

Resources for Working with Youth with Special Needs

Visual Impairments

Visual impairments range from the total absence of sight to the partially-sighted. A person with a visual impairment may be born blind or with limited sight. Others, may have acquired the impairment. Depending upon the amount of sight loss and when the sight loss occurs, the person will require varying degrees of assistance.

Legal Definitions

Partially Sighted - Visual acuity of 20/70 or less in the better eye with best correction.

Blind - Corrected vision in the better eye of 20/200 or less or a field of vision that is restricted to 5 degrees or less at 20 feet.

Leader Tips

Meeting a person with a visual impairment:

- Let the person with a visual impairment know of your presence by saying a word or two, rather than presenting an unexpected sound or sudden touch.
- Introduce yourself to the person. In time, the youth may learn to recognize your voice or even your footsteps.
- Speak directly to the person. Do not ask the individual's companion questions that the person with a visual impairment can answer. Remember, just because the person with a visual impairment can not see you does not mean that they can not hear you or make their own decisions.
- A sighted person receives additional clues to what you mean and feel from your facial expression. The person with a visual impairment must rely on the tone of your voice for these important communication clues.
- Address all people in the group by name. Youth with a visual impairment can not see to whom you are speaking.
- It isn't necessary to speak louder when talking. This is an unconscious tendency that needs to be recognized and avoided.
- In conversation, there is no need to avoid words that have to do with vision. "Read," "see," "look at," and color words are all in the vocabularies of people with a visual impairment. They use them quite naturally and expect others to do so.
- Do not handicap a person with a visual impairment by determining what you think the person can or cannot accomplish. Usually, they can or have made adaptations that enable them to participate.
- Always inform a person with a visual impairment when you are leaving a room so they will not have to guess whether you are still there.
- Keep doors fully open or closed. Half-open doors are a hazard.

Guiding a person with a visual impairment:

- Always ask before helping. The youth will tell you how you can help.
- If you transport a person with a visual impairment make sure that you orient them to your car. Guide their hand to the roof, door, seat, and handle.
- Youngsters need an opportunity to become familiar with their new surroundings. Give them a guided tour to become familiar with the meeting room.
- Don't expect them to know where everything is located after only one or two visits.
- When furniture is moved alert the individual to the change.
- When guiding a person with a visual impairment let them take your arm above the elbow, rather than pulling or pushing them. Proceed walking half-a-step ahead of the person.
- A slight pause before going up or down curbs or steps will alert the individual to the change in terrain. It is a good idea to verbally communicate changes, as well.
- Make an effort to describe things around you. Let the person with a visual impairment taste, touch, and smell. Talk about things that are being explored.
- Do not distract a guide dog. Ask the youth for permission to pet or talk to the dog.
- When showing an individual to a chair, place their hand on the back or arm of the chair.
- Youngsters with a visual impairment, like all youngsters, vary in degree of independence. Some are "I'll do it myself" persons, and others may demand help at every turn. The leader who can let the youth do as much as possible on his own, will be making an important contribution to the youngster's present and future adjustment.

Materials for a person with a visual impairment:

- If reading material is to be used, you may wish to arrange to have the information translated to Braille or have the information recorded on cassette tape for the person to listen to. Braille transcriptions can also be located through the local public library.
- The youth and their parents are the best resources to identify how to adapt printed materials.

Resources

Please note the University of Illinois Extension does not endorse any products advertised on the following internet sites. Also, the content of these internet links is subject to change, and thus their appropriateness as a resource may also change.

American Foundation for the Blind, <http://afb.org/>

National Braille Press, <http://www.nbp.org/>

The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, <http://nichcy.org/>

Source for fact sheet:

Sarkees-Wircenski, M., and Scott, J. L. (1995). Vocational special needs. Homewood, IL: American Technical Publishers, Inc.

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Source: University of Illinois Extension - <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/specialneeds/visual.html>
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