Signs and Characteristics of Prosopagnosia in Childhood

Many families described the process by which they came to determine that their child does not recognize faces. Many of these descriptions are useful for understanding the signs and symptoms of prosopagnosia in childhood.

Unable to recognize people whom s/he should have known.

♦ “When outside of kinder, out of context, [my son] asked his best kinder friend if the boy was his friend from kinder. He wasn’t sure.” – Parent w/ 7-year-old
♦ “I would see [my son’s] playgroup teacher over the road, and say - ‘oh, who is that?’ 'Hmm I’m sot sure' he’d say until we got close enough and she spoke, and then he knew straight away. He was an anxious child, so I was very careful not to give him anything to fret about, so I had to be creative.” - Parent w/ Secondary School Student
♦ “Our son always had difficulty in finding [us] in a crowd… unless [we] wore that same coat or hat.” – Parent w/ Secondary School Student
♦ “Once [my daughter] started at preschool, she began to tell us [of her difficulty] through her questions and actions—every day ‘Are these my friends?’ ‘I didn’t recognize you without your cat shoes on.’” - Parent w/ First Grader
♦ “When he was in preschool, he rarely talked to the other children and there was a father who would always make a point to talk to him and would be frustrated that my son wouldn’t respond. The father chalked it up to shyness, of course, but I’d say to my son, ‘Don’t you recognize… ? He says hello every day.’ My son would respond that the man was a stranger. Other preschool classmates would say hello and my son wouldn’t respond and when I’d ask him about it, he’d say he didn’t know them. I had suspicions from preschool on that it was facial recognition difficulties.” - Parent
♦ “[My] husband and son were picking me up at the airport and I walked right up to our son and he stared at me blankly, not recognizing me, until I said hello.” - Parent w/ 10-year-old
♦ “[He] walked right past [his] grade teacher in the grocery store and had no idea he knew her until she spoke to him.” - Parent w/ 10-year-old
♦ “[One] time, he started talking to a boy at a fair, thinking it was his best friend because he had the same cap as his friend.” – Parent w/ Secondary School Student

Unable to identify relatives in photos

♦ “Several of the families that we have worked with have taken copies of photos of family members and friends, cut off the hair to leave just the faces, and shown them to the child. Most school-aged children should still be able to identify the people in the photos even without the hair. If the child has a younger sibling, and they can do it, but the older child cannot, that is a good sign of prosopagnosia.” – Researcher.


♦ “I’ve always had a lot of trouble recognizing my parents and other family members in photos. My sister, 10 years younger, looks a lot like me when I was her age, so when I look at a picture with me in it, I just look for someone who looks like she does now. But now that she has matured, I can no longer recognize myself in pictures from the first decade of my life.” -Adult

Small group of friends
♦ “I had about three close friends at any one time, and almost no distant friends, until 10th grade where I made friends with a couple of people who were all part of a larger group. Fortunately, they all had very different body types so I was able to learn who they were quickly.” – Adult
♦ “He doesn’t really have many friends – but those he has totally accept him for who he is.” - Parent w/ 18-year-old

Little time spent in front of the mirror
♦ “I make sure he looks well groomed before he leaves the house.” - Parent w/ 14-year-old
♦ "I've never been into make up or obsessed over my appearance. I don't care what my part looks like, and I never brush my hair in front of a mirror, but based on the amount of hair left in the bathroom sink by my roommates, this may be more unusual than I think it is. I never really thought about it, but once I read a couple of prosopagnosia blogs who have said the same thing, I started to think that this may be a face blind thing.” - Adult

Hanging back in social situations
♦ “I have seen him, on arriving at a party in a public place, hold back from all his school friends and stand by me in a very uncertain way - until one of them caught sight of him and came over - ‘oh, hi [my son’s name]’ - then he lit up and joined in. In context he seems fine, but out of context he knows - consciously or otherwise - that he cannot depend upon his ability to recognize people.” – Parent w/ Secondary School Student
♦ “Social situations, even if he enjoys them, are exhausting for him. On the other hand, he has a great amount of confidence performing in front of an audience (as in drama/theater) and speaking in front of groups. He has told us that he doesn’t really get nervous because everyone in the audience is a stranger to him so he doesn’t get worried about embarrassing himself in front of someone he knows.” - Parent w/ 10-year-old

Small changes in physical appearance makes the person unrecognizable
♦ “[My daughter thought] when she’d had her hair cut no-one at school would recognize her.” - Parent
♦ “[My son], age 7, attended a very small rural primary school... There was a girl who often looked after him at playtime. One day [he] asked where she
Anxiety

◆ “[My son] experienced severe anxiety in full classroom settings although he seemed to do better in small group settings (such as his pull-out gifted class that only had about five children in it). He also experienced a lot of anxiety in settings where there were many people talking, especially in enclosed places, such as the gym and in the cafeteria. We have since learned that our son was and whether she’d left, as he hadn’t seen her for a while. I hadn’t noticed that she’d been away, but I saw her mother and got talking to her. The little girl hadn’t been away, so I asked if anything had changed about her. At first her mum said ‘No’ – then remembered she had [changed] her hairstyle... just a little, so instead of her hair being tucked behind her ears, she now had a fringe. After this, I asked [my son]... how he knew who was who and he said he could only tell by their hair, their earrings and whether they had breasts or not! Once we realized this, it all fell into place.” - Parent w/ 18-year-old

◆ “When I came home from getting my hair cut and colored, my child opened the door and asked me ‘Are you my Mom?’ I asked him why he asked. We talked about it. That was my first big clue. A year or so later he told me about not recognizing a classmate after a haircut. He was so happy because it was a big joke in the class and he was a hit with everyone for being so funny. At that point I knew he had trouble. It wasn’t until he was in 6th grade that I heard the term face blindness and starting researching it.” – Parent

Generalization

◆ “When I was bullied in elementary school, I think I may have become defensive around anyone who looked like the initial bully. Generalizing helped prepare me for when I did meet the bully, but I think the change in behavior encouraged the non-bullies to become bullies.” - Adult

Failure to respond to name in public

◆ “He often seems in his own little world and doesn’t always respond to his name. I think that’s because you don’t expect a stranger to call your name and everyone is a stranger to him!” - Parent w/ 10-year-old

Reliance on non-facial cues

◆ “I find myself remembering two of three indicators: hair color, personality, and height. If I remembered all three, I wouldn’t have a problem, but since it’s only two, I still find myself insisting to a gal friend that I’ve told them the story already only to realize that I had previously told a guy friend because he was sitting down when I told him and therefore, at her height. Had I remembered his hair color, I would have figured it out, but instead, I remembered the reaction to my story and drew the wrong conclusion. Gah! Saving grace- they both understand enough not to be offended.” – Adult

Anxiety

◆ “[My son] experienced severe anxiety in full classroom settings although he seemed to do better in small group settings (such as his pull-out gifted class that only had about five children in it). He also experienced a lot of anxiety in settings where there were many people talking, especially in enclosed places, such as the gym and in the cafeteria. We have since learned that our son
recognizes people primarily by voice so when there are multiple people talking at once it makes his recognition even worse... His social experience and how he functioned within the school setting were impacted, and his anxiety over these situations got worse as he got older and was expected to be more socially independent. We first saw his anxiety emerge in a serious way when he moved from first to second grade. This involved changing locations within the school and having a much larger class in a smaller classroom... [He] was in full fight-or-flight mode each day during school and this occurred off and on until 4th grade when it became an almost daily occurrence.” - Parent w/ 10-year-old

♦ “I think she’d be an anxious kid, even without her prosopagnosia, but there’s this everlasting anxiety that is always there in large groups or social situations. This leads to her escalating more quickly and melting down more easily.” – Parent w/ First Grader

♦ “[W]e were at a very crowded, loud restaurant and our son became very anxious. I took him outside to calm down and he told me that, when someone at a neighboring table’s voice would drown out my voice or my husband’s voice it was almost like his recognition of us would switch on and off. He said one second he would be sure it was us and the next second his brain would be telling him that it was probably us, but might not be.” - Parent w/ 10-year-old

♦ “[P]ervasive anxiety. Difficulty in crowds. Needing “space” or “down time” in large parties. Difficulty with change—wanting things to stay the same way.” - Parent w/ First Grader

♦ “[O]ur son seriously dislikes to be away from home at night (like to spend the night with friends or family). He can now put the anxiety he feels in that situation into context; when he wakes up in the middle of the night and has that momentary sensation of “Where am I?” he can’t look across the room to the friend in the other bed and recognize them as a way of immediately knowing where he is. It’s like waking up in a stranger’s house.” - Parent, aged 10

Befriending physically different people

♦ “My son... tends to befriend kids who have some uniqueness about them – one has very light blonde hair, one has red hair, one is smaller than his peers and has a distinct voice. He tends not to maintain friendships as well with boys who are average height and weight and have brown hair.” – Parent

♦ “His best friend [in primary school] was the only Chinese boy in the year below him.” - Parent w/ Secondary School Student

♦ “Keeping an eye out for children who are unique in appearance and with whom your child has some things in common can be helpful.” – Parent

No reaction/ close connection to a familiar face at a young age

♦ “I worried about my son’s lack of excitement when he saw me when he was a toddler. He just didn’t get as excited to see me as other children did when I
arrived home... Looking back, I don’t think he always knew who I was.” – Parent

“[W]hen our son was a baby/toddler, he didn’t resist interaction with us but didn’t seek it out either. When we would pick him up or get down on the floor and play with him it was always like he was surprised or didn’t know who we were.” - Parent w/ 10-year-old

Shyness

“He’s always been able to talk to strangers – order dinner, approach a clerk at a counter with a question – but it threw me when he wouldn’t want to say hello to a child he should know or that child’s parent. I understand this better now.” – Parent

DISCLAIMER: There is no research to confirm or deny any benefits to you or your child that may result from the information included in Project ProsoFamily. The University of Minnesota does not endorse anything on this page. It is simply words of wisdom from individuals and parents based on their personal experiences for you to adapt as you see fit.