

Courtesy of Deborah Young Studio



What is Staring?

Nothing in the definition denotes malice, however, a stare is often perceived as an unwanted act.

When we examine why people usually stare, we realize that the intent is rarely negative or hurtful.

How it Feels to be the Object of Staring?

Those who are the objects of stares report a range of emotions from feeling rejected, angry, embarrassed, self-conscious, nervous and acknowledged.

Why do People Stare?

The main reason people stare is to gather information about that which is out of the ordinary or different. They are curious as to why someone is unlike them and earnestly want to know why the other person is different. They wonder what happened to the person.

What do Most People do when they Encounter Someone with Physical Differences?

People are rarely taught what to do when they encounter someone who looks different from them, unless they learned this valuable skill from their parents or teachers. For many years in workshops conducted across the country, participants have shared that they feel uncomfortable and frequently look away to avoid making eye contact with people who are different from them. They report that they don't know what to do and are afraid they might say or do the wrong thing. Sometimes they are fearful and self-conscious.

Occasionally, strangers offer assistance and, unknowingly, intrude into the personal space of the other person. Onlookers may make a patronizing, inappropriate remark like, "You poor thing," or "Oh my, what happened to you?" These actions show that the viewer may be uncomfortable or uneasy.

Onlookers often feel sympathy; they want to make the person better or normal. They wish that the person who appears different didn't have to cope with their respective condition and circumstances.

Remember, none of these responses to encountering someone who looks different are negative.

Practice Makes Perfect

Practice these techniques at places where you most likely will never encounter the people again, such as malls, airports, department stores or super markets. The more you practice, the easier it will become for you to interact with others. After a while, these techniques will become routine and easy.

Be patient. It takes time and effort to master these techniques. Use the techniques that are easiest for you and that make you feel the most comfortable. If, after extensive practice, you are still struggling, enroll in a communications class at a local educational institution, consult a therapist, read *Changing Faces*, or participate in workshops about this topic at conferences offered by Facing Forward, the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, or other foundations that offer educational programs on this issue. Find a role model and ask that person to help you work through this challenge.

If you have a facial or physical difference and would like to learn more about coping with staring and communicating with confidence, please call us at 704.895.7634, or email info@facingforwardinc.org. You're not alone; we're here to help.



Charlene Pell
founder

Prior to sustaining a severe burn injury in a private airplane crash in 1994, Charlene was vice president of communications for a major corporation. Throughout her recovery, she was the object of intrusive stares and personally experienced alienation and rejection because of her changed appearance. As a result, she researched and developed techniques and strategies to cope with staring, and has conducted workshops and published articles about why people stare – nationwide and in Canada. Her foundation, Facing Forward, develops resources and programs to help those with physical differences communicate with confidence and courage.



To order brochures, email info@facingforwardinc.org or call 704.895.7634.
www.facingforwardinc.org

Additional Assistance and Resources

The following organizations are dedicated to providing resources and support to those who have facial and physical differences:

About Face International
800.665.FACE (3223)
www.aboutfaceinternational.org

Changing Faces
www.changingfaces.org.uk

Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors
800.888.2876
www.phoenix-society.org

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What to do when people stare



Courtesy of Deborah Young Studio



Responding to Awkward Questions, Especially from Curious Children

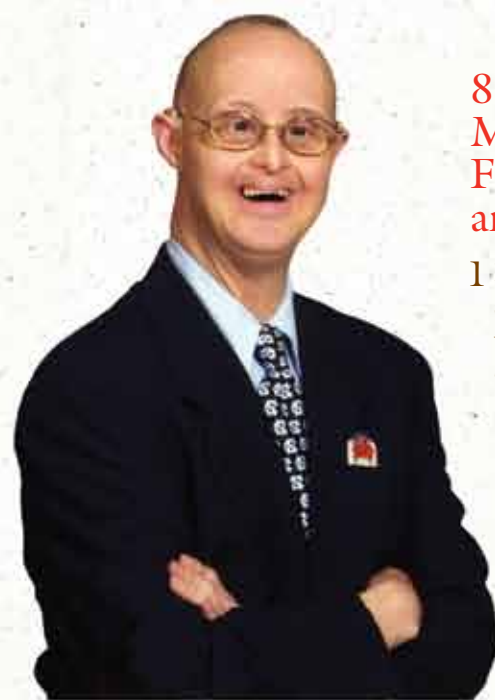
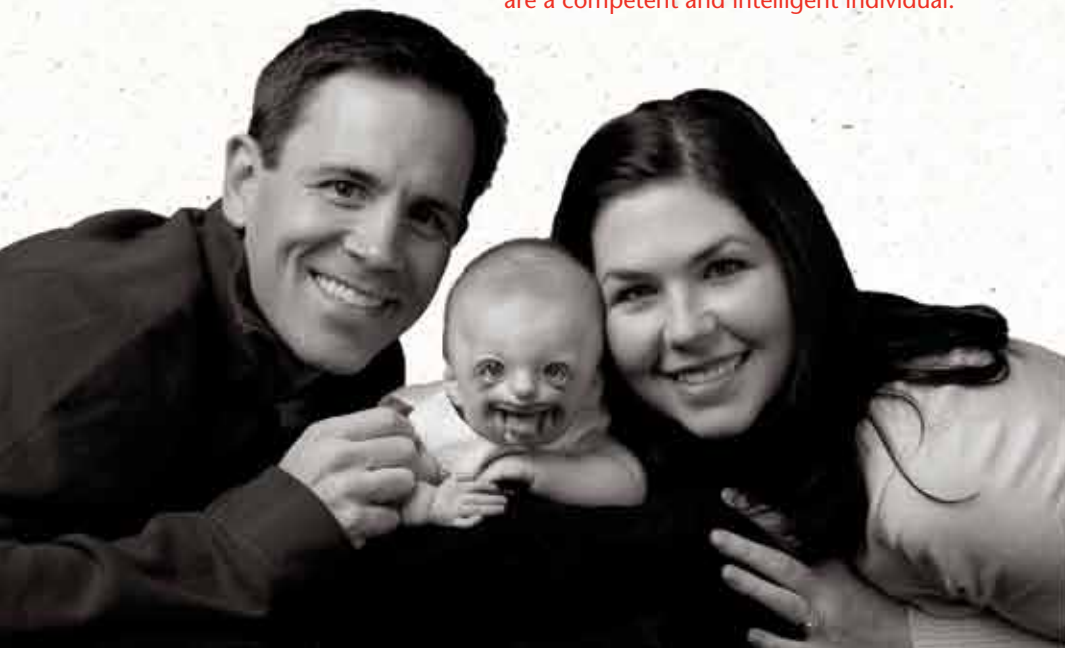
Children unabashedly approach people who look different and often ask innocent but hurtful questions like, “*What’s wrong with your face?*” or, “*What happened to you?*” Children rarely filter their thoughts, so they just speak what is on their inquisitive minds. Greet their curiosity with a smile and say, “*Oh, you see my face is different than yours. That’s because my skin was burned.*”

For toddlers, you might say, “*I have a boo boo. I’ll bet you’ve had a boo boo. I’m okay. How are you?*” Or for children 12 and older, you might respond, “*Have you ever experienced a burn from a hot stove or hot water?*” or “*Have you ever met anyone who was burned, maybe at school?*”

It’s important to answer children’s questions without scaring them. If possible, you might kneel down so that you can make eye contact with children and reassure them that they are safe. Most parents teach children to be wary of all strangers, so it’s not surprising that children are especially intrigued by people who look different than their parents, brothers, and sisters.

If an insensitive parent whisks away a child and interrupts your interaction with the child, smile at the child and wave goodbye. Set a good example with your appropriate, gracious behavior.

Every time someone stares at you, it is an opportunity to educate that person about your condition and to reassure the person that you are a competent and intelligent individual.



8 Actions that Your Family Member or Friend can take to Facilitate Pleasant Encounters and Minimize Staring

1 Instead of being protective, defensive, self-conscious, and angry, embrace a stare with a smile and offer a simple statement or greeting to put the other person at ease. Remember, he or she doesn’t know what to do or say, and probably feels awkward and uncomfortable.

2 Accept and support your loved one with a physical difference. Encourage the individual to wear appropriate clothing that does not conceal his or her scars.

3 Allow the individual to manage the encounter whenever possible. Resist the temptation to take control.

4 Visualize positive, not negative, encounters.

5 Empathize with the uncertain emotions and uneducated stares of a curious public.

6 Assure strangers that the person is okay, if he or she is unable to speak.

7 Be first to initiate conversation with strangers to take control of encounters.

8 Verbal, physical, and relational bullying is hurtful and degrading, and often requires professional intervention. For resources about bullying, contact AboutFace, the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, or seek help from a licensed professional with expertise in this area.

Rarely are stares intended to be hurtful, yet most of the time, stares are perceived to be malicious.



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12 Actions that You can Take to Turn a Stare into a Smile and Create Positive Social Encounters

1 Accept your appearance; if you are comfortable with yourself, others will be at ease in your presence. Self-acceptance is the most important aspect of relating to others.

2 Address the onlooker’s curiosity by saying, “I bet you wonder why I look different; I was burned, but I’m fine.” A simple, short statement usually facilitates dialogue and puts the other person at ease.

3 Make eye contact whenever possible. It’s very distracting to talk with someone who is looking elsewhere. Eye contact expresses attentiveness and acknowledges the other person.

4 Discuss similarities, what you have in common, not your differences. Talk about what you have in common pertaining to the place and the people, for example, the weather, or your immediate surroundings.

5 Maximize your appearance with careful attention to grooming, dress, makeup, and tasteful jewelry and accessories.

6 Use humor when appropriate.

7 Approach every encounter with a positive attitude and expectation. If you think people find you unattractive, they will. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

8 Stand erect, head up and shoulders back if you can. How you feel about yourself is reflected in your stance, gait, grooming, body and verbal language.

9 Find and create your own style. How do you present yourself? Do you show pride or shame? Do you attempt to hide your flaws?

10 Assume responsibility for the encounter. Don’t expect others to know what to do. Offer a simple greeting. The other person will perceive you as being approachable.

11 Be the first to introduce yourself in social situations. Your introduction shows self confidence and poise and puts the other person at ease.

12 If you are physically able, smile. People can’t resist returning a smile.

stare [ste(ə)r]
verb [intrans.]
to look at with a searching or earnest gaze.