



Visual impairment support

Meeting the needs of a visually impaired pupil in primary school

About this fact sheet

This fact sheet provides guidance on meeting the needs of visually impaired pupils in primary schools.

Recognising visual difficulties

Identifying a visual difficulty

Teachers need to be aware of the signs that may indicate the pupil is having visual problems. Informal assessment through observation can be invaluable and it would be helpful if teachers could make notes if they repeatedly notice any of the following. It must be noted however, that many of the 'symptoms' on the list may be present in children with no visual difficulty. It is however important to investigate every avenue if a pupil is experiencing any type of learning difficulty, or does not appear to be reaching his or her potential.

The eyes appearance

- Inflamed, weepy, cloudy or bloodshot; sore, crusted or drooping eyelid
- Untreated squints
- Unusual eye movements such as rapid involuntary movement of both eyes in a horizontal or vertical direction
- Continual blinking, rubbing or screwing up of the eyes, or incessant frowning for no apparent reason
- Obvious discomfort in bright light, or problems in dim light
- Complaints of dusty or gritty eyes
- Pupil of the eye appearing misshapen or irregular
- Eyes that do not appear to be aligned and working together

Physical indications

- The child holds his/her head in an unusual position, or tilts the head whilst working
- The work is held at an unusual distance or angle
- The pupil has a strange facial expression or peers when reading or whilst doing close work
- The pupil often complains about feeling dizzy or having a headache for no apparent reason
- The pupil persistently covers, closes or shades one or both eyes
- The pupil shows discomfort in bright light or when moving between different lighting conditions; eg classroom to corridor, playground to classroom etc.
- The pupil moves the head rather than just the eyes whilst reading
- The child makes frequent nodding movements or has an unusual sideways gaze whilst concentrating
- The pupil shows frequent clumsiness and bumps into objects, especially those to the side or at the feet
- The pupil has an unusual or hesitant posture when moving about, especially in unfamiliar surroundings
- The pupil has a fear of heights or unusually poor balance, and a reluctance to join in physical activities
- The pupil frequently fails to respond appropriately to questions, commands or gestures unless actually addressed by name, or makes an inappropriate response to non-verbal communication or group dynamics
- The pupil has difficulty in locating objects, particularly when against a poor contrast
- The pupil has poor posture or consistent failure to make and maintain eye-to eye contact
- The pupil lacks confidence

Difficulties with school tasks

- Inconsistent work for no apparent reason
- Short attention span and poor listening skills, especially when observing demonstrations or activities across the classroom
- Incessant day dreaming and 'switching off' from the activity
- Obvious consistent errors in reading and writing eg reversals or unusual spacing between letters or words. Letter that are not fully formed, or confusion between similar letters such as cl and d, m and n etc.
- Poor presentation or an inexplicable deterioration of work, tiny or over large handwriting and an inability to follow lines on a page
- An inability to read from the blackboard or OHP, etc. or from notices around the room or school
- Difficulty in coping or reading from text books and worksheets etc.

What action should be taken?

If you have observed any of the indications above consistently, you should notify the child's parents. Asking them if they have noticed anything about the pupil's eyes or visual functioning themselves. Ideally the pupil should visit an optician or consultant ophthalmologist. Ask has the pupil been prescribed spectacles or contact lenses and if so does he or she wear them when they should. Ask if the school nurse aware of the pupil.

If you have considered all the above questions and you are still concerned about the pupil's vision, please contact us at the visual impairment service.

Tips for helping the visually impaired pupil in the classroom

Teaching Strategies

- Always give clear verbal instructions and descriptions; the visually impaired child misses forms of non-verbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions. The child should be addressed by name first to get his/her attention, and explicit language should be used whenever possible.
- If appropriate and whenever possible, give the child 'hands-on' experience during class group demonstrations. The child should be seated as close as possible to the activity or demonstration, and again, clear verbal instructions should always be given.
- Most children do need extra time to complete tasks, especially written assignments. This can be helped by various means, and advice should be sought from a specialist teacher: the child should not be allowed to accumulate a mass of unfinished work.
- Listening skills do need to be developed and observational skills encouraged; the child needs to be trained to LOOK more carefully.
- Seated to the board and facing it. Such boards should be kept in good condition and the surface should be glare-free.
- The child may also need to sit near the front in hall activities such as assemblies, concerts etc. When watching television the child would be best seated at eye level with the screen, and again glare should be avoided.
- When younger children are listening to a story it would be helpful if they could have a copy of the book being read, or could look at it beforehand or afterwards individually.
- Good contrast is often more important than enlargement depending on the eye condition; advice should be sought from us.
- All teaching materials presented to the child should be of good quality and well spaced; hand-written and photocopied sheets are often difficult to decipher.
- The teacher should not stand with his/her back to the window as this causes silhouetting and the child will be unable to see the teacher clearly. Likewise, the television and computer screen should not be obscured by sunlight.
- The child will tire more quickly than other children and when possible, short intense periods of concentration are preferable to long sessions.
- If possible some displays should be mounted at eye level and be of good contrast and uncluttered. The child's attention should be drawn to them, or they may go unnoticed.
- Personal tidiness and organisation should be encouraged, and it would be helpful if the child had his/her own space, clearly labelled. It should be easily accessible and frequently used. Pegs and lockers would be best situated at the end of rows and should not be shared.
- Lighting should be at good level and consistent around the school with no glare.

Books and paper

Text books and reading books may need to be enlarged or modified for the visually impaired child. Often good contrast is just as effective if not more so. Worksheets should be clearly produced and preferably in black print on a white background. There is now a wide selection of computer software producing print in a variety of sizes and fonts. Reading books for the younger or less able child should contain well-defined pictures and words, and large print and audio books can be obtained from us if appropriate. Visually impaired children should not be expected to share text books, and some children may benefit from using markers or 'reading windows'.

Pens and crayons

When colouring, felt pens are generally most effective, and pencil crayon are preferable to wax. Thin black felt pens are generally the most effective writing implement, but can be messy, and a dark pencil may suffice. Black ink is usually better than blue, but the child must be allowed to experiment to see what suits him/her best.

Lighting

The lighting around the school should be checked regularly and should be consistent throughout the school. Many visually impaired children are photophobic, (sensitive to light), and they may be most comfortable in a shaded area of the room. Such children may be prescribed with tinted glasses, and they must be encouraged to use these in bright light. Other children may need extra illumination, and task lighting could be provided for them; specialist advice should be taken concerning this.

Reading stands

Raised worktops and leaflet holders can be used to bring the work closer to the eye. although the eye cannot be damaged by close work, posture can be affected if the child is always leaning over their work. It is easier for a visually impaired child to read from a book or worksheet placed vertically in front of him/her, and more light is able to reach the work.

Auditory aids

Many visually impaired children benefit from using audio equipment: lessons can be recorded to be listened to later, and notes can then be taken in the child's own time when they feel less pressured. Set books can be obtained electronically if appropriate. Talking calculators are a useful aid, as are speech synthesisers attached to suitable computer software. Our service can provide advice concerning this.

Magnification

The more severely impaired child may need more specialised equipment to suit his/her needs such as a video magnifiers. More common in the classroom are magnifiers of various types, or telescopes for children who have difficulty seeing the board. Such equipment must only be prescribed by a low-vision device (LVD) specialist, or staff from our service.

Safety considerations

Schools should be safe environments for all children, but many potential hazards are overlooked and can be particularly dangerous for children who have poor sight. Many of the hazards can be overcome quite simply: steps can be highlighted by painting a contrasting strip along the edges and transfers could be stuck on large expanses of plain glass. In practical subjects such as art, science and technology the children should be trained in the safe use and care of the equipment before working with it. ALL children need to be aware of the potential dangers both at home and at school; the specialist teacher will be able to advise on such matters. The following is a list of common obstructions that could cause the visually impaired child particular problems:

- Objects at head height; eg coat pegs, hanging plants, lockers etc
- Windows left open, especially those at head height
- Schoolbags left lying on the floor
- Electric cables across the floor
- Tilted chairs and chairs being pushed back suddenly
- Sharp objects held by other children; eg scissors, pencils etc
- Insecure doors which may 'catch' in the wind
- Glass doors such as patios or large plain glass windows
- Inconsistent lighting around the school
- Doors left ajar
- Locker or cupboard doors left to swing open
- Slippery or chipped and broken edges of steps
- Holes in carpet or lino
- Deliveries left in school corridors
- Disorganised movement of children around the school, especially at break times and when changing lessons

Mobility and orientation

Every child with a visual impairment has the right to reach their independent living potential. A major aspect of this is their ability to travel independently, to move around their environment safely and with understanding

Mobility is recommended as an integral part of the curriculum for all pupils with a visual impairment and teachers of the visually impaired usually make referral to the mobility instructor. The mobility instructor should assess the needs of each student individually in relation to:

- Strengths and difficulties of individual pupil
- Aspects of the individual pupil's development
- The specific requirement of the student, his/her family and the school

The mobility instructor encourages independent movement according to age, ability and needs of the pupil.

When travelling independently, a pupil uses a variety of skills and techniques. If the pupil has a severe visual impairment they may use a long cane to promote safe and effective independent travel. The mobility instructor teaches this skill. Other pupils may use symbol canes when undertaking busy road crossings.

The safety of the child is paramount and pupils should feel relaxed, happy and safe at all times.

Access

The mobility instructor may also carry out an assessment in school regarding access for visually impaired children and young people. Recommendations will then be issued concerning any adaptations, which may be required in order to facilitate full access.

Living skills

The aim of teaching daily living skills is for the pupil to learn how to care for his/her daily needs.

The mobility instructor will provide any necessary specialist equipment and

an individual programme is provided for each pupil tailored to their specific needs. This is based on a standard check list which will over time enable the pupil to progress to more complex tasks increasing their confidence and level of ability and eventually lead to greater self-reliance.

There is also programme of self-help skills, for example dressing and washing and where necessary, the mobility instructor will work with the pupil at home.

The role of the peripatetic teacher

The visual impairment service offers dedicated help to classroom teachers from their peripatetic teaching staff. They will do a specialist assessment and offer specialist teaching of children, the provision of resource materials, along with in-service training.

What the peripatetic teacher can do to help:

- Explain the effects of visual impairment and how it can affect the child's daily functioning
- Assess the child's needs and advise the class teacher on setting objectives and planning programmes
- Advise on classroom placement and lighting conditions
- Work with the child, teachers, parents and other agencies involved
- Assess visual functioning and training in the use of residual vision and co-ordination with other senses
- Monitor visual condition
- Train with the correct use of low vision devices
- Carry out observations during a wide range of curriculum areas in order to give advice and recommendations for classroom management
- Liaise with the school's examination secretary to request access arrangements from examination boards
- Observe the pupil in a variety of situations such as P.E., science and other practical or visually demanding subjects - to help make a diagnosis or give appropriate recommendations
- Provide reports
- Attend IEP review meetings
- Assess the need for classroom support

The role of the specialist teaching assistant

- Adapting teaching materials for the child's individual use. This may include;
 - Enlarging materials
 - Producing clearly presented worksheets and workbooks with good contrast eg bold black print on white paper
 - Ensuring the child uses the correct writing materials eg black fibre tip pen can be seen more easily than a pencil
- Encouraging the pupil to actively participate during group activities
- Ensuring the pupil's safety during practical lessons P.E. and school trips
- Provide concrete experiences and verbal explanations to support the class teacher's visual clues and class demonstrations. Ensuring all objects and illustrations are shown to the pupil individually
- Ensuring the pupil is sitting in the correct position during stories, assemblies, singing, class demonstrations and group activities.
- Assisting the child during lessons that involve copying hand gestures and body movements eg during P.E., music and movement and singing rhymes. To directly move the child's arms and legs to develop gross motor skills. Visually impaired children need to be directly shown skills and movements which peers learn incidentally or through imitation.
- Encouraging the development of independence and self-help skills to enhance self-confidence
- Ensuring the child makes full use of specialist equipment eg raised desk stand, LVD's and technological equipment
- Ensuring the child makes valuable contributions during practical activities eg art and craft, science, food technology and maths
- Training the pupil to make appropriate use of educational toys, games, scissors and equipment
- Providing a desk copy of board work
- Encouraging the child to socially interact with peers during group activities and play
- Ensuring the child wears his/her glasses
- Checking that the child has the appropriate lighting conditions and is not sitting in direct sunlight. Ensure full use of blinds
- Encouraging the child to adopt systematic strategies for organising his/her own equipment and materials
- Observation and feedback to the class teacher and the teacher of the visually impaired. Also written feedback shown in record book.
- Encouraging full use of residual vision

Typing and keyboard skills

Touch typing/keyboard skills can be taught to pupils with a visual impairment from around the age of eight by a qualified typing/keyboard tutor.

For pupils who are visually impaired this skill enables them to key in text without looking at the keys and produce text that their class teacher, their peers and most importantly they themselves can read (helping with revision for exams etc). Touch typing enables pupils who are blind to produce a print copy and with the facility of a transcription programme on a computer, a braille copy for their own use.

Instruction is given on accessing large print, magnification facilities and using the keys instead of the mouse to select items from the menus.

With IT being continually developed and an important part of the curriculum, this specialised training helps the visually impaired pupil access this technology.

In service training

The purpose of training is to enable the pupil with a visual impairment to be successfully included into the life of the school by having;

- Equal opportunities
- Access to the environment
- Access to the curriculum
- Support to achieve independence
- Support to develop from passive to active and to become a contributing member of society

Training is also aimed at enabling staff to develop awareness of and access to materials which promote social and academic integration and inclusion by:

- Providing appropriate support to meet the specific needs of individuals pupils
- Providing appropriate modified and differentiated materials
- Having an awareness of health and safety issues in practical subjects, physical education, mobility/ independence and other outdoor education activities
- Encouraging positive thinking towards aspects of disability
- Promoting good teaching practice and classroom management
- Imparting knowledge
- Understanding the importance of good communication

It also aims to enable peers and staff to develop a realistic understanding of the social and academic needs of pupils with a visual impairment by:

- Encouraging positive thinking towards aspects of disability
- Promoting a positive image of the pupils' functioning
- Challenging misconceptions about sight impairment
- Understanding the practical implications of working with a pupil with a visual impairment

Training can be given to teaching and non-teaching staff, other adults involved, parents/carers and peers including pupils with visual impairment to demonstrate the positive use of residual vision through:

- Case studies
- Social models
- Simulation exercises
 - Practical activities
 - Spectacles
 - Guiding techniques
- Demonstrations
- Handouts
- Discussion
- Written tasks

More information

The visual impairment service is part of Dudley Disability Service. We are a team of qualified teachers of the visually impaired and specialist teaching assistants.

We provide advice and information to parents and teachers. We help teach and support children with a visual impairment of all ages and abilities. We also assess children's vision. In addition we support and advise on the use of specialist equipment and train in the use of low vision aids, provide Braille and enlarged or modified learning materials, provide training independence and mobility training and teach touch typing and specialist software. We will also liaise with other professionals such as social care, healthcare and RNIB.

For further information or advice, please contact us at:

The Mere

Lawnswood Road

Wordsley

Stourbridge

DY8 5PQ

Tel: 01384 818003

Fax: 01384 814241

Email - judy.lewis@dudley.gov.uk

This publication is available in large print, braille or audio. An easy read version is also available. To request a copy call 01384 813400 or email L2L@dudley.gov.uk