

Access to education

This guide focuses on education in mainstream schools and settings. It looks at ways in which professionals can help reduce barriers to learning by understanding the individual needs of learners with vision impairment, providing accessible resources, enhancing communication skills, and making adjustments to the physical and sensory environment. It also considers issues of social inclusion and suggests strategies for addressing these.

NatSIP have produced [Top Ten Tips](#) for practitioners who are new to working with a child with sensory impairment which may also be useful alongside this guide.

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Part 1: Understanding vision impairment in children and young people

About this part

This part looks at what vision impairment means and its broad effects on learning and development.

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1.1. Types of vision impairment

Vision impairment has many different medical causes and varies widely in its effects. The most important thing for a teacher to understand is the practical implications for an individual learner in their class, as this will help you to identify teaching approaches which will successfully meet his or her needs.

1.2. The practical effects of vision impairment

Many blind people actually have some sight – e.g. they may have peripheral vision or tunnel vision or may find it easier to see in certain light conditions. The term ‘functional vision’ refers to what a person can see, rather than what they can’t see. It is a useful concept for including vision impaired learners, as it encourages teachers to consider how a learner’s useful vision can be maximised in different situations, and how they may need to modify their teaching.

The main functional effects of vision impairment include the following. Learners may experience more than one of these areas of visual difficulty:

- **Low acuity.** Acuity is the term given to the sharpness of the overall image seen by an individual. Both distance and near vision can be affected by poor acuity, but not necessarily to the same degree. Some learners may be able to see quite small print on a page but be unable to see at a distance, while for others the opposite may be true.
- **Central vision loss.** Some learners may have particular difficulty with their central vision, the area of the visual field which is used for detecting fine detail. They may be able to move around fairly freely, however, if the rest of their visual field is unaffected. These learners often have most difficulty with tasks involving reading, writing and close observation.
- **Peripheral vision loss.** This can create the opposite effect to central vision loss, creating particular difficulties in moving around and locating objects, but leaving learners able to work quite effectively with detail using their central vision. It can also present learners with

difficulty in finding the 'space' to record their answers on a question paper or workbook.

- **Patchy vision.** Some learners' sight is affected by irregular patches of poor vision, so that they may have to scan objects consciously in order to see them effectively. Complicated visual tasks may become impossible for these learners if they can only pick up information in disjointed fragments.
- **Low contrast sensitivity.** Some visual conditions cause particular difficulties where an object does not stand out clearly from its background. For these learners the lighting and colour scheme of the school environment will be especially significant. They may also find the clarity and contrast of print on the page more important than its size.
- **Light sensitivity.** Many learners with a vision impairment will find strong changes in light difficult to manage. Many find bright light painful (photophobia), while others may find it difficult to adjust visually when moving from a bright to a dimly lit area or activity.
- **Eye movement difficulties.** Some visual difficulties arise from problems in controlling different muscle functions in the eye. Nystagmus, for example, involves a continuous involuntary movement of the eyes, usually from side to side, which creates significant focusing difficulties. Some learners may have problems with convergence (the ability to train both eyes on the same object at the same time) while others may find it hard to shift their focus from a near to a far object.
- **Colour loss.** Colour confusion on its own is not considered to be a vision impairment, but it often accompanies and compounds other visual conditions. The extent of a colour vision loss varies between individuals, but the main educational implications are likely to involve difficulty in distinguishing detail in pictures, maps and diagrams. Activities which depend on colour coding may also present significant access problems to learners with a severe colour loss.

1.3. Partial sight and blindness

It is important to understand the differences between the educational needs of blind and partially sighted learners.

Learners with partial sight

The term 'partially sighted' is used to describe vision impaired learners who work primarily through sight. A learner with partial sight may also be referred to as "sight impaired (SI)" or "registered sight impaired". These terms include those with relatively minor visual difficulties as well as those who may be on the margin between print and braille and who are sometimes described as having low vision.

Partially sighted learners make up the majority of vision impaired learners. Their needs vary considerably, and many are able to work with normal print. Paradoxically, the fact that they may appear to cope can itself create difficulties, as it may lead to their needs being underestimated or overlooked.

Teachers working with a partially sighted learner need to know answers to the following questions. You may be able to find them out from the learner directly or from relevant specialist staff:

- Is their sight stable or is it variable? If so, under what conditions?
- What is the extent of their effective distance vision, for example, for reading from the whiteboard?
- What size and style of print can they read comfortably?
- Is their field of vision normal or restricted? For example, is peripheral vision reduced or are areas within the visual field missing? How does this affect their ability to work with diagrams, maps, etc?
- Is there a limited time over which the learner is able to use their sight efficiently before their eyes become tired?
- How competent are they in moving around the classroom independently and safely?
- Do they have particular preferences regarding the classroom environment, such as the nature of the lighting, seating position, or the use of the whiteboard?

Learners who are blind

Learners who are educationally blind do not have enough sight to work through the visual medium of print, relying instead on their other senses. The term “severely sight impaired (SSI)” may also be used. For many learners this may involve working through touch e.g. via braille. However, being educationally blind does not necessarily mean that a learner has no useful vision; many braille-reading learners have some vision which may be useful to them both in and out of the classroom, for example, for close observation of practical work, or for independent mobility.

Among those learners who are completely blind it is important to distinguish between those who have had some sight in the past and those who have never seen. A learner’s ability to grasp certain visual concepts may be greatly influenced by whether they have ever had direct visual experience of the world around them.

Teachers working with a blind learner need to know answers to the following questions. It may be appropriate to ask the learner directly, but also consult with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator/Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (SENCO/ALNCO) and/or Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision impairment (QTVI):

- How much sight, if any, do they have? How useful is it and for what activities?
- What level of skill do they possess in braille and other tactile skills? In particular, what is their speed of reading?
- What experience of the visual world, if any, do they have? Have they ever seen and therefore possess any visual memory?
- Do they tire easily? Is there a limited period of time over which they can work efficiently?
- How competent are they in moving around the classroom independently and safely?

In general terms, the more severe a learner’s vision impairment, the more they will need carefully targeted support to include them in education. There are exceptions, of course, and although categories of vision impairment are helpful, you should always look at learners’ needs on an individual basis. For example, additional factors may mean that

some learners with a moderate vision impairment may have higher support needs than others with a more severe loss.

1.4. The impact of vision impairment

There is no direct correlation between vision impairment and cognitive ability. Vision impaired learners have the same range of intelligence and abilities as their sighted peers. It is therefore important to have equally high expectations of vision impaired learners. However, statistics suggest that nearly 50% of all learners with vision impairment have some additional needs which may also affect their learning.

Vision impairment can affect:

- educational progress – particularly in reading and writing and concept development, as vision impaired learners may not have access to the incidental learning through vision that is available to sighted learners.
- speed of working and access to information - most vision impaired learners will take longer to complete a task, but this should not be seen as reflecting on their ability and potential.
- communication skills – particularly reading and writing. Many learners with vision impairment will need to learn specialist skills to enable them to read and write on equal terms.
- Mobility, orientation and environmental awareness - a lack of incidental visual knowledge means that many learners, especially those with more severe vision impairment, will need to be taught the skills to navigate their environment independently and safely.
- social interaction – many learners with vision impairment find it hard to recognise non-verbal clues such as body language and facial expression and may need support in developing social skills.
- self-esteem – there is a risk of learners developing low self-esteem, particularly if they experience negative attitudes and stereotyping.

With appropriate support and understanding the impact of these factors can be minimised or removed altogether.

Part 2: Accessible teaching and learning resources

About this part

This part looks at ways to remove barriers to learning and participation for learners who have vision impairment (VI), by making teaching and learning resources accessible.

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2.1. General principles for preparing resources

Accessible materials reduce the amount of support that vision impaired learners need. In mainstream schools, teachers are likely to have to modify (or direct teaching assistants to modify) curriculum resources for just one or two learners in a class of fully sighted learners. There are a number of general principles that can make the process of modifying resources more manageable for learners who have VI.

It is important to find out the most appropriate way to present materials for individual learners. Different learners will have different requirements, depending on their particular vision impairment – these are considered in more detail below. If you do not know the kind of modifications a learner requires, you should consult the Qualified Teacher of Children with Vision Impairment (QTVI), Special Educational Needs Coordinator/Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (SENCO/ALNCO), the learner themselves and/or their parents/carers.

Teaching assistants play a crucial role in enabling schools to understand and meet the needs of learners with vision impairments and are often responsible for producing modified materials for them. It is important to

make sure that teaching and learning resources are accessible and prepared in good time for lessons.

2.2. Principles for modifying resources

Some of the principles for managing the preparation of resources for vision impaired learners are:

- Plan ahead to make sure you/support staff have time to modify materials before the lesson.
- Make sure support staff know exactly what is required and by when.
- Consider producing materials for all learners in an accessible font size (at least 14 point) and typeface (e.g. Arial) to reduce the amount of modification needed – this will also help other learners, e.g. those with dyslexia/specific learning difficulties.
- Prepare resources electronically so that they can be saved and modified easily to produce different versions.
- Provide electronic copies of resources for learners so they can put them into their preferred format themselves on their own computers, devices.
- Encourage learners to submit written work electronically wherever possible and add your own comments electronically so that they are also accessible to learners.
- Give extra time, if needed, for learners with VI to process information and complete tasks. Where extra time is not possible, think about the simplest approach or resource that will enable them to meet the learning outcomes.
- Look for resources already available in a suitable modified format, such as those available from [RNIB Bookshare](#).

2.3. Published modified resources

Many published learning resources are already available in modified formats. Try the following:

- [RNIB Bookshare](#) (previously known as Load 2 Learn) was founded by RNIB and Dyslexia Action: it is a free online resource that allows teaching staff to download key curriculum materials in a range of formats and adapt them to suit the personal reading needs of individual learners. The service has thousands of accessible books

and images in various formats – Word, audio and PDF. New materials are being added all the time.

- RNIB library catalogue, which has over 170,000 items available for loan and/or sale in audio, Braille and Moon:
rnib.org.uk/librarycatalogue
- ClearVision, which is a postal lending library of over 13,000 mainstream children's books. The books all have added Braille (or Moon), print and pictures, making them suitable for vision impaired and sighted children and adults to share: clearvisionproject.org
- [The Living Paintings Trust](http://thelivingpaintings.org) also offers a range of resources for children in audio and tactile formats.
- VI-forum – an invaluable source of professional advice on accessible resources, as well as a platform where teachers can share copies of accessible resources: lists.education.gov.uk/mailman/listinfo/vi-forum

2.4. Making print-based resources accessible

Many learners with vision impairment can use print-based materials. With appropriate low-vision aids (magnifiers etc), even learners with very little sight can use standard sized print for some purposes. In many cases, however, enlarging the print can make reading easier. The preferred print size will vary, depending on:

- a learner's vision impairment and their functional vision levels in setting
- the nature of the task, and
- the complexity of the text.

For some vision impaired learners, enlarging the print may not help. For example, learners with a severe visual field loss may have only a small working area of vision, so making the print larger would mean they would see even less at one time. Other eye conditions may make reading tiring or make it difficult for learners to scan a text or keep their place. The QTVI, SENCO/ALNCO, or learners themselves will be able to tell you about the implications of a particular eye condition for close work and for reading the whiteboard.

How easy it is to read print depends not only on its size, but also on its quality. Other factors which can affect legibility include:

- font type – in general, use a clear font such as Helvetica, Arial, Tahoma or Tiresias; avoid light or curved fonts such as italics; avoid mixing font types in the same resource
- formatting and justification – avoid italics and underlining; do not use upper case letters for continuous text; left justify text
- spacing between letters, words, lines and illustrations – leave space before and after paragraphs and illustrations; if learners have to write on the resource, allow extra handwriting space for vision impaired learners
- quality of paper – avoid glossy paper as this can cause glare
- page layout – keep page design clear and uncluttered; keep drawings, tables and graphs as simple as possible
- contrast – some learners may require bold or semi-bold print; use black text on a cream or white background unless learners require alternative colour combinations; avoid coloured print and backgrounds if possible, but if you do use them make the colour contrast as strong as possible; avoid putting text over illustrations.

2.5. Braille

Modifying learning resources for braille users is a time-consuming and skilled task and will normally be organised by QTVIs. You need to communicate effectively with the QTVI to make sure braille resources are available for learners in time for the lessons when they need them.

Learners who read and write in braille need specialist training to do so effectively. Even the most competent braille readers read more slowly than most sighted people read print.

Most learners who use braille also learn to touch-type and use laptops with screen readers in lessons, tablets and/or specialist technology such as a BrailleNote or Orbit Reader. Work can be given to learners by email or on a completed using a screen reader and printed out in text or in braille, as required.

2.6. Tactile pictures, diagrams, tables and charts

Alongside braille resources, learners with little or no sight but good tactile skills may also use other tactile resources – pictures, diagrams, charts

and graphs – to gain access to curriculum information. Learning how to interpret tactile diagrams is a specialist skill which needs to be taught by a QTVI.

Tactile pictures/diagrams can be useful when:

- a picture/diagram is not easy to describe in words
- the skill being taught requires the use of this format, e.g. maps in geography
- the shape or pattern is vital to understanding a concept
- scale is important, and/or
- the real object is unavailable.

Tactile resources are often produced using heat and swell paper. A simplified version of the picture/diagram is printed or photocopied in black and white onto specially coated paper. It is then fed through a heat machine that raises all the black areas. Other tactile resources can be made using 'Wikki Stix', tactile drawing film or embossed braille paper. Increasingly, pictures and diagrams on websites have a text description that can be read by a screen reader.

Learners with vision impairment will have different needs and preferences, so before modifying pictures, diagrams, tables or charts for particular learners, check with the QTVI, the SENCO/ALNCO and/or the learner themselves.

In general, however, it will be useful to consider the following for both printed and tactile pictures and diagrams:

- **Is it essential?** Tactile diagrams and pictures take considerable time and skill to make and interpret. In many cases, the time needed to produce and interpret a tactile diagram may outweigh the advantages of producing a diagram – e.g. if it does not add information to the text.
- **What information is essential?** Modify pictures and diagrams to reduce the visual/tactile demand and to leave only the essential information. Some learners with a VI will only see or feel small sections of a picture or diagram at a time and will need to piece the sections together mentally to appreciate the whole thing..

- **Could the information in the picture/diagram be replaced with a written description or with a real object or model?** A written description can give the user information about the picture or diagram, plus, where necessary, additional information to provide a context that might be unfamiliar to the vision impaired learner. Some learners with a VI may find the concept of a 2D diagrammatic or pictorial representation of the real world difficult to grasp, so real objects can be more meaningful.

Further information and advice on creating accessible pictures and diagrams is available at [Images Central on RNIB Bookshare](#)

2.7. Real objects and artefacts

Some materials that might ordinarily be presented as illustrations or diagrams can be presented instead as real objects or models to help include vision impaired learners. In many cases, real objects are more meaningful to learners than raised 2D representations.

2.8. Information and communication technology (ICT)

ICT has enormous potential to support the learning in learners with vision impairment across the age and ability range. In recent years technology has enhanced learning experiences for all children. Because of the ability to customise and adapt equipment that is responsive to the user's needs and skills, it is particularly significant as a tool in the education of learners with vision impairment and other special needs.

As well as providing an important alternative means of access on an individual basis (e.g. through the use of a laptop or braille device for reading and recording in lessons) assistive technology can also provide learners with access to the many mainstream ICT-based resources that increasingly form part of all children's teaching and learning.

However, while technology is an essential tool in the successful inclusion of many learners who have vision impairment, it is not an automatic solution in its own right. Input from an appropriate specialist is needed to identify the right technology for an individual learner, and many solutions will involve extensive training before a learner is competent in using them independently in the classroom.

Because changes in technology take place so rapidly it is impossible to capture the current state of play in a single written guide. Further information on assistive technology is available [on the technology information page of the RNIB website](#).

Part 3: Developing communication skills

About this part

This part looks at ways to remove barriers to learning and participation for vision impaired learners by helping them to develop their reading and writing skills.

Good communication skills are vital to learning. Learners with a vision impairment should be encouraged to develop their language and communication skills from a very early age.

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3.1. Reading

Many learners with a vision impairment will be able to see the large, clear print used in early years settings and classrooms. But as they move through the school, print tends to become smaller and may therefore need to be modified, or learners may need to use specialist reading aids such as magnifiers. Teachers need to work closely with the Qualified Teacher of Children with Vision Impairment (QTVI) and/or Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO/ALNCO) to make sure appropriate materials are provided.

Learners with particular vision impairments may have difficulties with skimming and scanning to find information on a page. Their reading can be slower, and they may tire easily. It is often useful to allow learners to take materials home to read before they are used in lessons so that the

learner can take part in activities rather than spending their time trying to read the material.

Learners with VI may not have access to the incidental visual learning that sighted learners have. It is helpful to check that learners are familiar with a concept before asking them to do work related to it. For example, before asking learners to design an advertising poster or the front page of a newspaper, check that they understand the key features. If necessary, provide some pre-teaching, perhaps with a teaching assistant, so they can participate fully with other learners during the lesson.

Learners with little or no vision will need opportunities to develop additional skills such as their sense of touch to give them access to written material and auditory scanning skills so they may be able to access screen readers etc. Not all blind children are keen to use their hands, and in the early years of schooling these learners often need activities to encourage them to explore and tolerate textures and to become efficient touch readers. These activities will include, for example, those designed to develop:

- Sensory...something here
- manual dexterity, flexibility and strength
- tracking skills, and
- tactile perception – i.e. matching and discriminating textures and shapes by touch.

QTVIs are responsible for coordinating braille teaching and, along with support staff, will introduce learners to braille as and when the time is appropriate, and the learner is ready with the necessary base skills

Blind learners may have individual braille tuition alongside normal classes. However, it is good inclusive practice to make sure braille users take part in literacy activities alongside the sighted learners in their class. Some schools also help braille users to feel included by introducing basic braille to all learners in a class, holding braille awareness activities or braille clubs.

3.2. Accessible lessons

Lessons can be made more accessible to learners who have vision impairment by adopting a multi-sensory approach – for example, using audio or tactile resources alongside or instead of visual resources.

Look at one of your lesson plans. How accessible is it for a learner with a vision impairment?

Consider:

- any concepts that you have assumed all learners will understand, but which a person with VI may not have come across
- the amount of reading and writing learners are required to do
- the number of visual resources you use.

Annotate your lesson plan to show any modifications you could make to your lesson to enable a learner with vision impairment to take part fully, alongside the sighted learners.

3.3. Writing

Some learners with VI are able to write neatly and legibly, but others can find handwriting tedious and frustrating.

Difficulties may include:

- Lack of fine motor skills, resulting in poor pen control and large, uneven letter formation –learners may have had fewer opportunities than their sighted peers to develop these through play.
- They may need to work very close to the page to see what they are writing – this can be tiring and reduces the amount of light falling onto the page. A sloping desktop stand can help some learners.
- Writing in a straight line and putting adequate spacing between letters and words may be difficult. Lined paper can help, and paper with darker lines is available.
- Seeing what they have written – while learners may be able to write legibly they may not be able to read their own writing. black fibre-tip pens on cream or white paper often offer maximum contrast.

- Spelling – because learners with vision impairment may have had less exposure to written words or may find it difficult to see word patterns at a glance, they may have more difficulty with spelling than their peers or they may find it difficult to tell if words are spelt correctly. The teaching of spelling may need to be modified for them.

As learners progress through school, they may find that handwriting is an inefficient way to record their work. Many will be taught typing skills to reach the same standard of speed and neatness as sighted learners.

Most learners who write braille begin by using a mechanical Perkins Braille machine. When the learner presses the keys, raised dots are embossed onto paper, which is fed manually into the braille. For older learners, a variety of electronic braille-writing devices are available such as a BrailleNote. On these machines the output may be a tactile display on the front of the machine, as well as speech output. Learners' work can be downloaded and printed out in text or embossed into braille.

Many learners with severe vision impairment now use technology to complete work in most subjects on a conventional desktop or laptop computer, with software that enables them to record and retrieve information using synthesised speech. Teachers can supply work by email or dropbox type systems within school with learners submitting work in the same way.

However, in some subjects – like mathematics – most blind learners still use a manual braille because it allows them to lay out and check their work easily. In these instances, learners' braille will need to be transcribed for marking. This may be done by a teaching assistant qualified in braille, a QTVI or a le technician.

3.4. Listening

Some vision impaired learners may find it more efficient to process information through listening than through seeing. Many older students, and college and university students, rely heavily on recording devices to take notes or to listen to audio books. It is important to remember that learners' listening skills need to be developed, as their hearing does not automatically improve to compensate for their lack of vision

Part 4: The sensory and physical environment

About this part

This part considers ways in which schools can create an appropriate learning environment for learners who have vision impairment.

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4.1. Overview

An accessible physical environment can do a great deal to reduce barriers to participation and learning for learners with vision impairment, and it will also benefit all other learners.

There is a balance to be struck between providing an environment that is safe and accessible for learners with VI and preparing them to take an independent role in a society that is not always designed to meet their needs.

All schools must comply with legal requirements and have an anticipatory duty to plan for disabled learners. However, when a school knows it is going to receive a learner who has a vision impairment, a Qualified teacher of Children with Vision Impairment (QTVI) and Habilitation Specialist will usually conduct an audit to suggest where simple improvements could be made. In many mainstream schools with vision impaired learners, after health and safety issues have been dealt with, the only other adaptations made to the physical environment are those required by disability legislation. In special schools, or mainstream schools where learners' vision impairments are part of a range of complex needs, more adaptations may be required.

4.2. Carrying out an environmental audit

A Habilitation Specialist should be involved in auditing the school environment regarding access by a pupil with vision impairment but there are considerations you can make directly yourself.

Walk around your school looking for general areas where adaptations could be made to make the environment more accessible for a learner with vision impairment. Some of the features you may observe or consider include:

- Signage – clear, well positioned and easily visible, perhaps using braille or symbol.
- Steps, edges, pillars and other transition points highlighted with yellow paint.
- Handrails to help with mobility.
- ‘Tactile trails’ – dado rails or other textured materials at hand height, that learners can follow to find the route to a particular location in school – e.g. toilets, dining hall.
- Different floor coverings for different areas of the school to indicate a change of environment.
- Clear panels on doors so people can be seen approaching from the other side.
- A distinction between quiet and active areas in the playground, and shaded areas for learners with light sensitivity.
- Sensory gardens.
- Well-maintained grounds, free of obstructions.
- Corridors, cloakrooms and classrooms kept free of obstructions.

4.3. Classroom accessibility

It is also important to audit the environment in a classroom where a learner with VI is going to work. Consider:

Physical accessibility

- Are walkways clear? Are coats and bags put away safely? Does classroom storage create an obstacle?
- Is the layout of the classroom kept consistent?

Storage and labelling of resources

- Are resources kept in the same place and clearly labelled with tactile markers, if necessary?

Lighting

- Is there good ambient lighting in the classroom?
- Does the light fall directly onto the learner's work areas?
- Do the windows have blinds to reduce glare?
- Are reflective surfaces covered to reduce glare?

Teaching position

- Avoid standing in front of windows - this can reduce you to a silhouette and make it difficult for all learners to see you properly.
- Learners who have VI need to sit in the best position to see the whiteboard, etc, but not separately from the other learners.
- Do learners with vision impairment need to sit close to a power source if they are using ICT devices?

Whiteboard

- Make sure you use a clearly contrasting pen for writing on the whiteboard – e.g. black on white (Avoid using coloured pens or pens that are running out of ink.)
- What arrangements are/could be made for learners who cannot see the whiteboard easily, or at all? For example, do you provide individual copies of anything presented on the whiteboard for learners who need them?

Teaching and learning resources

- Are the print resources you use in an appropriate format for learners? (Consider print size, font and contrast. When working with vision impaired learners you should take advice from the learner, their parents/carers, the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO/ALNCO) or the QTVI, as appropriate.)
- Do learners have a good reading position? (Reading stands or raised boards are useful to help some learners get the best reading position.)
- Do you use real objects and artefacts to support your teaching?
- Do learners who use special equipment or large print resources have adequate space to work?

Part 5: Social inclusion

This part explores the issue of social inclusion. It covers the impact that vision impairment has on social development and contains some ideas to encourage blind and partially sighted young children to learn to socialise and make friends.

5.1. What impact does vision impairment have on social development?

Many children and young people with vision impairment need active support to develop skills of social interaction. Without this intervention they are at greater risk of developing low self-esteem than their sighted peers.

Ways in which vision impairment can impact on children's social development include the following:

- They may have difficulty in observing and imitating their peers which can impact on the development of age appropriate behaviours. A child may miss out on some of the visual clues and body language that people use to establish friendships.
- They may be more dependent on their parents in many areas, which may adversely affect the development of a sense of independence, one of the most important factors in relation to their self-esteem and adjustment.
- They may experience greater feelings of failure, particularly in relation to sport and exercise.
- They may be less accepted by their peer group and have fewer friends which is likely to impact on their self-esteem.

For some, the growing realisation of the restrictions that their vision impairment may impose upon them, usually in comparison to their sighted peers, may be a trigger for a series of negative emotions, and leave them vulnerable to psychological stress, frustration and even depression.

Also, sighted people may have inappropriate expectations about what children and young people with vision impairment can see and do, and thus wellbeing may be negatively affected when the child or young person is unable to meet these expectations.

Being aware of these issues is necessary to support children and young people with vision impairment in an appropriate way. However, it is important not to let this lead to a negative approach to their social inclusion, but rather to promote a positive problem-solving approach, focusing on finding solutions rather than dwelling on the difficulties the young person faces.

5.2 Taking responsibility for children's social skills

Schools should be working to support a child's social needs, as well as academic needs. Staff can plan how to encourage a child to interact with others, both in the classroom and in the playground. At first, this may need to be closely structured, but as the child grows in confidence and builds friendships, they won't need as much support. After school clubs should be available to all children, whatever their level of sight loss.

However, remember that all children have individual personalities. Some children don't want to be always playing with others; they like time to themselves, or with one special friend. Children with vision impairment are no different.

5.3 Ensuring children have the opportunity to interact

Depending on the extent of their vision impairment alongside other individual differences, children may find it difficult to forge strong social links with their peers and others unless informed adults prepare the way for them. They may remain isolated unless they know they are part of a group and ongoing help is available throughout each session. This will at least give them the opportunity to respond and interact with their peers. The whole process takes a lot of time and commitment from both teachers and carers. It is this extra input from adults which constitutes the basic difference between socialisation of blind and sighted very

young children. This extra input is so important to give children the opportunity they deserve to become sociable and independent children and adults.

When a child is familiar with the routine and environment and they are used to playing with other children, parents and teachers are often able to take a step back. It is then useful if the adult focuses attention on the other children in the group. The adult can encourage other children to involve a less confident blind child in play by:

- describing their activities verbally; the adult may need to prompt this by saying 'Tell Jack what you are doing'
- asking the child to join in an activity
- physically leading them to the activity
- talking to them whilst involved in the activity.

The main aim by this stage is for a child to feel confident enough to take the first step to join in. When a child with severe vision impairment says "What are you doing? Can I play?", this is a great achievement.

5.4 Top tips for social inclusion

These tips on promoting social inclusion are taken from 'What can you see? Supporting the social development of young people who are blind or partially sighted' by Dr Gail Bailey (RNIB Cymru).

- Friendships are a two-way process, so it is necessary to work with family and peer group as well as the young individual where there is concern about their social status.
- As there are barriers to enjoying sustained well-being, it is necessary to monitor and provide emotional support for a child with sight impairment. This support can be from professionals and parents if they understand the implications of sight loss for social inclusion and well-being.
- Sometimes a way forward is to raise awareness of the implications of sight loss to empower front-line practitioners to handle situations, as

well as offering direct support to the individual to develop coping strategies.

The early years

- Developing a close bond is key to attachment and the ability to form lasting relationships as the child matures. Early years practitioners need to be aware that there are barriers to developing a close bond if a child has vision impairment from infancy, so that they can work with parents find alternative pathways to communicate warmth to their child. This is also important for the development of language, concept development and play.
- Encouraging children to ask questions and parents to give quality feedback about the world around the child can help to bridge the gap between the experience of the child and the fully sighted world.
- As children and young people with vision impairments miss out on non-verbal communication, it is useful to describe expressions of emotion. "Your brother is smiling because he has just seen the tub of ice cream for pudding" or "Your brother's face looks sad because he has just waved goodbye to his friend and he'd wanted him to stay for a bit longer."
- Developing empathy and a vocabulary for feelings is important for being able to understand and manage emotions.
- Developing a shared understanding of the world around is very important for being able to predict what is likely to happen in given social situations so reducing embarrassment and anxiety.

The primary phase

- Play is important for socialisation and opportunities to develop these skills are sometimes limited for the child with a sight problem. If a child is isolated, play opportunities need to be proactively created.

- Understanding the impact of the eye condition helps professionals to find ways around practical problems.
- As the child grows, so does the need to trust others in the community – a building block for friendship.
- Even one trusting friendship can provide opportunities for quality feedback about what is happening in the peer group.
- The following commonly available approaches can be used to involve the peer group with some adaptation:
 - awareness raising workshops and quizzes
 - circle of friends
 - mentoring.
- Direct teaching techniques include:
 - social and emotional aspects of learning
 - teaching of non-verbal communication skills
 - the use of social stories to develop shared understanding or offset anxiety.

Secondary phase

- Some young people in this age range have limited opportunity to develop self-determination skills or independence.
- Multi-agency working is critical to help the young person develop autonomy and to empower families to adjust to this transition.
- Sometimes there is a need to promote tolerance of diversity and active strategies to provide understanding sight loss training and peer feedback. For example, mentoring schemes, Circles of friends, quizzes.
- Devising individual scripts for awkward social situations can help the young person to develop confidence and friendships.

Finally, the key to peers, parents and other adults being able to relate naturally to a child with a sight problem is to understand the nature of their eye condition and its impact on their social functioning.

5.5 Other resources

Other useful resources to support social inclusion include:

- Positive Eye produces a range of resources and tips to help professionals meet the educational and social needs of children and young people with vision impairment. Website: positiveeye.co.uk/

Further information

The RNIB CYPF and Education team can provide advice and information for children and young people aged 0-25, their families and the professionals who work with them.

Email cypf@rnib.org.uk , telephone 0303 123 9999 or visit rnib.org.uk/children or rnib.org.uk/educationprofessionals

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