

VI Times

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MN Regions 5 & 7 Vision - O&M Staff
Barb Lhotka, Editor



Vision-O&M Staff

The purpose of a newsletter is to provide specialized information to parents and teachers of students with vision impairments. We hope to send regular newsletters that will cover topics of interest that are informative and create a base of knowledge that will assist our students with their on-going success!

Social Skills

Social skills are essential for all of us in our daily lives. The *Focused On* social skills series by Karen E. Wolfe, Sharon Z. Sacks, and Karen L. Thomas (2007), AFB Press emphasizes that for everyone in our society “well-developed social skills are necessary for building relationships, developing positive self-esteem, and ultimately for acceptance into society. People with visual impairments need to learn how to socialize and to get along with others in their communities—to be good neighbors and co-workers. They need to learn how to develop friendships and close relationships in order to establish families and support networks.” (p. 2)

We learn social skills from infancy and continue to do so throughout our lives, so we must pay attention to the opportunities for our children with visual impairments to learn social skills and strategies at the same time as their sighted peers. “The key is to make children without vision aware of how others respond to certain behaviors and to give them the skills and knowledge necessary to behave in an acceptable manner. It is also important for youngsters to understand that choosing not to conform to society’s social expectations has consequences.” (p. 8)

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Contact your Teacher for the Blind / Visually Impaired or Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist if:

- You have further questions on the newsletter topic
- Would prefer the newsletter in electronic format by email or in print.

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Social Skill Development

The following is a handout written by Sharon Zell-Sacks, Ph.D., TVI, regarding the development of social skills by children with visual impairments.

Elementary-Aged Students (ages 5-11)

- Uses eye contact in all social situations appropriately (or turns to speaker).
- Uses appropriate body space (18 inches) when interacting with others.
- Can initiate a simple social greeting and interaction.
- Can maintain an appropriate social conversation for at least two to five minutes with a beginning, middle, and end.
- Shares belongings, games, and toys with peers appropriately.
- Uses social amenities in an appropriate manner (please, thank you, I'm sorry).
- Compliments others.
- Can make an appropriate social introduction including a hand shake.
- Does not demonstrate inappropriate mannerisms (eye poking, rocking).
- Demonstrates appropriate social behavior in specific environment (raising hand in class, waiting turn in a food line).
- Does not interrupt a conversation.
- Demonstrates turn-taking in conversations and when playing with peers.
- Demonstrates joining a group in play or in conversation.
- Can participate in age-appropriate games and activities (hand clapping games, volleyball, tether ball, use of swings and climbing equipment).
- Asks for assistance from peers or adults in an appropriate manner.
- Makes choices and decisions without prompting from adults.
- Shows responsibility for belongings, school assignments, and actions taken toward other peers or adults.
- Dresses age-appropriately.
- Is knowledgeable and can talk about video games, movies, television shows, and popular songs with peers.
- Shows understanding and caring for others.
- Discusses visual impairment with peers and adults. Can identify name of eye condition and explain it in a simple way.

Social Interactions

Greet others

Gain attention

Ask for help

Have a conversation

Share jokes

Join a group

Whisper a secret

Work cooperatively

Cope with conflict

Make friends

Be culturally sensitive

Understand/express emotions

Talk on the phone

Use social media

Negotiate

Communicate assertively

Deal with teasing, bullying and victimization

**The basic skills are learned early and develop with age.

Challenges

There are some areas that tend to make it difficult for children with visual impairments to readily gain the social skills they need for society. These challenges can be overcome when team members and peers understand visual impairment.

The following items are most limiting in developing good social skills.

1. Self-Image A sense of self-confidence takes a different course when all the feedback for who you are comes from the comments of other people. Without being able to observe the impact of one's behavior on others, feedback can be minimal. Children need to have feedback to help them distinguish between good and inappropriate behaviors (both for self and others!).
2. Social Isolation Children with visual impairments must be encouraged to try new things and become involved from a very early age. Without the ability to see what peers do to fill their time and entertain themselves, children with visual impairments tend to turn toward isolation.
3. Expectations Responsibility for oneself and belongings needs to be clearly established. Expecting less of the child with a vision loss than that of his or her brothers and sisters or peers is a barrier to the development of strong self direction and eventual independence. Rules that only apply "some of the time" or for "some of the people" will not produce good social responsibility.
4. Correcting Misbehavior Gentle correction and an explanation of what the appropriate behavior should look like is essential for the child who cannot see the role models surrounding him/her. Constantly telling the child to stop the behavior will not be as helpful as redirecting to a better choice. Consequences (not punishment) should be clearly associated with inappropriate behaviors. Rules should be explained and the consequences explained prior to the events that might create a need for the consequence!
5. Family Involvement Every child in the family will have a role. The child with the vision impairment must have a role that includes responsibility, self-control, cooperation, and builds independence.

Wolffe, K.E., Sacks, S.Z., & Thomas, K.L. (2007) *focused on importance and need for social skills*. New York: AFB Press. (pp. 16-25)

Social Behaviors

Social skills are not just the please and thank you actions of our world. Social skills also involve the ability of each of us to "read" a situation and decide what is happening, what our role in it will be, and what the mood of the situation is at the moment. Our reaction to the situation leads, in turn, to others determining "who we are." It is a complex social circle.

Dolly Bhargava, M. Spec. Ed, Renwick College wrote a paper explaining how loss of vision influences social interactions and social behaviors. The following thoughts summarize her findings.

There are both verbal (talking to your friends) and nonverbal (giving high fives; facial expressions) communication are social behaviors. They influence our relationships and develop our interaction style. "Communicating is not just about using the appropriate sounds, words and sentence structures to express a particular message. It's about knowing how and when to communicate a message appropriately according to social conventions."

Understanding the environment is essential to the development of social skills. The child must know and be able to recognize:

- what is physically in the environment,
- what sounds and sensations are in the area,
- what people do in that environment,
- what they shouldn't do in that environment,
- what the vocabulary of the environment is,
- what body language is used (gestures, facial expressions),
- when a misunderstanding occurs,
- social nuances,
- when to respond or not respond or comment,
- and more.

Social behavior has less to do with action than reaction in many cases. Therefore, the child must learn how to interpret both what is heard and what is perceived through the movement, breathing, actions, etc. of others in the room.

It is essential for children with vision impairments to have the opportunity to practice social behaviors in a safe environment. They need prior information and feedback in order to respond and interact in an appropriate manner. It is a daily learning process for any child, it is a minute by minute learning process for a child with a vision loss. We, as team members, must be on top of the situations and opportunities at all times to provide every opportunity for the child to understand the world they live in—a very sighted world.

Topic Preview

Future issues of this newsletter will address:

- Parenting
- Self-Determination & Advocacy
- Teaching Social Skills

Past Topics

- Introduction to BVI
- Cortical Vision Impairment
- Living Skills
- Low Vision
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orientation & Mobility
- Recreation & Leisure
- Transition
- Braille
- Early Childhood Intervention
- Technology
- Sensory Skills
- Social Skills

Vision Loss - Autism

Many times there are questions if the social behavior is due to vision loss or may be due to a factor of the autism spectrum disorder. Mary Mitchell Lundeen, an autism specialist with a degree in vision impairment distinguished the two in a forced choice survey. The characteristics that show up most often indicate a possible cause.

Blind/Visually Impaired

- Very alert to surroundings with alternative senses.
- There is a readiness to respond to appropriately selected and carefully timed social overtures.
- Shows social curiosity.
- Quiets to voice and other social overtures.
- Delayed peer relationships.
- Easily engaged in a variety of activities with an adult.
- Seeks to share information and experiences.
- Acknowledgement of emotions in self and others.
- Echoing of speech and reversal of pronouns of short duration—conversation skills develop.
- Insight into roles and relationships.

Blind/Visually Impaired & Autism

- Does not explore surroundings with alternative senses.
- Does not demonstrate appropriate responsiveness for mental age.
- Maintains distance.
- Oblivious to social overtures.
- Peer relationships distorted or nonexistent.
- Very difficult for an adult to engage—restricted interests and/or interruption of interests met with resistance.
- No interest in sharing or only sharing strong interests and personal demands.
- No or little use of emotion words or empathy statements.
- Little or no reciprocal conversation skills. Echolalia and pronoun reversal may be present.
- Limited insight into roles and relationships—no knowledge of their own role in relationships.