

Suggestions for Teachers Working with Children with Blindness or Severe Visual Impairments.

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Accommodating children with blindness or severe visual impairments in learning assistance or regular classrooms is not simple. Not only do children differ from one another in ability, use of vision, backgrounds and readiness, but often are coping with feelings of being different. This requires knowing the child, knowing abilities as well as disabilities.

Children with visual impairments need to feel at home in the classroom.

Make sure child is familiar with seating patterns and location of storage areas. Take a few moments to take child around the room. Let him familiarize himself with location of your desk, windows, closets, seating arrangements etc. If you are unable to do this, let another child take him or her around. Make sure child knows he or she is being addressed.

Make sure child knows the names of other children in the class.

Encourage social interaction. Encourage children to talk to child. Children who are blind identify people by voice. Encourage children to address child. If his name is not mentioned and the voice does not come directly, the child with VI may not know he is being addressed.

Have a class discussion about visual impairments. Most children will have questions, fears and anxieties. Explain to them what child may be unable to do, but be clear about what he or she is able to do. Encourage children to ask questions. Let blind child answer questions too. In our experience, these sessions have put a number of fears to rest and help the children to relate to the child with VI. And not the disability.

Children who are blind make sense of the world by using the sensory channels available to them. Touch, sound and smell bring reliable information. Studies demonstrate that children who are blind depend a great deal on language for their information. However explanations are not enough. Children need to be encouraged to explore objects and not be told about them if they are to build realistic concepts.

LITERACY: IT'S ALL ABOUT MEANING

The main difference you will find in teaching literacy is in the materials used...the concepts are identical. Make sure that Braille users have Braille books before they begin to learn. They need to know that Braille, like print, is the way words are written. The Resource teacher can provide teaching materials.

Language development is enhanced and further developed with the printed word

Mental imagery is the bridge that links the print on the page to the image evoked in the listener's/reader's mind.

Spoken language does not separate sounds from words or words from sentences. Young children often believe that the name of things is intrinsic to the thing itself. Nonsense contributes to understanding that the word may be freed from its context. Another value is the sharing of humour.

The Sense of Nonsense

Children as young as 3 1/2 years of age are great audiences for nonsense rhymes and games. This is as true for children who are severely visually impaired as it is for sighted children.

Awareness of rhyme is a connecting link to being able to separate sounds and syllables. Deciphering print or Braille depends on the ability to recognize that words are separated by spaces and that sounds are sequenced to make words. Knowing that rhymes are composed of letter sequences is a big step towards literacy. Because nonsense rhymes encourage listening to language sounds...they provide vital connections between the spoken and the written word. Rhymes are made by the same sequence of letters and demonstrate the link between sounds and symbols and the association of written and spoken language.

Mother Goose is a language teacher and appeals to young children's awareness and sensitivity to rhyme. Cross cultural analyses of the meter of nursery rhymes demonstrates that 16 beat verses are widespread. Mother Goose rhymes are full of actions and images that dramatize experiences with which children can identify. Every line evokes a different image.

Learning About Print

Help child understand that spoken words have printed (or Brailled) forms.
Write names of familiar people.

Glue familiar objects onto cards with their names in Braille. Make personalized alphabet books. Put child's name in Braille on his locker and desk. Paste familiar objects, pebbles, coins, bells etc. on cards with their names in Braille. Label objects in the environment.

Develop Interest in Stories

Build interest in literary language with stories that have rich language and evoke emotional responses. *Make up personalized stories that relate to child's own experiences.*

Repeated Readings of favorite stories develops the ability to predict story events, develops listening skills and memory, and control attention. Stories that contain an element of surprise elicit interest and attention.

Counting books, alphabet books, books about family life and everyday experiences help children link the familiar with the unfamiliar.

Select materials to which child can relate.

Allow child to select books

Create stories about child's own experiences.

Place books and pictures so that child can view them independently.

Separate pages with tabs.

Note child's interest in books and stories. They will give you a clue to child's interests.

Behavior to look for:

Shows interest e.g. smiles when being read to.

Recognizes familiar books

Makes choices

Reads silently

Reads different types of materials

Shows keen interest in reading.

Beginning writing

If child is not ready to write, let him or her tell a story to a tape recorder so he can play it back for himself.

If child is a print reader, let him write letters with a marker pen. Do not fuss about size of letters. The important thing is letter shape not size.

Encourage child to trace letters.

Try to have opportunities for classroom practice.

Number Concepts

As with literacy the goals of teaching are the same as for fully sighted children, only the materials are different. Focus on tactile materials and give child opportunity for ample practice.

Make use of tactile materials. There are tactile maps as well as graphs.