

Hometraing Module for Parents

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TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	3
1. WHO I AM	5
EMPATHY AND EMOTIONS.....	5
2. WHO I AM	8
SIGHT DESCRIPTION	8
3. WHAT THE WORLD SEES.....	11
BODY POSTURE	11
4. WHAT THE WORLD SEES.....	14
DRESSING, PERSONAL CARE	14
5. WHAT THE WORLD SEES.....	17
MANNERISMS	17
6. HOW DO I COMMUNICATE.....	20
INITIATING AND MAINTAINING CONTACT.....	20
7. HOW DO I COMMUNICATE.....	23
VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION	23
8. WHAT IS MY SOCIAL NETWORK.....	26
FAMILY.....	26
9. WHAT IS MY SOCIAL NETWORK.....	29
Friends, hobbies.....	29
10. EXPERIENCE AND INDEPENDENCE	34
DAILY LIVING SKILLS	34
11. EXPERIENCE AND INDEPENDENCE	37
ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY	37

INTRODUCTION

SMILE Too is an Erasmus project undertaken by 6 leading schools for the Visually Impaired across Europe. The partner schools are:

- Jordanstown School in Northern Ireland,
- Centre IRIS in Slovenia,
- GOA in Prague,
- Royal Visio in the Netherlands,
- Royal Blind School in Scotland
- Lega del filo d'Oro in Italy

The staff involved in the SMILE too project is experienced Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired. They are also involved in outreach work and support children who have visual impairment in mainstream and special schools.

SMILE too stands for Social Skills Make Inclusive Life Easier. As the name suggests, the aim of this 3-year project is to share knowledge about the development of social skills in children and young people who are visually impaired with the aim of making resources for parents to support social skills in this population.

WHY TEACH SOCIAL SKILLS?

It is well documented that the development of social skills relies heavily on observation and imitation. Children and young people with visual impairment often do not have this advantage. Much of social interaction is non-verbal and social cues and body language may be abstract concepts to the child with visual impairment. The development of social skills needs careful consideration as it differs considerably from that of their sighted peers.

“Sighted children observe and imitate people’s social behaviours, learning from any visual cues given. This is known as incidental learning. If these opportunities aren’t available to a child, understanding and development of appropriate social behaviour can become fragmented. Having appropriate social skills is crucial to a child’s everyday interactions. They enable the child to interact with others, establish friendships and later develop personal and work relationships”. RNIB website 8 November 2017

“If you’re blind, how do you know where to look when someone is talking to you? Or when to shake someone’s hand? Or what “personal space” means?

These are just some of the skills children who are blind must explicitly be taught, since they don't have the benefit of observing the actions and reactions of their family and friends in social situations." Perkins school for the Blind

Children who are visually impaired can find it difficult to acquire social skills that are vital for developing relationships and understanding social situations throughout their lifetime. It cannot be assumed that they will develop social skills automatically like their sighted peers. This has an impact both in school and in the wider world.

A GROWTH MINDSET APPROACH

The resources that have been developed in this brochure include methods and techniques that encourage a Growth Mindset approach. This approach develops confidence, perseverance and resilience which are vitally important for young people with visual impairment.

"A willingness to confront challenges, a passion for learning, and viewing failure as a springboard for growth are all characteristics associated with a growth mindset. Not surprisingly, this type of mindset is strongly linked to greater happiness and achievement in life". (biglifejournal.com)

The resources that were developed in the SMILE Too initiative aim to give parents the confidence and tools to nurture and develop the social skills of young people who are visually impaired or blind. We very much hope that you find them useful and that you use them as springboard for some amazing ideas of your own!

1. WHO I AM

EMPATHY AND EMOTIONS

Let's talk about...

Empathy is an ability that enables us to put ourselves in the place of another human being and understand his/her situation. It is the ability to imagine what someone else might think or feel or simply being able »to put yourself into someone else's shoes«.

Empathy is strongly related to sympathy and compassion. Sympathy is '*feeling for*'. To feel sympathy, it means you are able to understand what the person is feeling. With sympathy, one can understand or imagine why someone is either going through a hard time or why someone might be feeling happy or sad. Empathy is '*feeling with*'; it comes from a place of 'we', our shared humanity and is characterized by solidarity, kindness, and absence of judgment. Empathy is the ability to see the world as others see it, to be non-judgmental; to understand another person's feelings, and to be able to communicate the understanding of that person's feeling. Compassion takes empathy and sympathy a step further. When you are compassionate, you feel the pain of another (i.e. empathy) or you recognize that the person is in pain (i.e. sympathy), and then you do your best to alleviate the person's suffering from that situation.

Emotional development is one of the significant aspects of growth and development. Almost all the behaviours of man are guided in some degree by emotions. Emotions are present in every activity of human beings.

These emotions are prime movers of thought and conduct which influence physical health, mental health, social life, character, the learning process and area of adjustment. Emotions are 'feelings' or 'effective experience' which are characterized by some physiological changes that generally lead the individual to perform some or other types of behaviour (Crow and Crow, 1973).

The child's potential for development in terms of emotional aspects mainly depend on communication and social interaction (Parua, 2008). Good communication and positive societal interaction foster relationships and emotional adjustment, but for a visually impaired child, these channels are blocked, sometimes resulting in emotional instability (Pradhan, 2010).

Possible causes

The key reasons for delayed development of theory of mind (empathy and emotional intelligence) in children who are blind, partially sighted or have cerebral visual impairment are due to 'limited or absent' access to visual information during social interactions, such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and joint visual attention.

Emotional development of students with visual impairment is shaped by a range of factors including the child's personality, family support, and the ethos of the school, society and the extent of the child's degree of impairment.

Consequences

Children with VI may have challenges with the following due to limited opportunities and possible social isolation:

- understand that he/she is separate from other people at an early stage of development
- being able to develop and maintain various forms of joint attention at an early stage of development
- recognize his/her own emotions as well as those of others
- display a range of non-typical behaviour that appear to express feelings and emotions
- understand that people may have different emotions and worldviews
- manage their own emotional reactions
- limited awareness of others perspectives, values and beliefs
- recognize or understand the motives of others
- understanding the relationship between social expectations and social consequences (both positive and negative)
- developing cooperative skills.

How to support development of empathy and emotional skills

- Practice communication skills. Teach the child to pay attention and be aware of others **body language**. This can be done by developing **active listening skills** in order to **recognise nonverbal messages** such as other people's tone of voice, volume, emphasized words, breathing patterns, etc.

- Develop a “Theory of Mind”. Ask children to **step into the mind, or take the perspective, of another child** or adult: For example you could say "How do you think Miha is feeling? Why might he be upset? What could we do to help? "
- Aim to **create a "climate of empathy"** that encourages children to be empathic and understanding towards their peers and adults around them. For example you could say "That was very kind of you to help your sister when she lost her book. "
- Show children how to talk about feelings, teach the children how to express themselves about their feelings. **Teach the child to identify his/her own feelings**; when children show a range of positive or negative emotions, acknowledge how they feel, label the emotion for them. For example, if they are crying, say "You seem upset because..."
- Talk about how you feel and why so that children understand cause and effect. “Michael is feeling sad because Paul took his white cane. What might help Michael feel better?”
- Use **Social Stories** – this is a method which aims to explain the causes and actions of a certain social situation in a child-friendly way through short stories. Further, it is vital to connect these scenarios with the child’s own experiences

Other tips

- Shared practice
- Opportunities to practice
- Be realistic in your expectations

2. WHO I AM

SIGHT DESCRIPTION

Let's talk about ...

It is important that the child with a visual impairment has an awareness of their unique visual diagnosis. This is the first step towards understanding and accepting their visual impairment. This requires sensitive support and can be a long process. Having knowledge about their vision encourages self-advocacy skills and should enable the child to be able to share information with others about their visual needs.

Children with VI require certain adaptations in school because of their sight loss (for example, extra light at the table, sitting in the first row, using magnifiers, braille, having longer time when writing tests, etc). They need to know why they have these adaptations or additional individual help from professionals in order for them (and the family) to explain these differences to peers, friends and other family members.

As qualified teachers of visually impaired children, we often observe in practice the problems that children may have with understanding and accepting their own visual impairment. If we ask them what kind of visual impairment they have or their understanding of it, they often don't know how to explain it or deny that they have a visual impairment.

It is vital for parents to understand the importance of encouraging their child to discuss their visual impairment and to practice social skills at home as well as in school. This understanding of social skills is important for making friends, having a support network, vital for independence, maintaining good mental health and necessary for employment in future life.

Possible causes

- Insufficient explanation of the sight condition from an ophthalmologist, unknown terminology
- Parents may not know how to talk about visual impairment with their children through fear or lack of knowledge.

- Some parents find it difficult to accept their child's visual impairment, or feel guilty and blame themselves.

Consequences

- Children with VI may deny or ignore their unique challenges, regardless of the daily problems they face, as they try to be as similar as possible to their peers in order to fit in.
- Due to a lack of understanding, sighted peers and adults can misinterpret the needs and abilities of the child with VI. This can lead to low expectations of their academic and social potential. It can also lead to low motivation.
- Stereotypical ideas of how a person with VI looks and behaves may need to be addressed. Peers and adults may be puzzled when they find out that the person with VI may have some visual ability.
- If a child doesn't understand their visual impairment, they will not be able to communicate their needs, and could have difficulties with adaptive behavior or social interactions. This can lead to social isolation, emotional and communication problems which cause low self-esteem.

How to support ...

Teach a child with VI:

- To understand their unique visual impairment and be able to explain it in simple terms
- To be aware that he/she is a child with unique abilities and needs.
- To be aware of challenges as they arise and have the confidence to discuss these.
- To be able to show others the equipment that they use.
- To be aware of the support that they need, for example the size of enlarged print, braille, lighting requirements.
- To explain the purpose of the support they are receiving
- Strategies to deal with other people's reactions to their sight loss.
- To encourage peers to ask questions and answer them.
- To be able to talk about how others can help.
- To be aware of VI role models

The most important thing is that your explanation should be based on your child's strengths and talents!!!

Other tips

- Express acceptance with a positive point of view.
- Ask your child: How do you see? What do you see?

Get involved with support groups and other families who have experienced the same situation as your family.

3. WHAT THE WORLD SEES

BODY POSTURE

Let's talk about ...

What is body posture? Posture is the position of the body in space. The maintenance and the control of posture are a set of interactions between muscle-skeletal, visual, vestibular and the skin systems. Stability of posture is the key to maintaining balance of the body.

Video: correct body posture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCsgXitfdls>

For optimal operation, all parts of the body must be in the correct position relative to each other and to the gravitational force acting on it. When we stand, sit, walk or lie down, gravity affects the joints, tendons and muscles. Through proper posture, the force of gravity is evenly distributed, and no part of the body is overloaded.

Correct posture:

- makes movement easier
- balances muscle strength and flexibility
- ensures the spine is in the correct position
- promotes the functioning of internal organs
- conveys the impression of confidence and wellbeing

Possible causes

Why do people with VI have different body posture?

The visual system is one of the sensory systems that enables the body to assess and process information about the external environment, such as relative positions of body segments, and to adjust posture according to need.

In the absence of vision, a blind person loses contact with the outside world and develops faulty motor patterns, which results in postural deficiencies. In some cases it can be a self-regulation strategy where the person is under/over stimulated, anxious about a transition, it may be a habit they have

acquired over the years or a way of compensating for another physical difficulty.

Consequences

Posture challenges for visually impaired people:

- may walk with a full sole, on tiptoe, or toes/feet pointing outwards.
- may turn their ears in the direction of a sound and so may not walk facing forwards
- may stand or sit with their heads pointed downwards
- may lie across the table
- poor, slumped body posture may place their heads on the braille typewriter while typing
- during a conversation they may not turn towards the speaker which can be perceived as impolite
- Poor body postures may give sighted peers the impression that the person is asleep, not paying attention, is unwell or unapproachable. This can result in isolation.
- Some behaviour can cause injury or pain – eye rubbing, loss of balance, back pain, ...

How to support good body posture

How can we improve body posture in children with VI in everyday life:

- provide regular or occasional physiotherapy exercises
- organize special, individual movement therapy e.g. hydrotherapy, occupational therapy
- provide suitable sport activities: goalball, swimming, boxing, jogging with a peer
- offer music therapy or dance
- Teach body awareness through yoga
- Teach body posture
- Gentle agreed reminders e.g. a hand placed on a shoulder to signify 'stop rocking'
- On body signing
- Distractions, motivating activities

- Support transitions and help reduce anxiety
- Consistency - same approach from everyone

4. WHAT THE WORLD SEES

DRESSING, PERSONAL CARE

Let's talk about dressing, personal care

The 'first impression effect', is the tendency of the brain to perceive first impressions more strongly than later impressions.

Based on one more significant element, we sometimes evaluate the whole person positively or negatively, regardless of the other characteristics of the person. However, the first impression made in this way can be wrong.

The way we take care of our 'outward' appearance says a lot about our personality and this information can affect our social interaction. We can say that it is a kind of non-verbal communication along with our choice of colour, clothing and hairstyle.

Learning personal hygiene and independent care of oneself are important skills for all children to learn. These are equally important for children who are blind or visually impaired. It may take children longer to master these skills but it is essential to encourage independence and avoid the urge to do the task for them in a rush to complete the activity. It is important to learn these skills at an early age.

A child who develops this independence will have 'dignity, privacy and self-esteem'. (Gale, 1998)

Possible causes

- The process of learning these independence skills may start later or is slower because of their visual impairment. e.g. Lack of incidental learning through observing siblings/parents whilst dressing and washing.
- Mobility/ Physical difficulties - poor fine motor skills, poor tactile recognition
- Lack of time in the morning therefore help is provided
- Limited opportunities – parents support due to time constraints, love, or the individual may have processing difficulties learning a sequence
- Unaware of strategies to support - wardrobe organisation

- No visual motivation to be 'in style' as the dressing styles of peers or role models are perceived visually
- specific materials on skin may irritate, etc.

Consequences

- more dependence on parents which results in low motivation to be independent and take care of their own clothing
- limited development of self-determination or motivation to select clothes
- one less theme to talk about with peers which contributes to isolation
- stigmatization from sighted peers, distancing from social community – cultural or environmental dressing styles/rules, especially in specific occasions etc. These in turn lead to isolation and low self-esteem.

How to support ...

- Start young!
- Educate and empower - Personal hygiene prevents infections, makes us feel better and more confident.
- Encourage initiative to self-check and/or ask if they have something left on their face after meals.
- Use social stories
- Dressing skills can be taught best through hand-under-hand support and from behind the child, in order to guide the child's hands in a natural pattern.
- Practice dressing skills at natural times of the day (removing coat in the morning, taking shoes off/on before/after trampoline, etc.).
- Encourage the child to assist in dressing and undressing if clothes are soiled and need to be changed.
- Talk about types of clothing and different fasteners. (Finger dexterity is very important and should be practiced)
- Discuss likes and differences in personal belongings, the ability to coordinate clothing, determine if it is appropriate for the weather or for the situation (e.g. work, leisure, social occasion, etc.)
- Keeping clothing organized - designate drawers for particular clothing.

- Braille/print labels can be placed on the lip of the drawers to help with organization. Boxes, bins and other organizers can be used to keep groups of articles separate within drawers.
- Teach children how to hang clothes on a hanger - lay the article flat on a surface and then insert the hanger into the shoulders. The top button can be buttoned to keep shirts from slipping off hangers.
- Incorporate matching skills by matching and storing shoes in shoe boxes, also discuss what goes with what from a visual point of view, styles in fashion, what your child likes.
- Provide strategies - sequence when dressing, reverse sequencing initially, knowledge of their clothes (tactile recognition, knowledge of parts, orientation), smelling the clothes after usage – where to smell it
- Shop with parents or friends. If a young person is concerned about keeping up with the latest trends and styles, encourage them to discuss trends with friends or family members, particularly those who have the same interests and/or tastes.

5. WHAT THE WORLD SEES

MANNERISMS

Let's talk about mannerisms

It is a fact that human bodies have excess energy. If we aren't navigating through space, and instead idling in one spot or sitting, we shift position, flip our hands and feet around, swing our legs, and generally display all kinds of irregular motoric behaviour.

A mannerism is a movement of the body, or some part of the body, that is socially inappropriate and commonly displayed by people with a visual impairment. It is OK in our culture to swing a bag back and forth while sitting and waiting, but it is not acceptable to rock back and forth with the whole upper trunk. Due to lack of vision the child with a visual impairment is often not aware that their peers do not display these mannerisms.

Stereotypical behaviour is more present in the population of blind people than in partially sighted people. In the book *Visual Impairment: Access to education for children and young people* edited by Heather Mason and Stephen McCall. The authors explain that "Self-presentation skills may be underdeveloped in some young people with visual impairment." Lombana 1980 also cites that "inappropriate posture gait and other nonverbal mannerisms are distracting and discouraging" to employers.

Examples of mannerisms associated with people who are visually impaired are as follows:

- pushing thumbs or hands into eyes, rubbing eyes
- head rotation, body rotation
- rocking of upper body
- flapping arms, shaking hands, flicking with fingers
- jumping, spinning, hopping, springing up and down
- entering others personal space
- making different sounds
- eating with your mouth open
- picking your nose
- touching intimate areas of the body

Possible causes

- Sensory stimulation - Eye rubbing can send electrical waves through the retina and make sparks of light
- The child has motor skills difficulties other than visual impairment
- Self-regulation - repetitive movements of fingers, hands when the child is excited; a way of expressing feelings of happiness
- Can be a result of social deprivation (not sensory deprivation)

Consequences

- Certain mannerisms can lead to physical or functional defects (injuries).
- Isolation which reduces opportunities for active learning and experiences.
- Social stigma is placed on the person with visual impairment, since the behaviour is not socially acceptable
- Behaviors can cause parents or others to be scared of children, be scared for them, thinking they have developmental delay, autism or an emotional disorder. These behaviors can lead other children to make fun of them and segregate them socially therefore limiting their experience.
- Lack of self-occupation (unable to organize themselves, leading to lower autonomy)

How to reduce or stop mannerisms?

- Prevention is the best intervention. When stereotypical behaviours are noticed, start with an intervention as soon as possible
- Help the child to be aware of any mannerisms and discuss how these affect social integration (e.g social stories, visuals)
- If the child is not aware of the behaviour, we can remind them with a tactile sign (patting on the shoulder), or with verbal communication (an agreed word)
- Redirect behaviour using a distraction (fidget spinner) or alternate activity which is good for development of the child and will prevent the possibility of injuries.
- Use visuals if appropriate

- If the child shows an awareness of and attempts to redirect their behaviour or has a brief pause, we need to give the child praise
- The 'intervention' should be decided together as a whole (professionals, parents, child) to ensure consistency.
- Encourage the child to engage in different activities to help prevent stereotypical behaviour
- Organise the environment, this reduces the need for self-stimulation

6. HOW DO I COMMUNICATE

INITIATING AND MAINTAINING CONTACT

Let's talk about ...

Aitken (2000) explains communication as the 'sharing of information' which requires four elements:

- Someone to communicate with (giver/receiver)
- Something to communicate about
- A reason or intention to communicate
- A way of communicating (speech, sign, symbols, print, gesture, non verbal and so on)

The International Communication Encyclopaedia (2008), explains 'initiating communication' as the 'first movement we take to start contact with people we meet for the first time'. We approach people for two main reasons: first, to form a relationship/make friends and second, to acquire information, for example asking for an address.

Communication is an essential aspect of our life and personal development. Initiating contact with others is the first step towards successful interaction.

The most common way to start communication with a person is to look into their eyes and face. This non verbal signal opens the channel for communication.

If you reflect for a moment, you will see that conversation is more than words. Sighted infants and their caregivers engage in countless nonverbal conversations before the children learn their first words. They exchange eye gazes, smiles, a huge variety of facial expressions, movements, and sounds. These nonverbal exchanges go back and forth in a conversation without language.

This contact is very difficult for children with VI due to their limited/lack of vision.

Possible causes

- Initial communication is difficult because the person with VI cannot access all of the visual and non-verbal information from people around them.
- Limited choice of communication partner
- Not knowing how another person will react.
- Feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.
- Not wanting people to know they have a visual impairment
- Fear of your child talking to strangers
- Environment is too noisy and unsettling

Consequences

Without good communication skills, the child may

- feel isolated at school, and this may also affect their ability to socialise in adult life.
- have low self-esteem due to fewer 'peer' friendships
- talk too much
- miss cues
- not know how to or when to take turns
- become passive
- encounter difficulties to make friends or to get a job

How to support

Children with VI often miss out on opportunities for natural conversational interaction compared to their sighted peers. However, if they have people around them who know how to support their communication appropriately and have conversations with them, then they will not miss out.

- Role playing can be used to recreate different scenarios where specific communication is required e.g., shops, public transport and talking to friends.
- Use real life opportunities to practice and develop communication skills – going to shops, ordering something at a café, talking at the office, taking part in team sports, hobbies,
- Play turn taking games to help develop the skill of waiting on others.

- Use activities that encourage questions - this shows a person that we are interested in them and their hobbies.
- Develop opinions, and reasons why you believe something e.g., Would you rather?..... It is okay to disagree with someone.
- Research what is 'current' in music, sport, books, film. Again this provides material to talk about with peers.
- Use prompt cards to support conversation when out and about
- Teach non-verbal cues – looking at the person, facing with our whole body
- Teach tone of voice for responses (whispering, showing interest...)
- When another person speaks, we do not interrupt them
- If we want to say something, we wait for the right moment...
- It is important to listen intently to the person you are talking to.
- conversation: "Can I add something to that / that reminds me / I just thought of something..."
- When we speak, make sure that our speech is of appropriate length. If we are silent for a few moments, the other person will have an opportunity to answer.
- If vision is absent, teach how you know someone is there - use of the hearing to listen for any cues. Use of smell. Take notice of the feeling that someone is occupying the space next to you.
- Support your child to use the vision they have and promote 'positive looking strategies'

Provide opportunities and social situations where it is easier to start a conversation – smaller places with fewer people, when two people are already talking. The presence of familiar people and being in a familiar environment.

7. HOW DO I COMMUNICATE

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Let's talk about ...

Some authors say that conversation is 10% verbal and 90% nonverbal.

Verbal communication is a type of communication that involves the use of linguistic signs (letters and phonemes). It requires the use of written or oral words or expressions. Through verbal communication people exchange information, opinions, express emotions, and so on.

Verbal communication consists of:

- Distinct and clear speech
- Engaged listening
- Appropriately lengths of answers or speech.
- Appropriate use of language, for example; formal language, informal language and dialects.
- Appropriate greetings.
- Using a person's name, first or last depending on context.
- Expressing wishes
- Expressing gratitude
- Following the conversation
- Apologising sincerely.
- Asking for and accepting help graciously.
- Having a basic knowledge of a range of areas of everyday life to allow you to engage others in a range of conversations.

Social interaction also relies on being able to read and interpret a wide range of nonverbal cues. In social interaction is what we *do* as important as what we *say*. The way we listen, watch, move or react during conversation tells others if we are interested, sincere and how we feel about what is being discussed.

When nonverbal signals coordinate with spoken words communication is much clearer. Social and interpersonal relationships are more strongly established and developed as the participants gain a stronger understanding of each other.

Nonverbal communication includes:

- Facial expressions
- Gestures (hand or leg movements, nodding)
- Body posture
- Eye contact
- Paralanguage (rhythm, intonation, tone of voice)
- Personal space
- Physical response to emotions we experience
- Physical impressions including clothing, tidy/dishevelled appearance, personal hygiene

Possible causes

Why can people with VI have difficulties with communicating socially?

Difficulties in verbal communication are related to difficulties in recognizing nonverbal communication. People with VI can find it very challenging to understand and interpret nonverbal communication as these skills are learned naturally over time by observing others.

Consequences

- Children with VI often speak much more in conversations than others and repeat the same topic/story/question.
- Not knowing when to take turns
- They may not listen to others enough during the conversation.
- They go off topic.
- They forget to thank others or apologise, or may do these too often. These words lose their meaning.
- All these occur due to difficulties in recognizing nonverbal communication.
- Their head may be turned down and/or body turned so they are not facing the person they are in conversation with.
- They may not know when a person is talking directly to them, so it appears that they are disinterested.
- They can find it hard to follow a conversation in which many people are involved.

- They miss information that others express to each other without words, for example; nods, smiles or eye contact.
- Without good communication skills, the child may feel isolated at school, and this may affect their ability to socialise in adult life and result in low self-esteem.
- It is more difficult to make friends and to find employment.

How to support

- Practice every day and when possible, gain real life experience - go to the shops, order something at a café, have conversations at offices, do team sports or get involved in different hobbies or interests.
- Role playing can be used to recreate different scenarios where communication is required, for example; shops, public transport and talking to friends.
- Play games that will facilitate the development of communication skills
- Conversation is an exchange of opinions and thoughts. Speakers take turns. Practice turn taking.
- Ask people questions, this shows interest in the conversation.
- When we talk, we look at the other person and face them with our whole body.
- It is important to listen intently to the person you are talking to and consider their personal space.
- When another person speaks, we do not interrupt them.
- If we want to say something, we wait for the right moment...
- We can start with: "Can I add something to that / that reminds me / I just thought of something..."
- When we speak, we make sure that our speech is of appropriate length. If we are silent for a few moments, the other person has the opportunity to answer.

8. WHAT IS MY SOCIAL NETWORK

FAMILY

Let's talk about ...

Parents or carers of children and young people with a visual impairment contribute significantly to their upbringing and development, which forms their personality, and prepares them for life in mainstream society.

Each family is unique and has its own specific style of upbringing, which irreversibly affects the child and their personality.

Parents who accept the child's visual impairment will create natural conditions within the family home and the child's environment. This child will encounter everything that a child without a disability would. As parents focus on potential, solutions will be found to support the child to 'do' and 'learn' in a different way.

It is paramount that parents see beyond the disability, believe in their own competence, and receive the right support. If this happens, then social skills will be positively reflected into adulthood.

Possible causes

It is only natural for a parent to feel sad, shocked, worried, depressed, angry and hopeless when they discover their child has a visual impairment. Some can even feel denial with the diagnosis. These are valid feelings and must be recognised. Over time and with great determination, families can adapt to the situation and develop skills to support their child.

Some attitudes that impact on social skills are 'over-protection' and 'social stigma'.

'Over protection' - If a child with a visual impairment has an overprotective upbringing, this can lead to 'passivity' in the child and hinder their development. The consequences of this style of upbringing are particularly evident in socialization and social skills. The child will find it difficult to establish

friendships/relationships with others and independence will be diminished as they rely on parents for all their needs.

We are thankful the world is becoming more aware of people with a disability but at times 'social stigma' can be a difficulty for families. Due to this, families may feel that they do not want to expose their children to negative or uneducated attitudes and the feeling of being inferior. Sadly this 'hiding away', results in less opportunities for the family and individual, a diminished experience of life and joy, which impacts greatly on self-esteem.

When the child is accepted and understood within their family/ family circle this results in opportunities to develop their personality, independence, and autonomy. Relationships can be naturally fostered, and opportunities created with grandparents and cousins allowing parents/siblings to have the time necessary for them. It can't always be about the visually impaired person, there must be a healthy balance.

Consequences

If the family do not enjoy a normal family life within the family circle, there are consequences that can affect the whole family

- Low self-esteem
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Limited opportunities which impact on the future.

How to support

Family

- Build positive relationships
- Spend time together and apart: activities, games to promote turn taking, going out
- Develop a rich social life for everyone!
- Meet with the wider family
- Educate the family circle how to be 'inclusive' by using audio description, modelling, and consistent when supporting opportunities for independence

- Nurture and support good relationships with sighted siblings – a common interest
- Make time for your other children and YOU!
- Engage with support groups/ attend summer schemes

Specialists/Support Groups can assist parents and families by

- promoting an 'inclusive' attitude for the child with a visual impairment.
- providing an environment in which members can be themselves, being certain that others will understand and accept them without judgement as they have similar experiences.
- providing inclusive/adapted activities for the visually impaired individual
- passing on information
- providing respite for the family
- opportunities to re-evaluate or upskill

9. WHAT IS MY SOCIAL NETWORK

Friends, hobbies

Let's talk about ...

The process of building **friendships** with sighted peers is a challenge to visually impaired children/young people. Why? Vision helps us have an 'accurate' idea of what is going on in the group we wish to enter e.g., social cues, common interests, eye contact, reading facial expressions, clothing and so on.

If a child finds it difficult to create and maintain friendships, this may have a negative impact on their well-being and cause low self-esteem.

Therefore, early intervention is key. In elementary/ primary school children learn the rudiments of making friends. These basic skills are enabled by adults in the setting who encourage friendships, model positive interactions, assist with audio description, turn taking and ensure the visually impaired child is included. This intervention is necessary in the initial stages, but it is important your child develops their own strategies to gain this knowledge independently.

Every visually impaired person, like every sighted person, has a natural level of social confidence and preferred involvement. Your job as a parent is to be sure that your child's level is not unnaturally low because of poor skills or lack of social know-how. Some people are introverts, and some are extroverts, but within the constraints of personality your child should be able to function with poise and confidence. We all develop strengths and discover weaknesses in ourselves. That is part of the human condition. We must all learn as best we can to compensate for our weaknesses and make the most of our strengths.

The earlier your child has social experiences, the sooner they will acquire and develop social skills e.g. school, family, friendships and leisure.

Recreation and leisure skills (Hobbies) - Each person will have their own interests and preferences, and it is important you help your child discover and pursue something that makes them happy in their free time. This pursuit may also support a healthy lifestyle. A hobby will develop self-esteem, confidence and promote friendships with others.

Possible causes

- Overprotection
- Fear (both parents and child)
- Limited opportunities – to engage with peers in school, the community, recreation, missed
- Learned adaptive behaviour - engaging in solitary play due to lack of spontaneous interactions with peers
- Visual observation limits – knowing when to turn take, interpreting facial expressions, reading body language.
- Lower social competence

Consequences

- Low self-esteem
- Social isolation e.g., assistance is needed to learn the rules of a game to successfully join in, competence is required in orientation and mobility to be able to locate friends.
- Depression, withdrawal, sadness
- Limited opportunities which impact on finding friendships, and being successful in their future life

How to support

- Teach your child to use perceptual skills to keep track of what is happening in the immediate area. How many other children are playing in the room? What are they doing? Are the Lego blocks spread out on the floor? Is a video playing, meaning that children are probably sitting in front of the television? You can help your child learn to notice such things and draw correct conclusions from the data.
- Make a game to determine the sound: What toy is being played with? Balls, blocks, cars and noise-making toys all make distinctive sounds. When a child becomes familiar with their own talking or musical toys, these are easy to identify.
- Teach your child body language e.g., facing someone in an alert, relaxed, and friendly way. Talk about how and when people use body language

and gestures for communicating and socializing. Your child may miss the chance to interact with others because they do not see smiles, waves, nods, or winks. Practice these nonverbal gestures together so that they understand them more fully. Children learn how to interact in social situations by observing and copying others. These specific social skills can be taught and learned: for example, how to approach a potential friend, how to ask and respond to questions in a conversation, and what kinds of gestures to use when talking and listening. As with many areas of development, your child may need to practice social skills like these to master them.

- Teach your child how to play with objects and other children. This will promote turn taking and social skills. Provide audio description and model the skills your child requires to imitate others.
- Find out what kinds of activities, books, and television shows are “in” for children the same age as your child and expose them to these things at home. If your child is familiar with things other children enjoy, they will be more comfortable joining in a conversation about them. This will also provide topics they can use to start a conversation with another child in a different setting.
- Role play with your child about how to approach another child they would like to be friends with. You can take turns with you each playing your child and then the new friend and practice different ways to start and maintain the conversation. Give your child realistic feedback about what they are doing.
- We live in a society that judges people by their appearance. You don't need to agree with that idea to realize that other children are more likely to socialize with your child if they dress and act like others in the group. If you pay attention to the clothes and hairstyles of other children the same age, you can help them to fit in.
- If you don't hear your child mention the names of classmates probe to learn why not. Be creative in constructing opportunities for friendships to grow. If they are not happening, look for the explanation and make suggestions as to what your child can do about it.

- Awareness raise within the class/friendship groups. Help people understand the visual impairment, ways to help and promote independence/involvement.
- Use a buddy system - The classroom teacher/event organiser may be able to suggest an individual or small group to support a visually impaired friend. You could break the ice by inviting students over after school, or meet somewhere locally at the weekend.
- Encourage your child to become active using their talent or join an extracurricular program. Your child will need support initially to understand different sports or develop skills for music/ crafts. Cost and adaptations will play a factor in accessing activities.
- Encourage your child to invite one or two classmates to your home. It may be easier for your child to follow what's going on in social situations and to respond to other kids if the group is small, and they are in a familiar place. Be prepared to make some suggestions if your child needs help figuring out what to do. Perhaps you can involve the kids in doing an art project or playing a game. If your child is holding their own socially, then step away and give them the space to interact with the other children.
- A child who is visually impaired is often in the position of being helped. Encourage your child to think of ways they can help others in order to reciprocate. If they are good in mathematics, for example, they can offer to help another student with homework.
- Give your teen the opportunity to get to know other visually impaired teens in challenging summer programs with their peers. These experiences are an excellent way to jump-start social awareness and develop social skills. They also provide conversation opportunities when returning to school after the holidays e.g. water-skiing, whitewater rafting, or rock climbing, these are all pretty cool. Many friendships are formed at these summer programs which can provide much-needed confidence building and reinforce new skills.
- Your job is to remain on the sidelines - providing opportunities, setting the stage, observing how things are going, collecting data from other observers, quietly providing information and feedback to your child as

things go along. During these years you need to help your child learn to do things independently.

- Organize a birthday party, sleepover, weekend away
- Facilitate opportunities where your child can meet people
- Develop communication skills
- Meet friends with visual impairment (similar problems, understanding)
- Develop sports, hobbies, leisure activities – opportunity to meet people
- Contact support groups to find peers, summer schemes, etc.
- Audio describe - give a description of what is happening to ensure the individual is being included. Tell them what the other children are doing and allow them to try the same – modelling. Tell them who they are with, taking turns in a group.
- Ask people to treat them normally and not make a fuss.

10. EXPERIENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

DAILY LIVING SKILLS

Let's talk about ...

“Daily Living Skills” are the techniques that enable people with a disability to carry out their own day-to-day activities with minimum or no assistance.

Public perceptions of the possibilities of the blind in daily living skills are often distorted. At the same time, they are a matter of course for most blind people in life.

The more activities one manages, the more versatile and independent one is considered. By independence, one becomes independent from the help of others.

Some people may argue that the development of daily living skills is not related to social skills, but the opposite is true. Only a person who is not dependent on the help of other people can become a full - fledged member of society.

Objectives of Teaching Daily Living Skills:

- To build up self-confidence
- To support independent living.
- To enable children to carry out activities associated with their daily life by themselves or with minimal assistance.
- To enhance effective socialization in the community.
- To increase and enhance the sense of responsibility
- To rejuvenate self-sufficiency

What to include into daily living skills?

- personal hygiene, body care
- dressing
- food preparation and dining
- keeping clothes clean
- house care
- childcare, care of ill relations
- minor maintenance work
- shopping, use of various services

- household management with an appropriate division of family activities
- leisure activities
- interests and hobbies.

The list of items in the field of daily living skills corresponds to a similar list for people who can see. The only differences are in the method of performing each activity with a slight modification of common practices.

Possible causes

Visual impairment can partially limit and change a person's ability to live independently from the help of other people. The degree of these dependencies varies on the individual.

Well-adapted people with visual impairment can handle the area of daily living skills independently, only using the help of others in exceptional cases. It is more difficult, when fear, anxiety and a feeling of inability to do their own activities come to the fore.

If the individual is motivated and has a desire to be independent, along with the necessary family support, then a certain degree of independence can and will be achieved.

Consequences

- Social isolation
- Low self-esteem and self-belief
- Limited opportunities
- Passivity and low motivation
- Lower autonomy

How to support

- Develop daily living skills as soon as possible in early childhood through hands-on experiences as children who are visually impaired or blind cannot learn through visual observation.

- Develop confidence and self-esteem by giving the child a wide variety of experiences that they can learn from.
- Encourage your child to join in with a variety of household activities such as baking, cooking, cleaning etc. Give the child a chance to work out problems they encounter for themselves.
- Keep in mind equality (rights and responsibilities) and offer the same opportunities to take part in activities in and outside the home. Ensure all activities are safe.
- Give clear instruction, describe what is going to happen.
- Role playing can be used to recreate different scenarios where daily living skills are required.
- Promote a growth mindset and courage to try new things.
- Provide steps and methods to complete tasks
- Expose the child to specialist equipment – talking scales, liquid level indicators
- Attend events held by support groups to encourage independence skills.
- Have access to an Orientation and Mobility specialist – home or school

11. EXPERIENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY

Let's talk about ...

People who are blind or visually impaired must learn to orient to their surroundings. This means learning where they are in relation to what is around them. Mobility involves moving independently and safely in a variety of environments with the use of their other senses, learned travel skills and mobility tools.

Learning Orientation and Mobility (O&M) is vital for a number of reasons. First and foremost it promotes safe movement but also importantly it is a basic prerequisite for independent life, socialization, integration into society and the workplace.

In practice, Orientation and Mobility involves learning daily living skills such as shopping, travel to and from school and commuting to work, etc. The ability to move independently with a white cane gives a high degree of self-sufficiency and opens the possibility of getting out and making social contacts. So it can be seen that learning orientation and mobility skills is closely linked to developing social skills.

- Orientation and Mobility (O&M) skills are important for children to become as independent as possible. They help develop confidence, self-esteem and freedom of action.
- O&M skills will enable your child to socialise and be an active participant in his/her community.
- O&M will enable your child to travel with you in different environments to learn about the world in a safe and engaging way.
- Sighted guide skills will enable you and your child to move confidently and safely through a range of environments.

Orientation and mobility training also includes the development of communication skills. This can include asking for help or politely declining assistance!

Possible causes

O&M is vital for safe movement but is also a basic prerequisite for independent life, socialising, integration into society ultimately the work environment.

There may be challenges for the child who is blind or visually impaired, especially at the beginning. These may include a reluctance to step outside of their comfort zone or a fear of the unknown.

Consequences

- Low autonomy
- Low motivation
- Social isolation
- Dependence on other people

How to support

- Having access to an orientation and mobility (O&M) specialist. This person is a professional who has extensive training in teaching children who are blind or visually impaired to travel at home, at school, and in the community. Sometimes this is direct when- they work with children on a regular basis to teach them skills. Sometimes the instruction is indirect or consultative- when the specialist provides information to parents, teachers and other professionals to support O&M activities and build opportunities to practice skills into a child's day.
- O&M specialist can provide guidance in how to support your child's understanding of body concepts ("left" and "right"), spatial concepts ("up" and "down"), environmental concepts ("streets" and "traffic signals"), and mobility techniques.
- The development of O&M skills does not occur in isolation. Your child will need to use communication and social skills during travel. Looking at ways to build routines around travel will lead to the practice of a range of different skills.
- Encourage your child to participate in activities in the wider community. It is important to give your child as many different experiences as you can which they can learn from.

- Reinforce the skills they learn. This will ensure that a child is helped to become more independent in school or home, and will improve confidence and self-esteem. With these skills in place, a visually impaired child will be able to participate in a range of activities, encountering new experiences and people. By being independent the child and not the disability is seen first, thereby improving their life experiences.
- To develop confidence and self-esteem by giving the child a wide variety of experiences that they can learn from. They may discover things they like and discover new interests or hobbies. This may lead to the possibility of joining a club to meet like-minded people.
- Project 'Step Up' – outcome Book of Simple Steps