



• supporting your child with vision impairment in the early years

The most essential thing for any baby or young child is to make sense of what they are experiencing from the very first days. As a parent or carer you have a very important role to play in helping to make the world meaningful for your child. The following pages will provide tips and guidance on how to enhance those experiences for children with a visual impairment.

● communication

Communication is not only about learning to talk, it is a process that allows people to exchange information by one of several methods. There are auditory means, such as speaking or singing, and nonverbal, physical means, such as body language, touch etc.

Communication is essential from birth and it is important to establish this early on with your child through touch. A simple example of this would be singing 'round and round the garden' whilst tracing your finger on your baby's hand.

Read our blog on How to Communicate with a Vision Impaired Child here <https://www.henshaws.org.uk/communicate-visually-impaired-child/>

● learning to listen

A newborn baby with sight will be able to see a rattle and their mother's lips moving as she talks. In the early months a reflex response turns the eyes towards a sound that is out of sight (usually by 6 months). A baby with a visual impairment will need a substitute to encourage the baby to listen and locate the sounds around him/her. Ways to encourage this skill:

- Bend down and talk closely in your child's ear and then repeat in the other ear. Take the child's hand to your cheek and kiss his/her ear.
- Lie your child down and place a rattle to one side, shake it and then move their hand towards it.
- As the child crawls, place objects with a sound in front of them and encourage them to move towards it.
- Always move your child's hand to the sound – never the sound to the child's hand! Also do not move the toy/sound until they have reached for it first as this will encourage them to move and explore.

Listening is a vital skill for anyone with a visual impairment. Babies and young children with a vision impairment will often become really still in order to listen and work out what is happening. During their first years they will learn to associate meanings with words, so it is also important to:

- Name objects such as cup, shoes and spoon each time your child uses them. This will help your child to become familiar with them and make meaningful associations.
- Sing nursery rhymes and songs and help them to join in with the actions.
- Draw your child's attention to household sounds ie the washing machine, again naming it so your child begins to make connections.

• discovering hands and feet

Children with a visual impairment may need help to discover their hands and feet; here are some tips to help encourage your child to discover them:

- Touch your child's hands with your own.
- Wear chunky bangles, beads, watches etc which will encourage your child to explore.
- Use wrist rattles on baby's wrists and ankles that will make them aware of where they are and also encourage them to explore. This will also help strengthen muscles.



• grasping and holding



- Do not push toys into your child's hand, instead encourage the child to touch and reach for the toys with the fingertips.
- Encourage your child to reach by saying 'Here I am' and then touch the child's fingers with yours and let him/her grasp your finger.
- Stroke the back of your child's fingers with your own or with a toy, as this will encourage the child to adjust their grasp.

• learning to handle things

You may find that your baby will mouth their toys for longer than other babies, smell and also run their tongue over them; this is quite normal and your baby will use the mouth less as his/her touch becomes finer. You could also:

- Encourage your child to use their hands more to make them strong and sensitive.
- All babies' hand movements are clumsy and they have to learn to manipulate things.
- Help your child by giving him/her lots of practice!



• kicking and reaching

A sighted baby realises that a rattle makes a noise by shaking it and develops the understanding of cause and effect. A baby with a visual impairment needs to learn this process through guiding and touch. Here are some ways in which you can help your child learn this process:

- Use toys with buttons that start an action or make a noise. Things such as musical instruments, rattles, bells and activity centres are great for this.
- Have very bright shiny objects and toys.



• learning to look

If you think your baby/child can see anything at all, it is really important to encourage them to look as well as listen. Children with a visual impairment can be encouraged through play to make the most of their sight. They may find special ways of viewing objects and handling materials, maybe holding things close to their eyes, or to one side. Having sufficient lighting in the environment will help your child. Look out for signs of interest, it may be a smile, a tilt of the head, a wiggle of the toes. Observe your child closely and ask yourself if:

- they stare at sunlight or artificial sources of light
- they take note of faces or objects
- they tilt their head in a certain way to look
- they look at brightly coloured objects or mirrors

Remember to give your child time to look and process the information and to respond.

Here are some more tips to encourage your child to look:

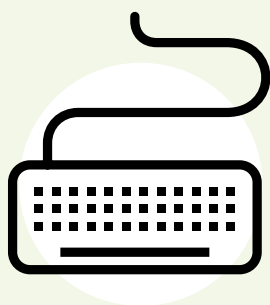
- Position your baby so that they feel secure. To put them in a good position for looking you may need to put them on their side or on their front.
- Place your baby so that they can see your face. If they can see something, babies react best to faces first of all.
- Talk, coo, nod your head and make big smiles to attract attention; play 'Peek a boo'.



• on the move

A child with sight will kick their arms and legs when they see things and also will lift their head to see. A child with a visual impairment may need encouragement to move in this way, so here are a few points that may help encourage this movement:

- Encourage your child to raise their head by placing a small pillow on the floor while lying on the floor and attract the child's attention by using a noisy toy or sound.
- Lay your child on their stomach with their chest over a small rolled towel – then encourage the child to lift their head by stroking the back of their neck.
- Gently stretch and move the child's legs and clap their hands together.
- Help your child to learn how to roll over from lying on their back to their stomach.
- From 3 months of age onwards gently roll the child over and back.



Children with a visual impairment need to have lots of experience exploring small safe places before they have the confidence to move around larger spaces. One idea is to set up a travel cot or a large play pen so they child can explore safely.

Some further ideas to try include:

- Rolling games help them to get the idea of moving from one position to another. Lay them on a large inflatable bolster or ball, and roll it gently back and forth. Put them on your lap and gently roll from side to side.
- Use favourite toys which make sounds to motivate them to move towards you.
- Help them to rock in a baby rocking seat or bouncy chair.
- Give them a go in the baby swings at the park.

Learning to walk and stand are significant milestones in the development of a child. Some children with a visual impairment may be a little late with this and some may prefer to shuffle instead. Babies with poor sight can be reluctant crawlers as they are more likely to bump their heads. A QTVI (qualified teacher of the visually impaired) or a mobility officer from the local authority can support you and your child at this stage.

Before your child is able to walk, they will need to learn to stand. You can encourage this by initially bouncing them on your knee to strengthen their legs. You can help them to stand on the floor by holding on to the sofa and encourage them to move along. Kneeling or standing behind might help them to feel more confident. Once able to confidently cruise around using the furniture, stand behind them, lean forward and hold their hand at shoulder level. You can then progress to giving your child a toy to hold in one hand whilst you hold the other. Your child may be frightened to move around, if so go back to practising with the furniture until they are more confident.

Once your child is fully able to walk around, it is important to:

- Keep furniture in the same place so your child can find their way around with confidence.
- Talk to your child when they are moving around about where they are, what they can hear, see, smell and feel.
- Leave doors open to prevent your child bumping into them.

• choosing an early years setting

Choosing a childminder, nursery, school or playgroup is daunting, so contact your Local Authority QTVI (qualified teacher of visually impaired children) to discuss the choices and help available. If a QTVI is already supporting you with your child's learning at home, they usually continue to support your child as they make the transition into early years settings. They can help you to make choices and help staff at the setting to understand your child's needs. They also directly support some children at playgroup or nursery and at school. Children with vision impairment may benefit from starting playgroup or nursery on a part-time basis a bit earlier than other children.



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