One of the contributions of the new social studies of childhood developed in the 1980s and 1990s was the understanding of childhood as a social and cultural construction. James et al. (1998) have pointed out that this made social constructionism the major theoretical foundation for redefining childhood as opposed to the naturalistic orthodoxies and biological determinism that often dominated previous approaches. Under this perspective the child appears as an effect of social relations, leaving little room for the child’s body as a physical or corporeal entity. In this chapter we argue for the importance of material bodies as an aspect of children’s lives, which also shapes social relations as much as it is shaped by them. Children’s social participation is most often embodied actions performed by real living corporeal persons. In recent years childhood scholars have directed increased attention to children’s bodies (Colls & Hörschelmann, 2009; Hörschelmann & Colls, 2010; Prout, 2000). We believe that attention to children’s embodied existence is particularly important when exploring the lives of disabled children.

This chapter is based on a qualitative study focusing on the everyday lives of disabled children and youth. Our aim is to explore how children and young people with visible physical impairments view themselves in a society where opportunities are strongly associated with both aesthetics and ability. The body is an experienced entity and has important symbolic significance, which becomes apparent when entering the social world of disabled children. The body is, in particular, an important element through which children come to create their identities. To examine disabled children’s bodily differences as signifiers of identity and explore how disabled children and youth create and enact aspects of bodily difference is an important part of understanding how they
negotiate the significance and meaning of difference. Our examination of the interaction between the biological and social–cultural processes in which bodily differences are located in particular situations or contexts is inspired by the social studies of childhood (James & Prout, 1997) as well as drawing on the Nordic relational understanding of disability, which has as its central focus the interaction between the person and the environment. In this view, disability is understood as resulting from the complex interactions between the impaired person and the social and cultural environment (Gustavsson et al., 2005; Tøssebro, 2004).

Identity and the body

Most pressing for every person is the self-reflective question ‘Who am I?’ and the ongoing process that people undertake to understand and construct their own state of being, becoming and belonging (Olson, 2010). This process has, in recent decades, become more complex and drenched with anxiety, as it is believed that people have been given, at least to a certain extent, unrestricted governance to choose who they want to be and have come to be seen as somewhat personally responsible for their well-being (Stets & Burke, 2003). Contemporary Euro-American societies have, furthermore, expanded the space within which people actively shape their identity and interact with others, demanding that they not only be mobile and easily adaptable, but also actively outgoing to gain a sense of belonging (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Urry, 2000). To form a relationship, whether intimate or through social networking, is to share a narrative identity with others which adds a sense of worth and acceptance to one’s own self-identity (Deaux, 2002). Without such affiliation, a person is likely to be seen as an outsider, as someone inferior and disfavoured (Aronson et al., 2010).

The increasing importance of reflexivity in modern society, along with the objectification of the body in culture and society, has placed more pressure on how people appear to others, where the body is thought to be essential in representation of character, identity and social worth, as well as signifying dispositions and boundaries among social actors (Turner, 2001). This embodiment of self and identity is also palpable in constructions related to age and ability, as well as in more everyday experiences of body, lifestyle practices and social activities (Grogan, 2007). It presents the body as a ‘canvas’ for peoples’ expressions of ‘their identity, their social status, and their social and sexual desirability’; it tells the story of ‘who they are’ (Jablonski, 2006, p. 142). It is, furthermore, through bodily experience that people interact with others and