

Identifying and supporting pupils with face blindness at school

Advice for Support for Learning teachers

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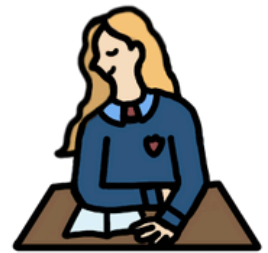
What is prosopagnosia (Face blindness or face recognition difficulties)?

Prosopagnosia, also called face blindness, is a neurodevelopmental condition recognised by the NHS. It is a difficulty recognising and remembering faces. This can include the faces of family, teachers and friends. Around 1 in 50 people are born with the condition, but it can also occur after an illness or brain injury.

Face blindness is a bit like dyslexia, but for faces. People with face blindness may sometimes recognise some faces, but often they mix people up or just don't recognise them. Their brains work differently when it comes to recognising faces.

Vision may otherwise be normal, the child can see faces clearly, the difficulty is in how the brain processes faces.

Prosopagnosia is a standalone condition. However, it also often co-occurs with other forms of neurodivergence such as autism or ADHD. Around 30% of autistic people are face blind. Children with visual impairment difficulties may also struggle with face recognition. In prosopagnosia, visual impairment is not the cause of the difficulties.



Facts about prosopagnosia for education professionals:

It is relatively uncommon for prosopagnosia to be identified or diagnosed in school-aged children. In the UK it can be very difficult to get a formal diagnosis. In children, the difficulty is usually spotted by parents.

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

When someone has prosopagnosia, recognising people often requires intense mental effort. This can be mentally draining and physically tiring. The condition is specific to facial recognition and does not affect a child's intelligence or general memory.

In previous research, some parents said that their child's prosopagnosia was misidentified as autism despite a lack of autistic traits. Prosopagnosic children might look less at faces simply because they are not very informative to them. Research also shows that people who have prosopagnosia look more at outer face features and less towards eyes than typically developing children. This reduced eye contact might be mistaken for autism.

Signs a child may have face recognition difficulties

- Might fail to acknowledge familiar individuals, especially in unfamiliar school areas.
- Has difficulty recognising familiar people when seen in an unexpected place (e.g., outside of school or in a different classroom).
- May appear “lost” or disoriented in crowded environments such as the playground.
- May socialise well in the classroom but is often alone in the dining hall or playground because they can’t rely on context to recognise friends.
- Unable to recognise self, peers, or familiar teachers in photographs.
- Frequently avoids using names, even of familiar peers or staff members.
- Relies heavily on non-facial features (e.g., hairstyle, clothing) to identify others, and may not recognise someone if these features change.
- Describes people using external identifiers (e.g., “the teacher with the red jacket”) rather than their name.
- Often reports they can't “find” someone they know.



- May express surprise at how well others can recognise people or assume that others have unusually good memory for faces.
- Struggles more in group settings where individuals look similar (e.g., same school uniform, sports kit, or gender).
- More likely to recognise people in expected contexts (e.g., a teacher in their usual classroom).

Support strategies for schools:

- Offer reassurance and understanding - this is a real and often invisible difficulty.
- Use large name badges, class photo charts, or visual timetables with pictures of staff and students.
- Use consistent seating plans and classroom routines to help with recognition.
- Always greet the students by name and encourage others to do the same with each other.

Sources of support and advice for schools:

- Each Scottish local authority has a Vision Support Service. Information on each local authority’s sight services for children and young people can be found at www.nn.nhs.scot/vincyp/professional-resources or by contacting the local education department.
- In England each local authority has a “local offer” webpage with information on how to access local services.
- Educational Psychologists.

Sources of reliable information about prosopagnosia

- NHS website: nhs.uk/conditions/face-blindness
- The UK not-for-profit group Face Blind UK: www.faceblind.org.uk
- University research groups e.g. www.faceblind.org and University of Stirling faceresearch.stir.ac.uk



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

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- 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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