

What is face blindness?:

Supporting strategies for parents and carers

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What is prosopagnosia (face blindness)?

Face blindness (officially called prosopagnosia) is a condition recognised by the NHS. It causes **lifelong difficulty recognising and remembering faces**, often including faces of family and friends. Eyesight is normal. Faces can be seen clearly but it is a specific difficulty in how the brain processes them.

Face blindness is a bit like dyslexia, but for faces. It's not all-or-nothing, you don't just either recognise faces or not. Face blind people might sometimes recognise some faces, but often they mix people up or can't work out who they are. Their brains work differently when it comes to recognising faces.



Recognising people when you have prosopagnosia often requires intense mental effort, which can be mentally draining and physically tiring.

Prosopagnosia can be a stand-alone condition. It can run in families, but this is not always the case. However, it often co-occurs with forms of neurodivergence such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Around 30% of autistic people are face blind.

The condition is **specific to facial recognition** and does not affect a child's intelligence or general memory.



Face blind people use context (where you are, or what you are talking about) as well as clues such as hair or clothing to help them recognise others. So, **meeting someone out of context** (e.g., bumping into a school friend in a shop) **makes recognition much harder**.

If someone with face blindness doesn't know who you are, it's not because they're being rude or not trying. There is no cure or treatment. They can't just "try harder" to recognise faces.



Children may not be aware of their face recognition difficulties since they often use cues like hair, shoes, schoolbags, or voice to identify others. Often, they don't realise that most people find it easy to recognise familiar faces.

It is rare for prosopagnosia to be formally diagnosed in school aged children. In the UK it can be difficult to get a formal diagnosis, even as an adult. In children, the condition is usually identified by parents.



Supporting a child with prosopagnosia

If your child appears to ignore someone they know or doesn't greet them, **don't assume they are being rude**. It may be that they simply did not recognise them due to prosopagnosia.

If you're with the child and someone else comes over that you both know, you can quietly tell them who it is or greet that person by name to help.



Tell them if you are going to change your appearance - like if you cut your hair, grow a beard, or get new glasses. They might rely on those things to recognise you. You should also let them know if friends, teachers or family members change their appearance.



Try to always wear the same distinctive item of clothing like a scarf or badge so your child can spot you. When meeting them or picking them up from school, always stand in the same place and tell them where you will be waiting and what you are wearing.

You can try to help to ensure they know this information before they meet up with other people too. You might be able to help them notice and remember distinctive facial or other features, for example a mole, freckles, a piercing, hair or teeth that might help them identify others.

Let the child's school know about their difficulty with faces. You could show staff the information on the NHS website.

Ask the school to make a plan to support the child, including on school trips. Agree suitable handover arrangements for collecting the child at the end of the day.

Sources of support and advice

If you suspect your child has face recognition problems speak to your GP. Prosopagnosia is not the only condition that can cause difficulties recognising people. You may also want to arrange an NHS eye test, letting the optician know about your concerns so they can check for any visual difficulties.

Each Scottish local authority has a Vision Support Service; parents/guardians can ask the child's school about this.

If the child is below school age, speak to their Health Visitor. Information can be found at www.nn.nhs.scot/vincyp/professional-resources

In England the local authority has a "local offer" webpage with information on how to access local services. You may need to look under visual impairment, or sensory and communication services.

Sources of reliable information about prosopagnosia that have been recommended by face blind people include:

- The NHS www.nhs.uk/conditions/face-blindness
- The research group www.faceblind.org
- The UK not-for-profit group: www.faceblind.org.uk
- "Nancy Mindick's book Understanding Facial Recognition Difficulties in Children."
- The young adult novel "Holding Up the Universe" by Jennifer Niven.

For further information or to express interest in taking part in future research please contact:

Dr Jud Lowes, University of Stirling. Email: judith.lowes@stir.ac.uk

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- Jud wrote a news article for The Conversation about experiences of living with face blindness that some people have said was useful to share with friends and family: www.theconversation.com/even-mild-face-blindness-can-cause-serious-difficulties-in-daily-life-new-study.

- The full research paper on which this fact sheet is based can be freely accessed here: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0322469> Lowes., et al (2025). PLOS ONE, 20(4), e0322469.
- Further factsheets in this series are available free of charge from <https://faceresearch.stir.ac.uk/prosopagnosia/>

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