www.clapa.com
020 7833 4883
info@clapa.com

Bullying and Cleft Lip & Palate

What can I do…?

If I'm being bullied

The best thing to do is always **talk to someone in charge who you trust**, like a teacher, another adult, or your parents/carer. Don't be embarrassed about this – everyone needs help sometimes, and you have the right to be safe from attacks and harassment. If they don't listen or can't help, try someone else and don't give up until someone takes you seriously. Remember that **no one deserves to be a victim of bullying**, and that you owe it to yourself and others at your school to try your best to sort things out so that the bulling stops, and no one can do anything to help unless you tell them about the problem.

For more general tips on protecting yourself from bullies, see the Kidscape or Bullying UK websites.

If you have a cleft, you may look and/or sound a little different to other people your age, and you may find that other people single you out because of this. Bullies tend to pick on anyone who is different, especially if **they do not understand your difference**. It may be that the bully doesn't even know what a cleft is, or what it means, they just see you as 'different' and want to harrass you because of this.

Remember that when hurtful words are used, it's often because the person using them **doesn't understand what they mean or why they are hurtful to you**, they just know that the words have an effect on you and will get a reaction.

Being different to others is nothing to be ashamed of – if anything it makes you special. If you were born with a cleft, you are the one in 700 in the UK population with the condition, and you have probably gone through several surgeries before you were even one year old. Even if your family have supported you every step of the way, chances are you have still found aspects of growing up with a cleft difficult, and the fact that you have overcome these problems is something you should be proud of.

If you are being picked on because of differences caused by your cleft, you could take it as an opportunity to teach your school or class about cleft lip and palate and why yours makes you special. You have been through a lot more than most people your age, and you should be proud to share with them your experiences and bravery. **Talk to your teacher about a way to do this, or ask your parents to talk to the school for you**. Your teacher may be able to present something to the class about cleft, or your school may even agree to host a whole assembly around cleft, what it means, and why you are special. If you feel confident enough, you may even want to present something yourself!



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Remember that **a lot of bullying comes from ignorance and a lack of understanding**, so by explaining to your classmates that your differences come from a condition you were born with, not only are you teaching them about cleft lip and palate, but you will be making things easier for anyone with a cleft who they meet in the future.

You should also think about checking out our young people's website www.clapaedge.com or joining our Facebook Group for young people with a cleft. Talking to others about your experiences is a great way to learn about ways to cope and what has worked for other people. It may also help you to feel more confident about who you are and the differences that make you special.



If my friend at school is being bullied

If your friend is being bullied, chances are they are very upset and may be scared about it, although they may not show it on the outside. If they have spoken to you about it, **they need to know that you are on their side and that take the problem seriously**. How you respond could have a big impact on how well they are able to deal with it and how confident they will be in taking things further with the school. You may feel pressured into going along with the bullying, especially when it is laughed off as no big deal, but if you know it is upsetting your friend then not joining in can make a big difference. It might even make the bullies realise that not everyone thinks they're funny, and that bullying won't make them popular.

For advice on how to help your friend approach teachers or another adult for help, check out the Kidscape or Bullying UK websites.

If the bullying is because your friend has a cleft, then reassure them that the bullying is not their fault, that it's just because the bully doesn't understand their differences, and, most importantly, that **differences are not something they should be ashamed of**. If you think your friend is brave or that their cleft makes them unique and cool, tell them so! It's important for them to know that you're on their side and that you want to help them.

If you can, talk to your teacher about educating the rest of your class or school about cleft. This can help everyone to understand what cleft is and why your friend may look or sound different, and it can make a huge impact on stopping bullying in its tracks. Make sure you talk to your friend first to see if they're comfortable with it, and don't put them on the spot if that's not what they want.

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If my child is being bullied



Bullying is always a serious problem, whether it's obvious like physical bullying or it's more subtle like their classmates making up rumours and excluding them from activities. Whatever the reason, the most important thing is that your child knows you love them, you are there to listen and support them, and that you believe what they tell you.

Check out the Bullying UK or Kidscape websites for tips on working with the school and talking to your child about the problem. In the first instance, you should always contact the school and ask about their anti-bullying policy.

You may also consider sharing our 'Tips for Schools and Teachers' or 'The School Years' leaflet with your child's school to help start a dialogue, both of which can be found on our website.

If your child has concerns about looking or sounding different because of their cleft, it is important to **give them space to talk about this freely with you**. You may feel like you have to stop them from saying anything negative about themselves, but try to let them get their feelings about the this out into the open. If they know that they can tell you how they feel without you stopping or judging them, it will help them to **feel safe and secure about exploring and dealing with these feelings**, which is an important part of growing up and dealing with self-esteem issues.

Talking about the bullying with your child may be very stressful, especially if it brings back memories of your child's treatment or even your own experiences if you have also grown up with a cleft. Try not to get visibly angry or upset, and instead calmly reassure your child that you are taking it very seriously and that you will talk to the school about it. Get as much information as you can, as this will help when approaching the school, and make sure you **keep your child informed** every step of the way so they don't have unnecessary anxiety.

One way to help stop bullying related to your child's cleft is to ask the school to educate their students about the condition and what it means, maybe as part of a fundraising project or in a school assembly. We have a variety of presentations which can be used to help children and young people understand what a cleft is and why your child may look or sound different because of it.

If you still have concerns about the bullying being related to your child's cleft, try talking to one of our Parent Contacts or ask about it in our Parent Support Group. If your child is over 13, encourage them to join our Young People's Group on Facebook, as talking to other young people like them may help them to feel more confident about their differences. For information on all of these, visit our website **www.clapa.com**

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