

Early Support

for children, young people and families

Information about visual impairment

Part 2 – Early Years



About this resource

This is part of a series of resources on visual impairment for parents and carers of children and young people with a vision impairment.

The resources are designed to help you find out more about your child's situation and to help you help them.

You will find information on:

- What vision impairment is;
- How this will affect you and your child;
- Where to go for further support and information.

This fourth edition was developed by the [Early Support Consortium](#) in partnership with RNIB because families, professional agencies and voluntary organisations asked for better information.

Families were consulted about the content and this publication reflects what parents carers who have 'been there before' say they would have liked to have known when they were finding out about their child's situation.

RNIB revised this current edition using feedback from families and in response to changes in policy and practice that have taken place since the first edition in 2004. It also now includes information for parents of older children and young people and we have consulted young people about the information that they want to be available.

This information can be used on its own. However, some people supporting young children may use it alongside another [Early Support](#) publication, the [Developmental journal for babies and children with visual impairment](#). The journal helps parents and carers to track and understand a child's development, celebrate achievement and find out what they can do to encourage their child to learn.

[Early Support](#)

Early Support is a way of working, underpinned by 10 principles that aim to improve the delivery of services for disabled children, young people and their families. It enables services to coordinate their activity better and provide

families with a single point of contact and continuity through key working. Early Support is a core partner supporting the implementation of the strategy detailed in Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability, the Government's 2011 Green Paper. This identified Early Support as a key approach to meeting the needs of disabled children, young people and their families.

Early Support helps local areas implement the Government's strategy to bring together the services families need into a single assessment and planning process covering education, health and care. Early Support provides a wide range of resources and training to support children, young people, families and service deliverers.

To find out more about Early Support, please visit:

www.ncb.org.uk/earllysupport

Where a word or phrase appears in colour, **like this**, it means that:

- You can look it up in the [Glossary](#);
- The contact details for the organisation or agency identified are listed in the [Useful contacts and organisations](#) section; or
- You can find out more in the [Who can help](#) section.

These sections are in [Part 1](#) of the series of the resource.

For more information about visual impairment there are three more resources in this series:

- [Visual impairment: Part 1 - General Information](#)
- [Visual impairment: Part 3 - School Years](#)
- [Visual impairment: Part 4 - Into Adulthood](#)

Please go to www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources to view.

[Explanation of the term parent carer](#)

Throughout this resource the term 'parent carer' is used. This means any person with parental responsibility for a child or young person with special educational needs or disability. It is intended as an inclusive term that can cover foster carers, adoptive parents and other family members.

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Early Years

Getting started

You probably have a million different questions. You will want to know which organisations can help you, what resources are available or simply want to know 'What do I do next?' You may also want to meet other parents carers who have experience of having a child with a vision impairment.

The RNIB resource Starting Point can help. Find out more information here: www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/copingwithsightloss/parentsplace/Pages/starting_point.aspx

Through the helpline and online guide, which draws from the expertise of five charities and children's hospitals, you can access trusted information.

Starting Point can:

- Put you in touch with other parent carers
- Connect you to national and local support organisations including local authority visual impairment services
- Explain your child's sight condition and treatment
- Help you understand what your child can see
- Provide advice on your child's development
- Provide advice on your child's development
- Explain medical jargon and the role of health professionals who can support you
- Provide emotional and practical support for the whole family

What can you do to help your child?

The most important thing for a baby and young child is to find meaning in what they experience from the earliest days. You have a very important role in making the world meaningful for your child.

Simple tips are to:

- Think about timing – introduce new ideas and experiences when your child appears ready
- Be spontaneous
- Be prepared
- Try it yourself
- Reduce distraction
- Show your child how to do it first
- Work from different positions when showing new movements
- Allow enough time
- Reduce support
- Be consistent
- Learn for a purpose
- Praise your child
- Practice
- Let your child do new things and use new skills as independently as possible
- Let your child help you do things
- Encourage self discovery
- Above all, follow your child's lead

[The Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#) offers lots of ideas for supporting your child's learning if you are looking for more detailed information.

Learning to communicate

Learning to communicate is vital for development and for forming relationships. Often children who have a vision impairment do not babble as much as a sighted child – possibly because they are listening more. In general, their language development moves forward more slowly than other children of the same age.

It is important to establish some sort of basic communication with your child early on, using touch. For example, you can play simple repetitive games such as ‘Round and round the garden’. After a couple of goes, wait for your child to react, and then respond. This allows them to tell you that they want you to play the game again. You could imitate the movement they made in response, to show them you have understood. This will help them understand that they need to take the lead sometimes, for two-way communication to take place. Read more about this in the sections called Communication, language and meaning, and Social and emotional development in the Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment.

One of the first breakthroughs in communication is when a child can make their parent or carer understand what they want. If you are spending a lot of time with a child who finds it difficult to communicate, you need to actively look for the signals children give before they can ask for what they want using words. Many parents carers in this situation become expert at reading the body language, vocal sounds and gestures of their child.

Developing ‘shared’ or ‘joint’ attention so that you know you and your child are concentrating on the same thing at the same time and are therefore talking about the same thing is very important for learning. It’s the foundation for social development, play, learning, communication and language and it starts from an early age, before your child can talk.

You can support your child by following their lead and observing what they’re interested in. Make sure that what you say relates to what your child is doing or touching at the time you speak to them. Slow down the pace so that your child has time to understand that you’re interested in the things they’re concentrating on too.

Some children have particular difficulty learning to communicate and may

need speech and language therapy. This may be particularly relevant for children with other learning difficulties in addition to a vision impairment who may need to use an additional, alternative means of communication. If you feel you need specialist advice from a **speech and language therapist**, the earlier you get this, the better.

Some children with complex or multiple needs, who may have a very individual way of communicating, use **communication passports**. A communication passport is a small booklet made up of information about a child, presented from the child's point of view in a positive way. A communication passport might say something like:

'My name is Anna. I am eight months old and I live in Liverpool. I am mixed race, my mum is Black African of Nigerian IBO ethnicity and my dad is White English and we are all British citizens. I can see you if you stand on my right. I need objects to be presented to me from the right. I often need help to hold things and like to be introduced to new experiences very gradually. If I like something, I smile and rock backwards and forwards. To tell you I don't like something, I make a noise and push away with my arms. I like different kinds of music and having rhymes sang to me. My favourite rhymes of all are 'Anyi n'eye', a Nigerian IBO action rhyme, and 'The wheels on the bus', which is one from England.'

A communication passport makes it easier for all the people your child meets to interact with your child in a sensitive, culturally appropriate and effective way.

Developing the senses

Learning is the key to development. This section explains how you can help your child to develop by helping them to listen, to touch and, if they have some vision, to look. All children with a vision impairment, even those with relatively good partial sight, benefit from learning to use their non-visual senses to give them more information about their surroundings. Children can be taught to interpret and piece together the information being sent to their brain from all their senses. These are skills which are learned over several years and can take a lot of practice.

Learning to listen

Babies are surrounded by adult speech from day one. When a baby is lying

very still it's easy to interpret this as a lack of interest in what is going on. However, babies or toddlers with a vision impairment often become really still precisely so that they can listen and work out what is happening. For example, in the morning a child with little sight may listen to the bedroom door open and hear their parent's voice. Gradually they learn the routine and begin to smile with pleasure in anticipation of being picked up and cuddled.

Your child needs to be rewarded for their smile by hearing the pleasure in your voice and feeling your warmth. In this way they will learn that smiles are important. Children soon learn to tell when their parents carers are happy or cross by the tone of their voices.

During their first few years of life most children gradually learn to associate meaning with words. Read more about this in the sections on *Communication, language and meaning* in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#).

Here are more ideas for talking together:

- Encourage people to use your child's name when talking to them. They will begin to hear the difference when people talk to them and when people speak away from them. They will also learn that adults usually use a different, higher tone when they are talking to babies and young children, and that they use only simple sentences and repeat what they have said. Gradually, they will begin to recognise the voices of people they spend the most time with and understand when someone is talking to them.
- Name objects such as bottles, spoons, vests and coats every time they are used by your child. Naming things every day will make the words become familiar and help your child to associate them with objects and events. If your family are bilingual, you may wish to use both languages to help your child's understanding and acquisition of their home language and that of English, too.
- Encourage your baby to listen to the differences in sounds, such as moving a sound maker round your baby – in front and behind – and listening to how their voice changes in different places, such as in the bathroom, kitchen or outdoors.
- Sing or say nursery rhymes, helping them to do any actions.

- Use repetitive games like 'Round and round the garden'. As your baby gets to know them they may show excitement, kick their legs or flap their arms. They will learn to join in by laughing, gurgling, clapping or banging, and in time attempt to say some of the words.
- Praise every attempt your child makes to use language, repeating the sounds they make and giving them meaning. Record the sounds they make and play them back to your baby.
- Help young children make sense of what they hear in busy settings where they are bombarded with lots of sounds. Take your child to the source of a sound to explain what it is and where it's coming from.
- Gain your child's attention before you encourage them to notice a sound and begin to make sense of it. For example say, 'Listen, Lily' and then take them to the vacuum cleaner so they can hear and feel the noise it makes.
- Take your child around the house, naming all the sound clues they can hear. A wind chime, a ticking clock, a humming fridge, and a spinning washing machine are all clues. Let them ring the doorbell or listen to the phone ringing.
- Taking your child to the same sounds over and over again gradually reinforces the experience, until sounds become familiar, giving them a sense of security.
- Turn off the radio or television when you want your child to hear and learn to listen to other sounds. It's easier for children to tune in to what you are saying and develop their own speech when there is no background noise.
- Use songs and audio stories. They're great for encouraging language development. When telling stories use your voice to make it fun such as 'Splish, splash, splosh!' or 'Closer, CLOSER, **CLOSER!**'

Learning to touch and feel

Touching and holding different objects is one of the most important ways for your child to find out about their world. It's important that your child learns to use both hands. Read more about this in the sections on Play and learning and Using hands in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#).

Within a few months of birth fully sighted babies discover their moving arms and this brings their hands in front of their eyes where they can see them. This may not happen spontaneously for a child who has little or no sight. Some children with a vision impairment notice that the little light they can see seems to disappear momentarily when their hands wave in front of their eyes.

You can help your child to discover their hands by putting wrist rattles on their arms, or little finger puppets which make different noises. When you sing finger and hand rhymes such as 'Pat a cake', or 'Tommy Thumb', blow on your child's hands too and stroke them. Some children enjoy having baby oil massaged into their hands. Once your child has discovered their hands, you can help them to use them, so that their fingers become stronger and more skilful. Your child may repeat some actions endlessly but tire easily of others.

Some children with a vision impairment find it difficult to use their hands or to experience touch in a pleasurable way. Sometimes it helps to stimulate their sense of touch by gently dabbing on the back of their hands or placing items in their hands or on their fingers. If this is too threatening or unpleasant for your child, try to use their feet as a means of experiencing touch, as this might be more acceptable to them.

Many children prefer to explore hard surfaces. Furry objects like teddy bears have a less definite shape and feel and some children with a vision impairment find this off-putting.

Here are some more ideas to try:

- Always position your child where they feel secure. Many children with a vision impairment feel safer if they can feel the edges of their space. This might be lying in your arms, on your lap, or sitting next to you on a sofa or chair, or in a baby activity nest. They should be able to reach and hold things easily so that they can use both hands to explore objects and toys. As well as their hands, children use their mouths to explore, often licking, biting and chewing their toys. This is an important way for them to find out about things and should not be discouraged. It's also important that babies experience different secure positions as time goes by, not always the same one, such as lying on their tummy.
- Make a noise with an interesting feely toy that has different textures and then put it near their hand. Let your child hold and explore safe

household objects. Pan lids and wooden spoons that can be banged and shaken make good toys. Lie your child under a baby gym and show them how the toys feel when they move.

- Introduce them to a variety of different materials and textures. Wood, metal, rubber, sari material, foil, carpet, paper, sponge, towelling, felt, denim, wool and velvet are more interesting to feel than smooth plastic.
- Assemble a treasure basket – a shallow sturdy basket containing a collection of everyday items made of natural materials which vary in weight, size, texture, colour, taste, temperature and sound for your toddler to dip into. Safe, clean items with interesting textures appeal to young children; for example, a squeazy sponge, the cardboard centre of a kitchen roll, or an orange or lemon. You might want to include some relevant items that reflect your own culture and heritage, and introduce items to your child from different cultures, too. You can change the items so that your toddler will always have something new to root around for in the treasure basket.

Find out more information about treasure baskets at:

www.nib.org.uk/learningthroughplay

Learning to look

When babies are born, their vision is not yet fully developed. Children's sight continues to develop in the first years of life by being used. So it's very important, if you think your child can see anything at all, or if you aren't sure, that you encourage them to look as well as listen. Children with vision impairments can be encouraged through play activities to make the most of their sight and they find special ways of viewing objects and handling materials, maybe holding things close to their eyes, or to one side.

It can be very hard to tell how much your baby can see. Watch closely and ask yourself:

- Do they tilt their head to look?
- Do they look at mirrors or brightly coloured objects?
- Do they stare at sunlight or artificial lights?
- Do they see better in dim light or bright light?

- Do they look at objects or faces?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, or if you have noticed them doing other things, it suggests your child may have some vision, so encourage them to use it. Here are some ideas to encourage visual interest. And don't worry – sitting close to the television or computer will not harm their eyes, and looking at things very closely will not strain their eyes.

Lighting

You can help your child by ensuring that there is sufficient (but comfortable) light in the environment. Be alert for the smallest sign of interest. It may be just the tiniest movement of an arm or a tilt of the head or a wiggle of the toes, but if you notice it and can work out which object, which direction and at what distance your baby appeared to see something, you can build on this interest by repeating the experience.

Visual stimulation

Some children may face additional difficulties arising from their physical and learning needs and may need extra help to make sense of visual information and in learning to 'look'. This is sometimes called visual stimulation. Visual stimulation takes place naturally for most children but needs to be carefully structured and planned for children with complex needs. For children who have very little or no sight, different ways to stimulate their interest have to be found to encourage them to explore the world around them.

Extra time

An important point to consider is that many children with multiple impairments and a vision impairment need more time to process information and respond to it. It's very easy to take something away from a child before they have had a chance to organise their response to let you know that they have seen it.

Objects and toys

Visual understanding can be supported by having lots of very familiar things to look at. It helps if objects and toys can be held or positioned close to your child so they can look at each part and not be confused by a cluttered background. Objects and toys that are simple in design and with a clear

contrast between colours or features are easier to understand visually. iPads also have lots of useful apps for visual stimulation. In the early stages of children's visual development, large objects with chunky features are more interesting than small things which are visually complex.

You may want to set up a small special area for visual stimulation, maybe in your child's bedroom, using objects that interest them. The [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#) offers more ways for supporting looking if you want more detailed information.

Here are a few more ideas to encourage your child to look:

- Position your baby so that they feel secure. To put them in a good position for looking you may need to put them on their side or on their front.
- Place your baby so that they can see your face. If they can see, babies react best to faces first of all.
- Talk, coo, nod your head and make big smiles to attract attention; play 'Peek a boo'.
- Place one brightly coloured toy against a plain contrasting background.
- Use shiny, silvery paper and mirrors to attract their attention. For example, inflate the inside of a wine box to make a reflective balloon. Unbreakable festive decorations can also make good toys.
- Use toys with lights to attract their attention. Torches and coloured lights are fun, too.
- Your child may be able to see a mobile made of shiny foil or holographic card.
- A spotlight or angled lamp may make it even easier to see but be sure that the light doesn't shine directly into your child's eyes.
- Suspend objects on a baby gym or a frame. Sometimes real objects are more exciting than toys; try a CD, reflector, shatterproof mirror, something striped, high-contrast simple black and white patterns or pictures.

Making play and learning fun

Time for play

When children are playing, they are doing much more than simply enjoying themselves – they are learning to make sense of the world using all their senses: taste, smell, touch, hearing and sight. Read more about this in the sections on Play and learning and Using hands in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#).

It may be difficult for young children with a vision impairment to explore toys and materials and to play with other children, unless sensitive adults actively encourage, support and extend their play.

You can help your child by:

- Observing your child's behaviour closely to find out what interests them.
- Giving enriched descriptions of what they are doing and what you are doing.
- Providing a commentary so that your child learns about the things they cannot see.
- Providing rich experiences which build on your child's interests.
- Giving them choice and control when they are playing.
- Making sure your child is able to engage with an activity in their own way.

Choosing toys and activities

All babies need opportunities to make things happen. At the simplest level, a baby gradually works out that if they cry, someone comes. Toys are an important way for a child to learn that they can make things happen. They help babies learn to do things for themselves. Toys that respond to action in a way that makes sense to a child who does not see well are best.

For example:

- Rattles which make a noise when they are shaken
- Activity centres or toys with buttons to push which make different sounds
- Balls that play a tune when shaken or rolled

Your baby's position is important. When they are playing, make sure they feel secure and that they have both hands free to move and explore their toys.

Some toddlers are reluctant to use their hands to explore and are not keen to let an adult guide them. Sometimes it's because they have had unpleasant experiences handling things that they found disagreeable to feel.

Don't worry if your baby puts toys in their mouth for longer than their sighted friends, or if they smell them or run their tongue over them. As their touch becomes more finely developed they will use their hands to explore more and their mouth less.

All the usual safety considerations apply but there are a few special considerations when choosing a toy for a child who has a vision impairment:

- Is the toy easy to manipulate?
- Is it brightly coloured with good contrast?
- Does it do something, like make a noise or have parts that move?
- If you close your eyes, is it interesting to touch?
- What could a baby do with it?

It isn't necessary to buy expensive toys. Lots of other things make good playthings. Here are some suggestions:

- Different kinds of paper, cardboard and corrugated card
- Materials that feel different and can be explored, such as fur, cellophane, bubble wrap and so on
- Small containers filled with rice or dried pulses which make good rattles
- Mini-beanbags made out of different fabrics and filled with dried beans

- Cloth books made from different fabrics with shells, feathers, buttons, short strings and ribbons sewn to the pages
- Feely boards or mats with different textured materials – not just smooth fabric but leather, plastic, corduroy and so on
- A tray of buttons, marbles, stones, milk bottle tops and cotton reels – best for older children who have stopped putting everything in their mouth!
- Velcro and zips, which satisfy the ‘fiddle factor’ – as do bicycle bells, bicycle pumps and clip purses, which snap open and closed
- An old wind-up alarm clock and cardboard tubes from kitchen foil
- A range of different brushes and spoons

If your child has a vision impairment and additional needs give some thought to these ideas too:

- Choose toys and play materials that offer a variety of sensory experiences.
- Children need to be alert to play, so choose other activities when they are unwell or tired.
- Children learn from opportunities to experience challenge, risk and excitement, carefully chosen to take account of their needs and skills.
- Define a play space around your child to create a secure familiar den.
- It’s especially important to find out what motivates children who have limited communication skills by observing their responses. Watching and listening to a child is the best way to find out what kind of play is likely to stimulate and interest them.
- Children with additional needs depend more on a sensitive play partner to encourage, support and extend their play with objects – someone who also knows when to withdraw or not interfere!
- Make sure your child is in the most suitable position to use hands and eyes to best advantage, whether seated, standing or lying down.
- Keep toys within reach so that any of your child’s movements can create an effect.

- Allow your child to explore objects with their mouth or feet as well as encouraging them to use their hands.
- Try to use your child's repeated behaviours, developing them into an activity that is more creative.
- Use simple short descriptions to support activities.
- You can try a 'Little room', an idea devised by Lilli Nielson. You can make a little room from a large cardboard box. Place the box on its side with your child lying just inside the opening. Line the sides with textured materials and suspend objects securely from the top so that they hang down within the child's reach. This brings the environment closer to the child making it easier for your child to see, touch and hear the objects.

Toy libraries are an inexpensive way of introducing your child to lots of new toys. Toy libraries:

- Offer play facilities.
- Provide a place to meet other parents carers.
- Allow you to borrow toys in the same way as you borrow books from a library.

Toy libraries are run by volunteers (often parents carers of young children) or by paid staff. Many are located in community centres, church or village halls, and schools, while others are housed in a bus, van or caravan to enable them to reach a wide area. Regular borrowing of appropriate toys encourages all children to explore and develop new skills. Brothers and sisters are welcome too. For details of your nearest toy library, contact **Play Matters**. You can also read RNIB's Toy leaflet at: www.rnib.org.uk/learningthroughplay

Playing in the kitchen

Parents carers spend a lot of time in the kitchen and your child will want to join you there. Encouraging your child to 'help' you in the kitchen can lead to useful play. It could include:

- Banging saucepans with a range of spoons
- Playing with plastic boxes and lids
- Playing with cake tins of different sizes

- Unpacking shopping bags
- Unloading the washing machine into a basket
- Putting plastic bowls and plates away
- Sweeping with a dustpan and brush – very hit and miss, but often enjoyed
- Fetching vegetables from a rack
- Washing fruit
- Spreading butter on bread to make sandwiches
- Mashing and mixing sandwich fillings
- Licking the bowl
- Stirring jelly or cake mixture
- Washing up cups and plates
- Cutting out biscuits, kneading bread or chappatis – or making their own with playdough

Older children often play happily with a selection of screw top jars. Let them unscrew them and try to find a reward inside.

Keep a collection of empty egg boxes, clean yoghurt pots and margarine tubs in a cardboard box. Children need to learn about containers and their uses by taking things out and putting things in, and working out relative sizes. You may like to put some of these safe items in a low cupboard so your child can get things out for themselves. It's best to fit cupboard locks on cupboards where you store plates or glasses, or bleach, detergents and cleaning fluids.

Making food with your child helps them develop better control of their hands, and it's fun if afterwards you can eat the food you have made together.

The kitchen is often also a good place to introduce messy play, as it usually has the floor that is easiest to clean. All children need to experience a range of materials and have opportunities to express themselves through painting, drawing and making things.

Some children will be able to see certain colours, fluorescent and metallic paints. Take care to choose non-toxic paints. Whatever their level of vision,

children hear colour talked about and will want to know about it. Give your child the opportunity to learn to use glue and modelling clay. Encourage them to make collages and models using boxes, different types of paper, card and fabric. Some children enjoy making tactile pictures and sand and other grains of various grades can be added to paint to achieve different textures.

Settling down

Children like routines. A well planned day enables a child to recognise, and then anticipate, familiar events and helps them to cope with the different things that happen. Events such as eating, bathing and bedtime provide a pattern for young children's lives.

Eating

Whether you are breastfeeding or bottle-feeding your baby, it's a special time for you and your baby to get to know each other. It's important to take time to enjoy the closeness of regular feeds in the first few months. It gives your child several opportunities every day to feel your warmth, the familiar way you hold them, to get to know your scent, the feel of your clothes, the sound of your voice and perhaps the look of your face. This is important, too, for children who are fed by non-oral methods, such as tube feeding.

Your baby may be more reluctant than other infants to drop feeds, so they may be a little later being weaned. If feed times are difficult, or if you are concerned about your child's weight gain or growth, there are professionals who can help. For example, **speech and language therapists** often help with sucking and swallowing difficulties, and **health visitors** can advise on early feeding patterns and weight gain, and can assess whether to refer your child to a **paediatrician** for extra help.

If you are returning to work, you may need to plan very carefully how and when you wean your baby. If you are breastfeeding you may have to introduce a bottle earlier, before moving on to solids at the usual time. Most babies with a vision impairment enjoy sucking, so you may need to transfer from breast to bottle to cup very gradually.

When your baby is ready to start eating solids, take it slowly. Their main nutrition continues to come from milk and it takes time for babies to accept new flavours and learn to swallow lumpier food. If your child regularly chokes or gags on their food, express your concern to your **health visitor** or **GP**.

Introduce new flavours early on. Your aim is for your child to like a wide range of foods. Encourage them to taste something again if they don't like it the first time. Remember that new experiences are accepted best when a child is feeling well, so don't push them if they seem a bit under the weather.

There are clues that help your baby know that it's meal time:

- They have that 'hungry' feeling
- You put their bib on them
- You put them in their highchair
- They hear familiar sounds that indicate food is on the way
- You give them a spoon
- They smell delicious food

Some children show they want to feed themselves by finger feeding or grabbing their spoon. Others may need you to encourage their independence. To feed themselves, your baby needs to be able to hold a spoon, scoop with it, put it in their mouth, close their lips round it and then replace the spoon.

Learning these skills takes time and you may have a long period where you both have a spoon.

At mealtimes, babies learn many skills:

- In crawling or walking to their highchair, they are learning to orient themselves
- When they show they want to get in the highchair or that they want the food they can smell or hear you preparing, they are communicating
- If they are offered a choice of two foods, they are learning about different flavours, smells and textures, and also learning about making decisions
- If they are helping with feeding, they are refining the use of their hands to pick up finger food or control a spoon

Introducing solid food:

- Fingers were invented before spoons and forks, so concentrate on them first. Using cutlery may not be your cultural practice either.
- Let your child feel your own jaw when chewing and listen to you eating crunchy foods. They'll love it and it helps them understand what actions are required for eating.

- When introducing your child to using a spoon, put your hand over theirs, holding the spoon. As they get the idea, you can gradually move your hand further up their arm so that they are controlling it more.
- Tell them what you are doing: 'I'll help you to scoop up the potato.' Children enjoy a commentary on what's happening and it helps children who can't see know what the food is. Alternatively – 'I'm rolling the Injera' (Ethiopian staple bread).
- Your child may be able to get the spoon or injera for example to their mouth once you have helped them to load it but they may need help to put it back in the dish. It's worth putting a damp cloth or a non-slip mat under the dish to prevent it from sliding around.
- Alternate between helping them do it and letting them do it by themselves. But don't let mealtimes go on too long or make your child feel frustrated by forcing the pace of independence. As meals take place at least three times a day, try to make them happy occasions for both of you.
- Always show you are pleased with your baby when they can do something new for themselves. You can show your pleasure by touching them and through your voice. This stage needs lots of patience with all children.
- All children make a mess, eat with their hands, throw their spoons and even put bowls on their head. A long-sleeved bib, a big splash mat and a flannel or wipes make cleaning up easier. Clean up at the very end, rather than all the way through the meal. Some parents carers tie easy-to-clean toys to the high chair for their child to play with while waiting for their dinner.
- Let your child put their fingers in the dish to explore their food. It may be the only way they can find out what they've been given.
- Some babies eat all the food they're given, while others are fussy eaters or simply not interested. Try to relax – babies can pick up on the feeling that you're worried. If they don't eat much, or indeed nothing, they can always have a bit more next time.

Learning to drink from a cup:

- Introduce a cup early so your baby gets used to handling it.
- Alternate between using a bottle and a cup and gradually increase the amount of time they have the cup. Some parents find it helpful to give their child the cup at the beginning of a feed and give them the bottle as a reward, after they have taken a few sips.
- Start with a small amount of water or milk in the cup. This makes it easier to control the flow of liquid and reduces the risk of spills.
- Children with vision impairment need to be shown the sequence of picking up a cup, holding it, and putting it down again, rather than letting it drop or throwing it.
- When your child can drink from a cup with a spout, gradually introduce them to a cup with no lid.

Bathtime

Bathtime provides a natural opportunity to talk about and learn the names of body parts. When getting your baby ready for a bath say, 'It's bathtime now. Let's get you undressed.' Remember to use a non-slip mat and watch and stay with your child at all times.

Bathtime is a good time for exploration too:

- Give your baby time to explore. Stick foam shapes and toys with suction cups to the side of the bath that they can feel.
- Some families put up textured tiles, or a soap dish in which they put a toy for their child to discover.
- Show them how to pat the water to make splashes.
- If you have a shower attachment, turn it on gently and listen to the different sounds of water spraying on a shower curtain, the side of the bath, into the bath or onto your child's body.
- Scented soap and bubble bath make bathtime more interesting.
- Practice pouring and squeezing bath water.

- Find toys that make interesting noises when filled with water or emptied.
- Use a plastic tube to blow bubbles in the water. Some children like bubbles being blown against their body.
- Use towelling flannels or a mitten that feels velvety when dry. Sponges of different shapes are fun too.
- Take turns in games and talk about what your child is doing.
- If your baby is afraid of water try using a small baby bath so they can feel the sides and don't feel lost in a big space, a baby bath seat or sponge insert.
- Once your baby enjoys the bath, you might like to take them swimming.
- Many pools have parent and baby sessions that are quieter, and sometimes warmer, than public sessions. It's good to take your child swimming at an early age so they become confident in water and learn about water safety.

Bedtime

Many newborns fall asleep at the end of a feed in your arms or are easily rocked off to sleep and drop off in the buggy or car. As they get older it's important that they learn to fall asleep by themselves and become less dependent on being rocked or patted. It helps if you begin to put them down just before they fall sound asleep, so they learn this important skill. It takes time for babies to learn this, sometimes many months, but it's worth persevering so that your child develops good sleep habits. Babies who can fall asleep by themselves often get themselves back to sleep when they wake in the night. So you'll get more sleep too!

Read more about this in the section called Towards independent self-care in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#).

You can help your baby to recognise bedtime and to begin to tell the difference between night and day. Bedtime will be smoother and easier for both of you if you establish a clear routine. Activities near bedtime that are quiet and relaxing help your child to wind down, rather than wind up. For many children bedtime follows bathtime, a drink or a story.

Your baby will gradually get to know it's time for bed when they put on pyjamas or a sleep suit, or they hear you drawing the curtains. Children with a little vision may see that it's getting dark or that you have dimmed the lights. Some babies have a favourite object or blanket to take to bed. Quiet songs or lullabies, or a gentle wind-up musical toy, may help your baby go to sleep.

If your baby doesn't see, they won't know that darkness means time for sleep, but they will get used to night-time sounds. If you keep evening sounds gentle and soothing they will come to associate those noises with slowing down and going to sleep.

If your baby has trouble sleeping, ask yourself:

- Are they comfortable?
- Have they had enough to eat and drink during the day?
- Are they too warm or a bit cold?
- Are they in pain?
- Are they tired?
- Have they had too many naps during the day or close to bedtime?
- Have they been busy enough to make them tired?
- Are they wound-up or over-excited?
- Are they afraid of something?
- What happened last night at bedtime?

Many children find it difficult to settle into a regular sleeping pattern. Sleep deprivation can quickly exhaust your daytime energy and lower your spirits, so ask your **health visitor** or **GP** for help. Many health centres run sleep clinics and there are organisations to support parents having problems getting their children to sleep. Call the **Cry-sis Helpline** on: 08451 228 669 (open seven days a week, 9am –10pm) to get help from someone in your area.

Dressing and undressing

Even when your baby is really tiny you can begin to help them learn about dressing and undressing. Read more about this in the section called Towards independent self-care in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#).

Ideas to try include:

- Dress and undress your child in the same order every time. Talk through the actions each time.
- Undressing is easier than dressing and is worth learning first using loose clothes. Many babies delight in pulling socks off.
- At first, choose clothes that are easy to get on and off. Pull-up trousers are easier than dungarees.
- Choose attractive, comfortable clothes with 'feely features' where possible.
- The backs of clothing can be marked with a small button or piece of velcro under the label at the neck. Use velcro as a fastener wherever you can – children with vision impairments love the sound of it. They love zips, too.
- You can put a coat with a hood on the back of your child's head so your child can start putting the coat on. Add a short bit of ribbon to the sliding bit of the zip to make it easier for them to hold and pull up and down.
- If your child has a little sight, choose clothes in colours you think they might see.
- Later on, teach them that their clothes are always to be found in a certain place to encourage their independence.

Personal care

How do you tell if your child is ready for toilet training? Read more about this in the sections called Towards independent self-care in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#).

Questions to ask include:

- Are they happy and comfortable sitting on a potty? Let them play with one for a week or two before starting, if this is culturally acceptable to you.
- Do they ever tell you there's a poo in their nappy?
- Have they ever noticed themselves doing a wee without a nappy on?
- Are they happy to be in the bathroom?
- Do they know that you go to the toilet?
- Will they usually respond to your request to do a wee or a poo?

If you're not sure whether your child is ready, or if you know your child has other special needs too, you might want to talk it through with a health professional first.

And finally – are you ready? Can you be patient when accidents occur? They probably will. If you know that in the next few weeks you will be moving house, having a baby or visiting somewhere unfamiliar it can be better to leave toilet training to when you and your child are feeling settled.

Things to keep in mind:

- Has your child got enough clothes that are easy to pull on and off?
- Have you got time to sit and talk to them while they sit on the potty or toilet, so that they feel more secure? Small children need to try very frequently at first.
- Choose a potty with a solid base that is hard to tip over. Put it where they feel secure, such as within reach of a wall or something to steady themselves on. Alternatively, you could use a potty chair. When they are older they might want a toilet seat but these feel less secure to a child with a vision impairment so are best avoided when you first try.
- Your home may have installed an Arabic style toilet. You might wish to introduce your child to a western style toilet gradually for when he or she starts to attend early years settings, etc. This will enable your child to become less wary of things that they are not used to.

Think about what you'll do when you go out together. Here are some more toileting tips:

- Use the same routine every time on entering and leaving the toilet. Think about a simple route in and out and add tactile points to the room that your child may understand (bells on the door, an elastic band on the handle).
- Be flexible about whether they use a potty or toilet. A lot of children with a vision impairment fear sitting on a toilet. It's easier to poo if your feet can reach the floor or a step. Don't leave them on their own, and offer lots of talk and support such as holding hands. Singing helps too.
- Some children need to explore what they have done and where it is, once they have done it. Don't be too squeamish about this, although this can be gradually discouraged as the child develops their skill.
- Praise each success. Most children love to hear the toilet flush and to do it for themselves. Or use recorded songs, favourite toys or anything else that your child would recognise as a reward. Consider buying a musical potty.
- Accept accidents in a matter of fact way – there will be many. It's important not to tell your child off, as this leads some children to deliberately wet or dirty their clothes as a way of getting attention. Try to have a 'Never mind, better luck next time' attitude. But do take your child to the bathroom to change wet clothes so that weeing becomes associated with the toilet.
- Be sure that your child always does the whole process, including washing their hands, every time. You may of course have your own faith and cultural toilet etiquette requirements that you may wish to support your child with, too. If you are from the Muslim faith you may wish to follow in your home Qadaa' al-Haajah, or Asher Yatzar if you are from a Jewish faith tradition.

On the move

Early movement helps your baby to learn about their position in space. Sighted babies see other people moving around and learn by trying to copy. You may need to teach your baby ways of moving. They need to learn: Where do I begin and end? Where is this body part in relation to that? How much force is too much?

This section suggests ideas for helping your child to move independently and develop stronger muscle tone.

Babies who do not move can develop repetitive actions, such as rocking backwards and forwards. This may show that they are bored and need stimulating. Read more about this in the sections on Movement and mobility in the [Developmental journal for babies and children with vision impairment](#) – see www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources.

A baby sling or backpack carrier enables your child to experience your movement, while held close, warm and secure. They also provide an alternative view of the world for children with some vision.

If your baby has a condition that affects their movement, they may find moving tiring or frustrating. If your child appears to see better on one side, or holds their head in a particular position to view an object, it will have implications for how you introduce them to new experiences. If they also have difficulty controlling their muscles, supporting their body or moving, it's important to get professional advice from a [physiotherapist](#) on how to position, lift, and carry them and also how to encourage them to move.

Your child may need extra equipment to support their movement or position. Some children require specialist buggies, standing frames, body jackets, or bolster rolls to support them. As a child grows heavier you may need help with lifting or supporting them. There are many different supports, seats and standing frames but it is essential to receive professional advice, from a physiotherapist, for example, to ensure that specialist equipment suits a child's particular needs as they grow.

Getting your baby moving

Before a baby can learn to sit unsupported they have to be able to lift their head when they lie on their back and on their front. They need to move their head from side to side to strengthen their neck muscles. You can encourage them to lift and turn their head by attracting their attention with musical or squeaky toys, brightly coloured lights or toys that are interesting to feel.

Your child needs to experience floor play, lying on their back, tummy and sides, rolling, pushing, pulling and to be propped up securely against a person, or with cushions against a piece of furniture.

Here are some ideas to try:

- Put them on their back and gently tilt their hips from side to side.
- Rolling games help them get the idea of moving from one position to another. Lie them on a large inflatable bolster or ball and roll it gently back and forth. Put them on your lap and gently roll from side to side.
- Use favourite toys which make sounds to motivate them to move towards you.
- Help them to rock in a baby rocking seat or bouncy chair.
- Give them a go in the baby swings at the park.
- For toddlers, push-along toys that make a noise motivate children to move at the same time as protecting them from bumps.

Remember that if a child is engrossed in playing it can be frightening to be suddenly picked up with no warning. So as you approach your child to move them to a new position or take them to another room, tell them that you're there. Say their name and lightly touch them before you pick them up.

You can also try infant massage. For a child with a vision impairment, starting early with infant massage can support tactual sense, body awareness, and the use of hands. Importantly, it can help to establish the strong bond of trust between you and your child. Many health visitors run massage classes.

You can find out more through the International Association of Infant Massage at: www.iaim.org.uk

Infant massage

Many early learning skills require the development of tactual sense. The awareness of our hands and fingers, for example, is a vital skill for exploring objects and our environment. Experiencing massage early can support the child's understanding and acceptance of positive touch and really help when you might want to sensitively guide your child's hands for learning and play. Infant massage can enhance your interactions and also help your child's developing sense of body awareness. Massage can also encourage your child's purposeful movements, for example, transitions from lying to rolling and then to propping up on arms and hands.

Tips for massage include:

- Always make the best use of your child's available vision – move in close to encourage face-to-face contact.
- Be aware of lighting conditions. Avoid placing your child directly under a strong overhead light which will then put your facial features into silhouette.
- During massage describe what you are about to do and comment on what you are doing, keeping language simple.
- You may need to break down the massage routine into smaller stages and build slowly. Remember this is a time for mutual pleasure. Respond to what your child seems to like and go with what is comfortable for you both.
- Start and end the session the same way each time. This helps your child understand what is about to happen, what will happen next and to develop their understanding of when massage is about to end.

Your child needs lots of opportunities for physical exercise. Take them walking, running, climbing and play plenty of physical games with them. In fact, the more active the play, the more confident they are likely to become. They will be a fitter happier child and far more able to join in with their sighted friends. Help to guide them at first by holding their hand, but as they get older encourage them to hold only your finger and when tall enough, your elbow.

Babies and young children with vision impairment need people who are loving and confident when handling them. When playing physically, include some

repetitive games that follow a pattern so your child can learn the pattern, anticipate what will happen next and enjoy it. Most children love rough and tumble play. It gives them experience of different positions – high up, low down – and of different movements such as swinging and bouncing. Always talk about what you are doing while you play. If your child also has a physical disability, or problems controlling the movement of their body, talk to your child's **physiotherapist** about safe games to play. You may also want to ask their advice or the **health visitor** before using a baby walker.

Safety

Before your child starts to move around the house on their own, you need to make sure they can't hurt themselves:

- Fit guards to fires and the cooker
- Keep doors fully open or properly closed
- Pad sharp edges of the furniture
- Move breakable objects and houseplants well out of reach
- Keep small objects that they might swallow or choke on out of reach
- Fit plug guards to electrical sockets and pin back trailing wires
- Lock bleach, cleaning fluids and medicines away
- Fit cupboard locks
- Fit safety gates to stairs

Try not to be frightened for them, as they will sense your worry. Remember, all toddlers fall over and bump themselves during the day.

You can help your child by putting up sound, scent and tactile clues to help them know where they are in the house – for example, a wind chime in the hall, scented potpourri, wallpaper of different textures on the walls, and floor coverings that sound different, such as tiles, stripped wood or carpet.

If your child has some vision, try to find out if they can see better in bright or dim conditions and then consider the implications of this at home. For example, is the hallway a bit dark or do any rooms need blinds when the sun is strong? It's easier for children with vision impairments to find toys against a plain background, so plain carpets and tabletops are likely to be most helpful.

Alternatively, you can spread out a plain cloth so that your child's toys are easier to see. If your child finds very bright light uncomfortable, look out for glare caused by light reflecting off shiny surfaces, like sinks or worktops.

Some things to try:

- Keep furniture in the same place, so they can find their way confidently around the room. If furniture has to be moved, show them the new arrangement.
- When they are moving around the house, talk to them about where they are going, what they can hear, see, feel or smell.
- Teach them the language for describing positions such as on, under, next to, above, forwards, backwards and eventually left and right.
- Count steps with them and make it fun. Gradually all this helps to give them a sense of distance and direction.
- Let them go round the room by themselves – they will find their own way around.
- Encourage your child to work out what each door in the house is like. The front door may have a panel they can feel, or a mat in front of it, or a letterbox that they can reach up and feel. A back door may have a cat flap or a different shaped handle. Internal doors offer clues too. Some open easily while others drag a bit on carpet. Point out different floor coverings too. If the door is by tiles or lino it might be the bathroom or kitchen. Encourage your child to use all these clues.
- And remember to leave doors fully open or completely closed to prevent your child from walking into the edge of one.

In safe areas where your child can move freely, they may be very confident but at the same time, may be anxious about leaving the house. As your child gets older, you may want some extra help with encouraging your child to explore, to learn routes around nursery or school and to learn to move confidently in an unfamiliar environment eg when visiting a friend's house. Your visiting **qualified teacher of visually impaired (QTVI)** can put you in touch with a mobility officer who can support you and your child.

It may be that using a long cane would help your child to walk about more

independently. Opinions vary as to when to introduce early cane skills but some people think it's a good idea to introduce children to use long canes as soon as they can walk, and that parents should be actively involved so that children learn to use their cane as part of everyday life, not just in mobility lessons.

One parent introduced her daughter to a cane when she was three years old and says that it was the best decision she could have made – her daughter took to it straight away and her concentration and behaviour improved immediately. She is also relaxed and her cane provides the information she needs to react to changes and hazards independently, without relying on being told.

Up and walking

Many children have dens and hideouts, which are, in effect, small spaces over which they have complete control. This experience is essential for children with sight impairments. They need to learn that a space has walls or sides, a bottom, a ceiling and a floor and an entrance or exit. Huge cardboard boxes are a good way to teach this and are fun, or you could corner off a bit of a room with armchairs. The aim is to create a space in which your child is confident and in which they can control their toys. Gradually the space can be made bigger, encouraging them to move and explore further.

Children with a vision impairment need lots of experience of exploring small, safe spaces. It builds their confidence and makes it more likely that they'll want to move round larger spaces, like a room or garden, independently. Some parents set up a travel cot or very large play-pen with toys to encourage their child to explore in safety.

Other ideas to try:

- Let your toddler play 'house' or 'boat' or 'car' inside a large cardboard box
- If you have the space, keep an old mattress for jumping on
- Let them climb on a small strong box, and help them learn how to jump off
- 'Sit and ride' toys such as toy cars give your child some freedom of movement with some protection from bumps

Learning to stand and learning to walk are real milestones in a child's development. Your baby may be a little later in learning to do these things than other children and some prefer to shuffle on their bottom instead. Babies with poor sight are often reluctant to crawl as they are more likely to bump their heads, so encourage them to get up on their feet as early as possible.

- Before walking, your baby first needs to learn to stand. Encourage this by bouncing them on your lap to strengthen their legs and by standing them leaning against your chest when you are sitting down.
- Help them to stand on the floor holding onto a sofa and encourage them to move along. They may feel more secure if you stand or kneel behind them.
- When they confidently move along furniture, stand behind them, leaning forward, holding their hands so they're no higher than their shoulders.
- When they are comfortable in this position, gradually move their feet forward with your toes, so they get the idea of moving one foot and then the other.
- If they are still frightened of moving and are clutching on tight, practice around the furniture a bit more until they gain confidence.
- Give them a favourite toy to hold in one hand, while you hold the other.

Developing your child's confidence

As children begin to move around the house on their own they still want to know where you are. You'll find they call out very often and need you to reply so they can be reassured by your voice that you are still around.

Exploring the world outside

Each time you walk to the shops or the park or to pick up brothers or sisters from school, your child has an opportunity to learn about the outside world. A baby in a buggy feels the difference between a warm sunny day, a crisp cold day or a wet day. As well as the temperature, the sounds are different too – on a wet or foggy day the sounds are more muffled, and it's possible to hear spray on the wheels and the raindrops hitting the buggy covers. Some children with vision impairment don't like wearing hats as it makes hearing and interpreting sounds more difficult. Likewise some toddlers dislike gloves if they stop them from feeling walls, fences and things that they pick up. Try to

make regular walks fun and use them as a chance to notice something new, or reinforce something from last time.

Look out for interesting things along the way which may be large or colourful enough for your child to see:

- Bright red post boxes
- Cracks in the pavement
- Bubble paving stones at crossings
- Bus shelters

Listen for interesting sounds and explain:

- Cars and lorries
- Children playing
- Dogs barking
- Wind in the trees
- Squeaky gates

Collect interesting things like:

- Leaves, twigs and pine cones
- Stones
- Feathers

Talk to your child as you turn corners, introducing the language of directions, for example left, right, straight on, let's turn round, stop and so on. You can touch them on their shoulder, too, to reinforce this: left shoulder when turning left, right shoulder when turning right. See if they can begin to remember which way to go on walks that you do together often.

Gardens and parks

Take your child to the park or let them go in the garden in all sorts of weather and during all the seasons, so they know how different gardens and parks sound and smell when it is rainy or sunny. Introduce them to grass, gravel paths, tarmac, wood chips and springy safety surfaces. Let them feel and smell safe plants and notice the difference between cold metal swings and a

warmer wooden fence. When it's warm enough, let them experience grass barefoot, too.

Other ideas for spending time outside:

- Give them a sturdy wheelbarrow to collect things in and play ball games with an audible ball.
- Let them help you plant herbs in pots or in the garden which have a definite smell – for example, rosemary or thyme release a strong smell when stroked and are not too prickly. Some children can use different scents to remind them where they are and find their way around.
- If you have a space big enough for a climbing frame, hang something noisy on it such as a wind chime so that they can find it by themselves. Sandpits and paddling pools have great play value as well if you have the room. Introduce these things slowly and supervise closely.

Gardens and parks can be magical places but can also be dangerous:

- Make sure the fence is secure so they can't wander out and that the fence itself is safe.
- Make sure the garden gate is securely fastened.
- If you have a pond in the garden, cover it over so they can't fall in.
- Watch out for wires, hose pipes, poisonous berries, cat mess, slug pellets, stinging nettles and thorns.
- If you use garden canes, cover the tops so your child can't hurt themselves if they fall.

Car rides

Car rides are often helpful in soothing a fretful baby, but as they get older, your baby may become bored and frustrated strapped in a car seat. Keep them entertained by talking or singing to them. Explain the sounds they can hear, or play music or a story, and give them some favourite toys to play with. For long journeys, a new toy or activity centre attached to the car seat might help keep them happy and interested for some of the time.

Meeting others

Many parents or carers find it helpful to talk to others when they find out their child has a vision impairment and to meet other families who have a child with a vision impairment. Some choose to contact or join a parent carer support group. Some are organised by **local authority vision impairment services** and others are run by parents or sight loss charities. Your local Action for Blind People children and families co-ordinator can tell you about parent-led support groups in your area.

Action for Blind People also run residential weekends where you can meet other families with a child or parent carer who has a visual impairment, take part in activities and listen to talks about supporting people with a vision impairment.

Parents groups vary enormously in size and how active they are. Some cover only part of a city, while others bring together parents carers from across a whole county. Some parents carers keep in touch by phone or email and meet informally in between group meetings.

Group meetings give parents an opportunity to:

- Share experiences and emotions
- Learn from each other and meet other people who understand what it's like to bring up a child with a vision impairment
- Meet older children with a vision impairment
- Listen to guest speakers
- Attend social events which involve all the members of the family

You may want to look at general parents carer support websites, such as Mumsnet: www.mumsnet.com or Netmums: www.netmums.com as these often include active conversations relating to children and young people with a vision impairment.

If you are a parent carer of a child with vision impairment, or a blind or partially sighted parent, you may like to visit **Parents' Place**, at: www.nib.org.uk/parents. This site contains information about how to connect to information, advice and social networking groups with other parents carers

of children with a vision impairment. You can find more information on support groups in the [Who can help](#) section in Part 1 – see www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources.

When you're out it can be difficult when a total stranger asks you questions in front of your child about your child's eyes and what they can see. Shopping with a young child can be stressful enough without such questions. However, it happens, and it's difficult to avoid other people's curiosity or well-meant interest. Eventually you become used to it.

Many parents carers find it helps if you prepare your own matter of fact answer, making it less likely that you get upset. Your answer can reinforce the positive attitudes you want your child to have. Brothers and sisters often become very good at explaining what their sibling can or can't do. Eventually most children learn to answer for themselves. Encourage people to talk directly to your child and support your child so that they learn to answer politely and appropriately.

Choosing an early years setting

Starting at a childminders, nursery, school or playgroup is a big step, so contact your Local Authority **qualified teacher of visually impaired children (QTVI)** to discuss the choices and help available. If a QTVI is already supporting you with your child's learning at home, they usually continue to support your child as they make the transition into early years settings. They can help you make choices and help staff at the setting to understand your child's needs. They also directly support some children at playgroup or nursery and at school.

Children with vision impairment may benefit from starting playgroup or nursery on a part-time basis a bit earlier than other children. Most go to local mainstream nurseries or playgroups, but some special schools also have nursery classes.

Early years settings offer young children with a vision impairment the opportunity to:

- Broaden their experience
- Engage with the Early Years Foundation Stage to assist them in playful learning and their development
- Learn to play with other children
- Get used to moving about confidently in different and larger environments
- Play with more and bigger toys than can be provided at home
- Increase in confidence both indoors and out-of-doors

All these skills are valuable in their own right for children who are in their early years and it can help them make a better start at school later on. It's never too early to begin finding out what educational opportunities are available in your area.

Going to an early years setting for the first time

This is an important stage for you and your child. Children are primed to stay close to their parents carers so it's no surprise if, from the age of around eight months to three years, or older, children protest when you leave.

Visiting a new childminder, playgroup or nursery before you first leave your child there is essential. It allows them to become familiar with the new surroundings and to get to know the children and adults there. This may take longer for a child with vision impairment. How quickly you can leave depends on your child. If they settle in gradually but without tears, they're likely to have more confidence later on, when they start school.

Try to stay calm and positive and always talk about the setting in an encouraging way. If you smile and talk in a relaxed way when you chat with the staff, your child will pick up cues that it's fine to stay. If you show you're anxious, your child may pick this up too and become more fearful.

Check whether the setting operates a 'key person' system. This is where one person takes particular care of your child and forms a special relationship with them so they can build confidence and trust in the setting over time. The setting might also have an equality named co-ordinator (ENCO) on the team, whose role is to support inclusion and to promote equality for every child. The ENCO, working alongside the SENCO can aid your child's transition into the early years setting and support your child's equalities needs.

In addition, try to help your child become more confident about:

- Learning practical everyday tasks, like dressing, eating and using the toilet
- Talking to new adults, for example, when paying in a shop, so that they learn to ask adults for help
- Taking some responsibility for tidying toys, watering plants or feeding a pet

When you start leaving your child, slowly build up the amount of time you are

away. Try not to play alongside your child, or they may think you'll always be there. Aim, little by little, to distance yourself from your child – for example, by wandering to the edge of the room and talking to another adult so that your child can hear your voice and knows you're still there, but busy. Start by telling your child that you're going away for a couple of minutes and then return. If your child's happy with that, gradually increase the time you're away. Aim to build up a 'goodbye' routine so that your child knows you're going, but is confident that you will always come back.

One way of helping your child feel more at home in a new setting is to turn one area into a quiet corner. Create this with furniture and add a removable entrance. It could enclose your child's favourite toys. Your child might like to explore and feel secure in this area first. Then the area they play in can gradually be expanded. Other children can be invited to visit in ones or twos. As your child gradually wants to venture further into the play areas, your child's key person can respond by helping them to learn key routes and introduce them to all the activities that are on offer.

Playing with other children

All children play alone or alongside each other at first and it takes time for them to be ready to mix with others and interact when they play. While a fully sighted child can quickly scan a room and see all the possibilities for play available to them, including other children, a child who has a vision impairment may only be aware of what is immediately within reach. Being able to move and being told what is on offer that day gives a child more choices about what to do. It takes time and reassurance to encourage them to include others in their play. If they join in with a small number of other children early on, they will soon be less reluctant to mix.

In general, children with impaired vision need more help to understand social conventions and to learn to use appropriate body language. Being with other children helps as it gives them lots of opportunities to experience how other children behave and to experience reactions to their own behaviour.

Encouraging positive behaviour

Learning to share, searching for independence and dealing with change are important parts of every early years child's development and it's important to have the same expectations about behaviour that you would of other children

of the same age. However, when a child has other learning difficulties in addition to a vision impairment, be aware that unacceptable behaviour may be a signal that they do not feel well or feel frustrated that they can't communicate something. Trust your judgement.

It sometimes helps if other children can share books about vision impairment. You can find suggestions in the sight section at: www.healthybooks.org.uk Alternatively you can view the Early Support resource on [Behaviour](#) – see www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources.

Setting boundaries

Building up a child's self-esteem and making them more secure involves establishing some ground rules to let them know what you expect of them and what responses they can expect from you.

Establishing ground rules:

- Be consistent about behaviour. If you let them get away with something one day and not the next, they won't know whether it's right or wrong.
- If you say no all the time, your child will switch off and not take any notice of you. Say no to the things that really matter. And if you say 'no' mean it and carry it through – otherwise they learn that if they make a fuss you will change your mind.
- Take every opportunity to tell them they have done something well and that you are pleased. Praise and positive reinforcement are the best ways to let a child know that you value what they've done and encourage good behaviour.
- Encourage other adults to behave towards your child in the same way as they would to any other. Your child is a child who happens to be blind or have partial sight, not a blind child or a partially sighted child. Positive attitudes and high expectations really affect your child's view of their own abilities and their self-confidence.

Establishing routines

It's important to establish clear routines so that children know what to expect. Routine helps young children feel secure, and it's very important for children who can't see, because it can be more difficult for them to anticipate what's

going to happen next.

Routines can be built around taking children to nursery, mealtimes, and personal care. Doing things in the same order, day after day, helps children predict what will happen next and begin to understand more about the world. There will be occasions when normal routine is disrupted. Explain this to your child to help them understand and deal with change.

Choosing a school

It's important to discuss options with your visiting teacher (QTVI). You should be offered information on the schools in your area. This may be the local school, a mainstream school that has a specific resource for children with a vision impairment, or a special school, including schools specifically for children with a vision impairment.

Your local school should make provision for your child, but may not have a specific resource for children with vision impairment. The RNIB website lists some of the mainstream schools in the UK that have specific resources for blind and partially sighted children.

Find out more information here:

www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/livinglearning/specialschoolscolleges/Pages/special_schools_colleges.aspx

Most blind and partially sighted children are educated in mainstream schools, but some attend special schools for children with a vision impairment or schools for children with additional learning needs. RNIB has details of schools and colleges that are specifically for blind and partially sighted children, including those with additional needs, or have facilities for them.

Find out more information on choosing a school here:

www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/livinglearning/schooloptions and www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/livinglearning/complexneeds

The Early Years Foundation Stage

Children in all early years settings in England follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This became compulsory in September 2008 for all early years settings that have to register with Ofsted – The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, which inspects and regulates care and education for children and young people in England. The Department for Education revised the EYFS in 2012. The new framework sets out seven areas of learning and development that must shape educational programmes in early years settings. All areas of learning and development are important and inter-connected.

Find out more information here: www.rnib.org.uk/teachingearlyyears and download the RNIB Focus on foundation booklet.

Learning to read

Young children can be introduced to the pleasure of listening to rhymes and stories from an early age, including stories about their own experiences. This is often their first introduction to books. Children look at pictures and recognise people and objects that they experience in everyday life, or are introduced to other real-life or fantasy experiences. They begin to enjoy imaginary play where toys and objects represent real-life experiences. They begin to use crayons and pens for early drawing. Young children play at reading and writing before they begin to learn more formally. They also begin to pay attention to the sounds or 'phonic' elements that make up individual words that they hear spoken, especially in rhyming games.

These are all emerging skills that are needed for literacy to develop. They demonstrate a child's ability to link meaning to abstract symbols. Vision usually plays a key role in these early developments, but other sensory channels can be used to provide alternative opportunities if a planned approach is used. You can help your child with all of these experiences.

It's never too early to introduce your baby to books. Babies enjoy the closeness of being read to, well before they understand the words that are being said. Babies with vision impairment are attracted to clear, simple images such as faces and bold black and white patterns like stripes and chequered squares. They are also likely to be attracted by movement. Some board and cloth books open out into a frieze of high-contrast pictures which you can prop up for your baby to look at.

When your baby has developed some control over their hands, let them turn the pages as you share a book together. Babies will want to feel the pages, so books with textured pictures, crinkly pages or flaps to lift up are fun. Young children enjoy noisy and squeaky books too. Soft plastic books are fun to splash about with in the bath. You can adapt books and make your own with objects that have particular meaning for your child.

Let your child discover the things that you read and explain what they are – newspapers, recipes, catalogues, takeaway menus and junk mail, as well as books.

Booktrust is the national charity concerned with books and reading for pleasure. The organisation is probably best known for **Bookstart** which offers parents or carers of every baby in the UK a free pack of advice and books. There is a version of the pack called **Booktouch** specifically for children with a vision impairment. Every blind or partially sighted baby is entitled to a free pack, and there is an extra one (featuring an older touch and feel book) for children aged two to four years. The pack is often given out by health visitors or QTVIs who work closely with their local Bookstart scheme to ensure the right numbers of packs are ordered and given out.

Learning to read in print

Children with limited vision may not naturally come across or be able to see and learn about visual symbols, pictures and printed text. They may enjoy stories but not be able to see the details of the pictures or text with sufficient clarity to understand it or make connections with the story.

If your child has some vision, choose books with bright, clear pictures with bold outlines to read with them. Babies are attracted to big, clear illustrations of familiar objects. It's best if the words are in bold print on a plain background, as words printed on top of a picture are harder to see.

Many children with a vision impairment are able to use print, although most need larger or clearer print than is normally found in books. Partially sighted children learn to read in the same way as sighted children, using suitably adapted large print books or magnifiers, or other **low vision aids** prescribed by a low vision clinic to help them see the words more easily. It's important to remember that not all children need spectacles, but you should find out all the options available to make it easier for your child to read print.

You can find some books in large or clear print at your local public library; the

National Blind Children's Society sells a large selection of large print books, and the **RNIB National Library Service** has giant print titles to loan.

RNIB has a good summary of information on books for the classroom:

www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/education/support/resources/resources/Pages/classroom_books.aspx

And books for leisure:

www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/education/support/resources/resources/Pages/leisure_books.aspx

Learning to read in Braille

Some children may learn to read and write in **braille** or **Moon** as an alternative to print. **Braille** is a tactile form of reading made up of raised dots. Reading braille requires the ability to discriminate by touch the patterns that are made by the sets of raised dots which represent letters or words.

There are two grades of braille:

- Uncontracted braille is a straightforward letter for letter translation from print and includes the alphabet, numbers and punctuation marks.
- Contracted braille has shorter signs for combinations of letters and more commonly occurring words. This makes braille documents shorter and quicker to read.

Children learn to write braille using a Perkins Brailler, a braille writing machine with six keys, which make raised dots on special paper. A qualified teacher of visually impaired children will give expert advice about whether a child should learn braille.

Moon is another form of reading by touch, which looks more like print letters, using curves and straight lines. It is easier for some children to read, as it can be enlarged, but there are not as many books available.

Even though it may be far too soon to think about whether your child will learn braille later on, you can borrow books with both print and braille on them to share together. In the same way as we read print to children who are far too young to understand letters and words for themselves, you can let your child feel the braille dots and introduce the idea that braille dots make words that tell you what to say.

Children need a rich literacy environment to prepare them for more formal reading and writing approaches later in school.

You can help your child prepare for reading and writing by:

- Reading to your child
- Involving your child in everyday routines and objects so that they become meaningful to the child

- Responding to your child's early language and communication to help them make sense of their everyday experiences
- Listening to first stories, such as stories about their daily experiences
- Sharing early tactile and sound books with family members
- Labelling books with a tactile marker or braille so that children can pick out their favourite stories
- Using story sacks or 'bag books' in place of pictures to add to the pleasure of sharing books and encourage children's involvement in understanding and predicting stories
- Labelling everyday objects or features at home with braille, such as a symbol, initial letter or braille name on room doors, such as 'Jane' on Jane's bedroom
- Labelling print books with braille tape/film

Before beginning to use braille, children need to develop touch discrimination and a range of hand skills so that they can use their fingers to discriminate and read braille symbols through touch and use a braille machine to write. These finger skills usually develop through touching, striking, twisting, picking up, carrying, pointing and playing with everyday objects that they come across. Finger strengthening activities can be included in everyday experiences and play so that they are motivating and meaningful for your child. If your child has any difficulties with using their hands or is reluctant to do so, talk to a **qualified teacher of visually impaired children** about the best ways to help.

Below are lots of ideas for activities to encourage early touch skills.

Grasping with whole hand or palm:

- Squeezing toys
- Squeezing clay/dough/plasticine
- Taking objects out of containers
- Drawing

- Using pastry/cookie cutters

Grasping with finger and thumb:

- Stringing beads
- Holding paper for cutting
- Using crayon/pencil/paintbrush/glue sticks
- Pinching clay/dough/plasticine
- Turning pages of book
- Sorting small objects like paper clips and buttons
- Using buttons, zips and poppers (press studs)
- Turning knobs on a wind-up toy

Releasing from grasp:

- Giving an object on request
- Stacking activities
- Sorting activities
- Placing objects in containers
- Putting shapes in a shape sorter
- Putting coins in money box slot
- Putting pegs in pegboards

Rotary (turning) motion (wrist/elbow movement only):

- Assembling nut and bolts
- Turning volume knobs on radio, TV, etc
- Manipulating screw top lids on jars
- Mixing food in a bowl
- Scooping sand, gravel, dried peas/beans

- Finding things in gravel, sand, dried peas/beans
- Turning keys in locks
- Pouring from one container to another

Using fingers individually:

- Making finger prints in clay/dough or plasticine
- Pushing buttons on a cause-effect toy, CD or music player or electronic learning toy to get different responses
- Playing musical keyboards
- Turning dial on traditional toy phone
- Tracing around stencil with finger

Encouraging light/sensitive touch:

- Handling soft or fragile objects without crushing, e.g. cotton wool balls or dried flowers
- Tickling others gently
- Stroking a pet
- Moving counters over a slippery surface

Encouraging tactile discrimination:

- Identifying clothing by texture
- Using feely bags
- Playing 'What is it?' games using touch alone
- Finding objects in sand barrel or similar
- Sorting socks by texture and size
- Sorting shapes such as building blocks or pasta
- Sorting small objects, e.g. buttons, beads or grains of rice (short and long grain)

Developing hand and finger strength:

- Crumpling pieces of paper (e.g. newspaper or brown paper)
- Stretching rubber bands
- Manipulating dough/clay
- Squeezing bottles (glue, bubble bath)
- Using a small stapler with one hand
- Using a stapler placed on table
- Using a rolling pin
- Using a hole punch
- Assembling and dismantling linking construction toys
- Squeezing a sponge or wringing water out of a cloth
- Flattening a ball of clay/dough with hands/fist

Using both hands:

- Stringing beads
- Pulling tape off a roll
- Tearing paper
- Twisting lids off and on
- Tearing or cutting paper
- Holding container with one hand while putting object in and out with the other
- Pushing together and pulling apart pop toys
- Kneading bread dough
- Rolling dough/clay into balls and sausage shapes
- Rubbing in flour and fat when making pastry
- Stabilising bowl with one hand whilst stirring with the other

Developing finger position:

- Curve fingers over edge of a ruler or pencil
- Gripping rungs of ladder/climbing frame
- Name and identify the job of each finger, e.g. 'Peter Pointer'

Developing tracking:

- Trace along a line of string, dowelling, and so on
- Track along a line of thread, wool, pipe cleaner or straw
- Follow a line of holes or stitches

The following organisations have materials to help you support your child in these early touch skills. You can find contact details in the [Useful organisations and websites](#) section in [Part 1](#) – see www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources.

- The [Royal National Institute of Blind People](#) has information about braille reading schemes and distance learning courses designed for parents and support workers wanting to learn braille to support their children. Check out the summary of information on books for the classroom: www.nib.org.uk/professionals/education/support/resources/resources/Pages/classroom_books.aspx and books for leisure: www.nib.org.uk/professionals/education/support/resources/resources/Pages/leisure_books.aspx.
- The [ClearVision](#) lending library has an extensive collection of mainstream picture books with added text in braille or Moon. These include a number of two-way books that combine print and pictures with braille, which blind and sighted children or adults can read together.
- The [RNIB National Library Service](#) also has braille children's books for older readers.
- The [Living Paintings Trust](#) offers a free library of children's picture books called [Feel Happy](#).

- **Booktouch** is part of Bookstart which aims to get babies and toddlers who are blind or partially sighted introduced to books and provides a free pack for parents carers.
- **Bag Books** have a selection of multi-sensory story packs to buy.

Stories in other formats

Many children's stories, poems, songs and rhymes are available through toyshops and bookshops. Your local public library should have a range of audio books. Charity shops are a good source of children's CDs to buy. **Calibre Audio Library** is a lending library of audio books and has a collection of stories for children. The **RNIB National Library Service** also has a postal library service that offers a range of children's audio books.

For more information about visual impairment there are three more resources in this series:

- [Visual impairment: Part 1 - General Information](#)
- [Visual impairment: Part 3 - School Years](#)
- [Visual impairment: Part 4 - Into Adulthood](#)

All resources are available to download at: www.ncb.org.uk/early-support/resources

Early Support

for children, young people and families

www.ncb.org.uk/earlysupport

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supporting blind and
partially sighted people

Early Years Equality

removing racism • defying discrimination

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