

Helping Children Who are Blind: Family and Community Support For Children With Vision Problems by Sandy Niemann and Namita Jacob, published by the Hesperian Foundation, Berkeley, California, 2000

This is a well written and comprehensive book aimed at a multicultural audience. It will be valuable to people around the world seeking to understand how to support and encourage children with severe visual impairments. An excellent effort with the use of illustrations to show how parents can enrich the lives of their children. The biographical profiles of real children give the book immediacy and relevance to many different cultures. The examples of cultural adaptations to basic intervention techniques are well described.

The first chapters (1-4) provide important background information and encourage parents to work together to support their children and one another. Emphasis on being responsive to children is valuable and creates the building blocks for social development. For example parents are well advised to place emphasis on play as a way for children to learn about the world. Using play to acquire skills is extremely effective and useful. Parents are also encouraged to let the child take the lead and have control over their activities. The authors clearly state that it is parents who are the experts about their children.

The skills to be taught need to be understood and strategies developed to help the child master needed skills, such as independent movement, activities with objects, socialization and life skills. Ways of adapting activities for children who cannot see are also carefully illustrated and explained. The authors take pains to make the purpose of the activities clear and enable them to initiate interactive learning games for every age group, including infancy. Research has clearly demonstrated the value of early intervention. .

Ways of determining how and what a child can see are also carefully explained. The authors provide good technical information in a highly readable manner. Blindness interferes with normal development in both subtle and overt ways. Giving children confidence to move with

independence and orient themselves to their environments is extremely important. The authors do a good job in explaining how to encourage confidence and teach independence.

Language development and communication are more complex issues and require more attention than is given in the book. For children who are blind, language plays a critical role in learning about both the physical and social environments. Studies of language development in blind children reveal the high degree of attention they give to language. Tone and direction of voice are important when children do not see visual clues. Conversational interaction is enhanced by talking directly to children and letting them know they are being spoken to. Vocabulary, listening skills and conversational abilities are encouraged and enriched with story telling, word games, and opportunities to interact with others. Overall, the authors have provided an excellent resource that will be extremely helpful to parents and teachers in many different cultures.

(Reviewed by Sally Rogow)