

# So you think your child might have a Visual Impairment

## "Let's Talk"

There are many different ways that a child's vision may be affected. Although visual impairments may influence a child's education, they need not necessarily have an effect on the way s/her learns.

### **Common visual impairments include:**

Difficulties with scanning

The child has significantly more difficulty than other children in finding key words and/or phrases in a page of print

Problems with focussing (fixating) on an object or word)

In some cases the eyes are not able to "lock" on to the desired object, causing difficulties with focus and perception

Restrictions in the field of vision

Most people are familiar with the phrase "tunnel vision" and this is a helpful idea in relation to field restrictions. This impairment may be typified by whole head or even body movements when attempting to scan text etc.

Distorted vision and/or perception

Some children will not see the world as others do. In some cases their view is grossly distorted, perhaps like when looking in "fairground" mirrors; in other cases, parts of the image may be missing etc. This condition can be very unsettling.

Getting tired easily

Visual fatigue affects many children who do not have an obvious visual impairment. Some children find it extremely difficult to maintain their focus and perception and this affects their ability to perform tasks in school.

Focussing "far and near"

This problem may manifest itself in visual fatigue as children struggle to change their focus, perhaps when moving from reading a book to looking at the board.

Slow processing of visual information

Children with a visual impairment may find it difficult to "fix" a picture or diagram in order to copy etc.

## **Implications for Education**

Unfortunately, having a visual impairment does not automatically mean that other senses are more highly developed, though this can be the case if a child and/or family choose to make it a priority. Teaching and learning in schools is becoming increasingly visual and this is likely to cause problems.

The pace of learning, especially in highly visual subjects, may be slower, as will the accumulation of “everyday” knowledge and understanding. A visual impairment can restrict the experiences and opportunities available to a child. Because of this, progress may not be a true indication of ability – this is an important point to make when discussing achievement in school. Also parents are advised to reassure teachers that holding a book or worksheet close to the eyes is a legitimate strategy, which will do no harm to a child’s vision. Indeed it may be the only way for a child to access print.

The attitude of family and friends is likely to have a significant bearing on the impact of a visual impairment – if it is not seen as a major problem then it will not become one! If school and family can work together to recognise and build on strengths while looking for opportunities to minimise weaknesses the child will be supported to develop emotional strength and confidence. Emotional security is probably the single most important gift any parent can give to any child, and this is especially so in terms of a visual impairment.

### **What can teachers and parents do to help**

1. Make sure that the child knows that it is ok to have a visual impairment and is able to view the condition in the light of other strengths and achievements
2. Make special efforts to teach life skills, especially eating, dressing and personal care/hygiene/grooming and relationships with others.
3. Teach word processing skills and develop expertise with specialist “talk/write” software.
4. Try to organise the provision and use of a laptop and Dictaphone

For further information contact:

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