



Guide for Schools about vitiligo

This guide aims to help you explain what vitiligo is to your pupils and support any children in your school who have this condition. As education professionals you have a very important role in making sure that children with vitiligo are fully included in the school and are given any support that they need.

Of course, all children are individuals and they will not react in exactly the same way to having vitiligo. You will need to find out from the parents/carers about how the condition has affected their children.

However, they are likely to have similar problems and face similar challenges in school as a result of having vitiligo.

The main problem that children with vitiligo have to face in school is the reaction of other pupils to their appearance. Once children become aware of visual differences, they are likely to stare, make comments and ask questions about anyone who looks different. Without the intervention from school staff, this kind of attention can become distressing for children with vitiligo. It may develop into bullying, impacting on the children's psychological wellbeing.

Explaining what vitiligo is to your pupils

Giving pupils the basic facts about vitiligo should mean that they do not have to ask questions of the children with the condition. It should also reduce incidents of bullying if pupils have more understanding about the impact that vitiligo can have. You may wish to include the following in the information you give:



What is vitiligo?

Vitiligo is quite a common condition which makes the skin, and sometimes the hair, turn white in patches. This is because melanocytes, the cells which give the skin its colour, have been damaged.

Can anyone GET VITILIGO?

Anyone can develop the condition, whatever their skin colour or ethnic origin. It affects at least one person in every hundred throughout the world, including in the UK. Vitiligo can begin at any age but about 50% of people develop it before the age of twenty.



What causes vitiligo?

Firstly, **you cannot catch vitiligo**. It cannot be passed on to someone else by touching them and it is not infectious. Vitiligo is considered to be an 'autoimmune' condition, in which the immune system attacks the body's own tissues.

The causes are not completely understood yet, but they seem to be a mixture of genetic and environmental factors. People with a particular combination of genes are more likely than others to develop vitiligo, but it is not only due to heredity. The development of vitiligo may be triggered by such factors as:

- Hormonal changes in the body, for example during adolescence.
- Damage to the skin, for example from a cut or sunburn.
- Extreme stress.
- Contact with certain chemicals.

Is there a cure?

There is, at present, no 100% cure. In some cases, the white patches can regain their colour without the person having any treatment. However, it is rare for the condition to go completely.

What can people do IF THEY HAVE VITILIGO?

This depends on how they feel about the condition, especially whether they have it on their face and hands. Parents will probably want to get



treatment for their children. There are creams which can be very effective in bringing back colour to the white skin patches, or at least slowing down the progress of vitiligo. It is also possible to conceal the white patches by using a camouflage or fake tan product.

HOW ARE people affected BY VITILIGO?

Vitiligo does not hurt physically. Children with vitiligo are likely to be affected psychologically if they do not feel supported and valued. Concerns and anxieties about having a different appearance can lead to symptoms of distress, such as underachievement and withdrawal from school activities.

Supporting children with vitiligo

Be prepared to talk to a child about vitiligo

Children may want to talk to adults at school about issues concerning their vitiligo. It is important that you acknowledge their concerns and talk to them in a matter of fact, confident way about their appearance. A child with vitiligo may need reassurance that the change in their skin colour makes no difference to the way adults at school feel about them.

If you are concerned about the psychological well-being of a child with vitiligo, it may be appropriate to refer them to a counselling service, after consulting his/her parent/carer.

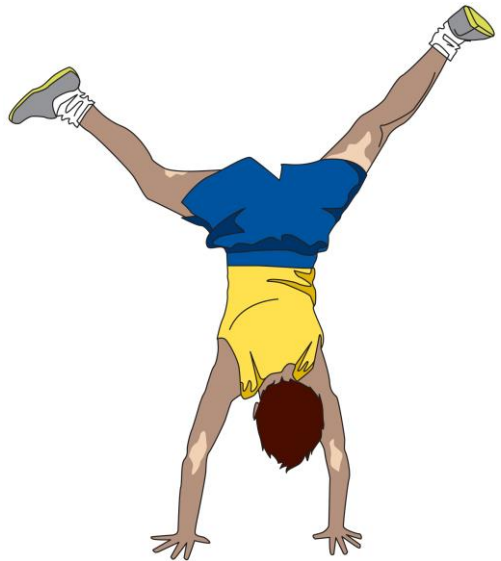
Including a child with vitiligo

As with any child with difficulties, emphasising their strengths and making sure that they are included in school activities will build up confidence and self-esteem. If they seem withdrawn, it may be appropriate to create opportunities for the child with vitiligo to socialise with the other children.

Depending on the age of the children, work on challenging stereotypes of beauty will be a valuable way of including a child with vitiligo. It is helpful to encourage the class to look at materials that celebrate being different, in contrast to those which suggest that 'beautiful' is always good and 'ugly' is bad.

PE activities

Be aware that there may be particular issues in PE. A child with vitiligo may be reluctant to change their clothes in front of other children, or they might not want to participate in an activity like swimming. You will need to discuss strategies for managing these difficulties with the child's parent/carer.



Skin care in hot weather

You need to be aware that a child with vitiligo will probably need to take extra care when their skin is exposed to sunlight. Most people with vitiligo are particularly vulnerable to sunburn. Not only is sunburn painful but it might stimulate the vitiligo to spread in some people. It is therefore important to make sure that children with vitiligo wear a sunhat and use sun protection creams or lotions to prevent it. They should be encouraged to keep in the shade, particularly at the hottest time of day.

Dealing with bullying

The school's bullying policy will apply to all instances where children are picked on by their peers. It will be useful if all staff, including meals supervisors and classroom assistants, have information about vitiligo to help them deal with problems arising from a child having the condition.

Further Information and support

If you would like further information about vitiligo, please look at the Vitiligo Society website www.vitiligosociety.org.uk. We have produced a short video *Living with Vitiligo*, which explains what vitiligo is like from the point of view of young people and their parents. This would be appropriate for staff training.



You can also contact the charity Changing Faces at www.changingfaces.org.uk, which offers advice to schools about vitiligo and other skin conditions.



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