

Some ways of compensating for visual loss

By necessity, visually impaired children have to develop ways of compensating for their loss of sight. Here, we consider some of the techniques that can be used to maximise residual vision.

Making maximum use of existing vision.

This involves:

Visual enhancement: teaching the child particular skills and strategies — for example, learning how to recognise detail in pictures, diagrams, and so on.

Reading techniques: teaching the child how to scan the text efficiently, and quickly locate the relevant information.

Scan-and-search techniques: some children may need to be shown how to scan pictures methodically to find the information required, if they are unable to see the whole picture at a glance.

Posture, angle of head and position of neck.

Certain eye disorders result in the child functioning better by adopting a compensatory head posture.

For example, a child with reduced central vision will tilt their heads so as to try and see round the area of visual loss. Strategies and techniques like this may help the visually impaired child to compensate. Also, the positioning of work, lighting and seating can help the visually impaired child to function more effectively.

Using good auditory discrimination.

You may have heard the suggestion that the ears of a visually impaired person are comparable to the eyes of a sighted person.

Accepting this idea without qualification can give a false impression. Good auditory discrimination is not just a matter of being able to listen carefully, but of being able to *isolate* and *identify* relevant sounds.

Playing *word and rhyming games* with visually impaired children will help to strengthen their recognition and association of sounds.

Response to sound begins very early in life.

We can often see this in a visually impaired baby because it will ‘*still*’ (or listen) when a sound is made. This may be followed by increased body action if the child finds the sound stimulating.

Response to specific sounds may begin by the age of four to five months, and is usually indicated by smiling, turning the head, or intent listening.

As the child begins to recognise more sounds, they will develop a tendency to increase their handling and moving of objects, simply to hear the sounds that are produced.

The child who sees normally can make this association between words and actions. However, adults need to talk to the visually impaired child about movements and actions, to be sure that the words have a real meaning to them. You may need to give *physical demonstrations* so that the child can make the connection between the word and the action. Remember that the world of the visually impaired child may be full of vague, abstract concepts.

Other compensatory skills

We need to encourage visually impaired children to develop skills—such as *touch* and *listening*—which will compensate in part for their lack of sight.

Visually impaired children do not *automatically* develop better listening skills or a better sense of touch. These skills need to be encouraged and taught from an early age.

Not being able to copy other children's play and learning—for example, riding a bike, or building with bricks—needs to be addressed by:

Practical demonstrations

Verbal descriptions, and

Encouragement, to develop good manipulative skills

You can teach the visually impaired child about the *structure* and *shape* of objects by encouraging exploration and manipulation. Early handling and explanation helps the child to learn the different shapes and parts of objects—a rattle, a doll, or a motor car, for instance.

The visually impaired child learns to understand how parts go together to make the whole object when play provides for taking apart and putting together blocks, toys and household objects, such as pans and lids.

Using all these skills will help the visually impaired child to form a knowledge of mental space and grouping, and give a more complete picture of the environment.