



INCLUDING A CHILD WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

in a mainstream setting

1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa's Inclusive Education policy is built on the belief that all children can learn and benefit from learning together at their local school. Schools that take a supportive approach to teaching and learning make this inclusive learning experience possible.

2 WHAT IS VISUAL IMPAIRMENT?

Visual impairment can range from no vision to low vision, with only a very small proportion of children being blind. The causes can be neurological, genetic, due to illness, injury or infections. Depending on the extent and type of the visual impairment, the following visual perceptual functions are affected: size, colour, shape, distance and direction

3 HOW DOES VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IMPACT LEARNING?

A visually impaired child will typically learn about the world in a different way from a child without a visual impairment. Learners with visual impairment may not be able to rely on their sight to obtain information, and may therefore need to use other senses to do this. They will usually need extra experiences and attention to learn skills that sighted children develop as a matter of course by watching people and objects around them and imitating what they see.

The impact on learning depends on the extent of vision loss, but generally speaking this appears in three important areas:

- 1 LEARNING DOES NOT TAKE PLACE THROUGH INCIDENTAL VISUAL OBSERVATION
- 2 IMPORTANT VISUAL CUES ARE MISSED
- 3 LEARNING IS MINIMAL WHEN DONE VIA THE TRADITIONAL TEACHING FORMATS, SUCH AS STANDARD TEXTBOOKS AND CHALKBOARDS.

4 TEACHING AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES

The type of strategy implemented in the classroom again depends on the extent of vision loss. First establish the learning and support needs of learners with visual impairment in your class. Once you have identified these needs, you can plan for appropriate intervention. Below is a list of a wide range of strategies which could assist you. Select strategies which would be most appropriate taking into account the specific needs of the learner.

- Most importantly, **LTSM (Learning & Teaching Support Material)** must be made accessible to the learner. For learners with low vision, this may simply involve enlarging text. Learners who are blind will require a higher level of support, including materials in braille and access to various supportive technologies.
- **Assistive devices** ranging from a simple magnification sheet to an iPad or tablet can offer print-enlargement to support reading, as well as voice-recognition software as an alternative form of reading.
- For children with **low vision**, contrast is an important factor in seeing text. For example, yellow chalk on a blackboard offers the best contrast.
- Use **supportive teaching aids** which can be high or low tech and which can be sourced through an occupational therapist.
- **Adapt assessment tasks** and procedures. Use alternatives to visual assessment tasks such as orals.
- **Use verbal descriptions** to make up for the lack of visual acuity or clarity. Non-verbal cues may be missed by a child with reduced vision.
- Remember that **emotional support and encouragement** increases confidence and success in all children – do not single out the child with low vision.
- Teasing is a common difficulty where children look, speak or move differently. Minimise this by encouraging **respectful discussion about differences**.
- Ask for professional educational and technical support from **experts in the field** – new techniques are constantly being developed.
- Allow the learner an opportunity to discover or orientate themselves to the layout of their new classroom and **minimize changes in the environment**.
- Check with the child where and how they can see best so that they can be **seated in the optimal place** in terms of light, dark, movement and peripheral vision.

- It may be tempting to do things for the learner because it's quicker that way. It's also tempting for the learner to allow this, but it is not helpful in the long run. **Let the learner do things for herself.** This encourages independence, learning and self-esteem.
- Identify yourself by name in case the student does not recognise your voice.
- Indicate verbally when you are entering or leaving the person's presence.
- **Convey orally** whatever you have written on the board or shown on overheads, particularly charts and diagrams.
- Try to **minimise noise and disturbances** in the classroom, as the learner with visual impairment relies on verbal instruction and information.
- Encourage the learner to **take responsibility** for reminding his teacher when support is needed.
- Let different **classmates** take turns in pairing for assistance if necessary.
- **Allow extra time** and/or break tasks into smaller chunks where needed.
- Encourage participation in **extra-mural activities** where adaptations can be made to create opportunities to acquire skills and confidence.

Many of these are simply effective classroom management and teaching strategies which will benefit not only the learner with visual impairment, but ALL learners in the class.

RESOURCES

- ▶ www.nvaccess.org NVDA (Non-Visual Desktop Access) is a free downloadable "screen-reader"

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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