

Visually Handicapped Children

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This is a numerically small but seriously disabled group. Visual disorders arise from a multitude of causes either within the eye itself or in those areas of the brain that deal with the interpretation of the visual phenomena.

Blind children have to learn from attentive listening, smelling, touching and manipulating whatever lies within arm's reach. They generally dislike soft toys; they need playthings which provide good *feelable* shapes and textures, and above all a meaningful language. It is enough for normal individuals to close their eyes in order to appreciate the previous deprivation of the totally blind. It is more difficult to understand the baffling, visual world of a partially-sighted child who may possess a few patches of the visual field; this may prove highly useful for near vision but the child has little notion of distances, perspectives and spatial relationships and therefore cannot readily appreciate our predominantly visually organized world.

Blind children are easily distracted by sound; they will be unable to focus attention on meaningful elements in the environment for long, and so, in self defence, tend to drift into a state of non-attention.

Young blind children unable to see how both hands function together may be unaware of how to bring this about. Even when bilateral function is explained and illustrated to them, they may still need to feel the position of one hand relative to the other. If in addition, they have a central disability for spatial recognition, their learning problems are indescribably complex.

People whose visual perception is very poor are still, however, able to lead full and happy lives, have a full time job and look after their own families. To do

these things and to have a chance of complete independence, one must be very patient at training them to use the other senses to their full capacity in an attempt to make up for the other sense which they have not got.

What follows are some practical guidelines which may prove helpful at some time or another:

1. Blind children need more help than other normal children. They have to be taught to do things that normally would be easily learnt by copying. They must develop all the other senses to the maximum efficiency.
2. They must be cuddled and frequently talked to. They need to know that you are there!
3. Always tell them when you are going to touch them, or to do something startling. They cannot see what you are doing. They also appreciate your telling them what is happening around them. Hold their hands when something frightens them.
4. Always try to be honest and truthful. These children must be able to trust their helpers. Let them hear you laugh when you are playing with or teasing them. They cannot see your smile.
5. Give them things made out of solid, robust materials like wood and metal. These are better things to be manipulated than soft toys are. Tie the toys to the cot or play-pen so that the child can find them if they are dropped accidentally. One must ensure that very small objects are kept away from infants because they may end up swallowing them or even choking. Common items are preferable because these are the things they must learn to appreciate and identify!

6. Help them identify the various things around them. What is wet? What is gritty? What is sticky? What is soft? What is hard? What makes certain noises?
7. Let them help in the kitchen. This is a good place to use the senses of touch and particularly taste and smell. One may fit a guard to the top of the cooker and turn saucepan handles away from the sides and front to avoid any danger as much as possible.
8. To improve their sense of direction, you can play games such as by calling them and letting them find you whilst you keep calling.
9. To help them learn, let them do things with you. Let them dress and undress by themselves as well as wash and dry themselves. Help them get used to stairs but have a safety gate when they are exploring on their own.
10. Always inform a blind person when you have moved a piece of furniture.
11. Take them out and give them the opportunity to play outside in all weathers. Let them enjoy the company of other friends even at the cost of them getting a few bumps and bruises.
12. It is important for them to distinguish boys from girls. Let them help in bathing babies.
13. In case of partially sighted children ensure that they have proper glasses to wear at the times they should. If more than one member of the family wears glasses make sure that they are wearing their own and learn to recognise them. A spare set of glasses is advisable especially if the child cannot do without a pair. The glasses must be checked regularly to ensure they are clean, not scratched and properly maintained. Eyes have to be seen by the ophthalmologist and new glasses should replace old ones, if necessary.

Here are a few tips to help you guide a blind person:

The grip or linking position.

The blind individual is one step behind the helper, for better direction. The helper's arm is straight. The blind person's arm is bent holding the helper's just above the elbow.

Steps and staircases

Whether ascending or descending, the guide should be one step ahead, thus preventing the blind person from taking an extra step into thin air!

When going up, always inform the disabled by saying *steps up*. Walk in rhythm, one step in front with your partner's gripping arm being slightly stretched forwards and upwards until you reach the top. After having ascended the whole flight of steps, take a large stride forwards and stop, allowing the blind person to negotiate the last step. As he feels his arms resume its normal level of grip, he will know that he is on the landing. Likewise, when going down say *steps down*. Otherwise the procedure is very similar to going up.

Entering cars

The blind individual simply has to be helped by

placing your gripping hand on the passenger door handle and tell him which way the car is facing. His hand then slides down your arm and locates the handle while the other finds the roof.

Getting out of cars

You must check for the passenger whether the road is clear before opening the door. Then he can open the door with one hand and find the roof with the other.

Walking in single file

One often needs to do this in busy areas like shops and restaurants. Indicate the need for your partner to step in behind you by moving your gripping arm to the middle of your back, keeping your arm straight.

Doorways

The helper would have to go through the doorway first; the blind partner follows and closes the door. Take a look at the door, if the hinge is on the left, the partner should be on your left side with his left hand free. Describe it as *door left*. As you turn the handle and move the door, the blind person can distinguish whether it is moving inwards or outwards. Inform him if the door is a swinging door.

When you are opening the door, do so with your gripping arm; otherwise your partner will be unaware of your actions.

Sitting

If possible approach the chair from in front, centrally, but whichever way you approach it, always place your grip hand on the back of the chair. Let your partner slide his hand down your arm to the chair back, then he can sort the rest out by himself. A blind person usually feels the side of the chair with the calf of his leg and checks the chair depth with his hand.

Conclusion

The day-to-day problems of parents of handicapped children have much more in common than in difference; while their advisers need to possess more virtues than compassion. After all their child is handicapped and for many years will continue to require the same affection, encouragement, patience and sensible discipline subject neither to over protection nor to intolerable strain.

Workers need to shed their ideas and to look, listen and record truthfully what is really happening and what additional measures could be undertaken to improve the situation. I pray to the Divine Lord to endow each and every one of us during our tasks in helping these beloved children so that through the medical and nursing staff we can help in reducing the handicap to a minimum and develop their capabilities to the full. Moreover, we must be endowed with intelligence, patience and sensitivity but above all with that important combination of insight, foresight and humour, it other words ordinary common sense!

Just because a child is handicapped, this does not imply that his life and that of his family are going to be devoid of happiness!