmental challenges for children due to appearing different to others can be more devastating in themselves than the physiological challenges.

We have concerns about *Child's Name* future in school as she is a little different to other children and I am worried that she may be singled out for this reason.

Experience has proven that some children can be very cruel if one of their peers looks unusual. Children with visible differences often experience staring, name-calling and other forms of bullying.

Having said this I am sure that many pupils with visible differences do have positive experiences at school and this is due mainly to the culture that the school creates, supported by the parents of pupils attending that school.

HOW CAN <School's Name> HELP?

A school's culture has a significant impact on a child's experience at school. Teachers and parents need to understand that children with visible differences are vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination.

Help us stand up against prejudice and discrimination and foster a positive, inclusive culture at this school by adopting the following **Stand Out principles**:

Spread the word about visible difference equality at school, work and amongst friends and your family

Think positively about visible differences – don't let negative assumptions get in the way

Approachable – display a warm manner when meeting someone with a visible difference

Normal, natural eye contact - look, but don't stare

Deal with discrimination, - if you see it, report it

Own up to not knowing about visible differences: find out more

Understanding – show understanding for the challenges people face

Try again – don't give up if people doubt your belief in visible difference equality

HOW TO ANSWER YOUR CHILDS QUESTIONS

You may find your child coming home to ask you questions about her “mark” and I want to provide some tips on how you can answer those questions and also alleviate any fears you or your child may have and in addition help us in supporting *Child's Name* during her time here at *School's Name*.

It is normal for young children to comment or ask about a child's visible difference. They may point, try to touch or pinch birthmarks or shy away from a child with a skin condition. We realise that there is no intention to be rude at this age; nevertheless, what they say can come out bluntly or in exclamations of shock, surprise or dislike. Your reaction to your child's curiosity will be crucial to the way the child will come to feel about visible differences – in others and/or in themselves. The ideal way to handle this is to address your child's queries directly rather than try to ignore them or appear flustered. By giving a simple explanation, you can encourage your child to feel comfortable with differences. You will satisfy their curiosity, provide them with just enough information to alleviate any uncertainty and help promote the idea that *Child's Name* visible difference is just one part of who she is. Here are some example phrases:

- “It's just a birthmark that doesn't hurt her.”
- “It's her special mark that she was born with.”
- “It's her giant mole. Most people have moles – hers is just very large.”

Child's Name calls it her birthmark her 'chocolate mark', so this is another description you could use with your children that *Child's Name* will also relate to if your child asks her about it.

Having mentioned the CMN, then move the conversation along naturally and in an appropriate way – “What did you have for lunch today?”; “Can you please find your schoolbook?”; “Where are your moles?”.

I have some info sheets and a teacher guide 'Having something to say' which is included in the packs the school has already received. Further information about the condition can be found at our charity support group website www.caringmattersnow.co.uk .

Should you have any other questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to me directly.

Thank you for your time and most importantly for your support in promoting acceptance, tolerance and diversity at *School's Name*.