

# Visual impairment

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Children's Therapy Services [Patient information](#)

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## Information for early years and children with additional needs

### What is a visual impairment?

The term 'visual impairment' describes any non-correctable problem with vision (sight), which can range from complete absence of vision to conditions such as low vision, blurred vision, absence of side vision, or not being able to see certain colours.

Many children with visual impairments have them from birth, although they can happen later following illness or injury, or because of a medical condition. Most impairments will affect the child throughout their life.

### What causes visual impairments?

Causes of visual impairments include:

- structural defects of the eye such as anophthalmia or microphthalmia
- genetic conditions such as albinism
- conditions such as paediatric glaucoma or cataracts
- infections from some viruses during pregnancy
- damage to the parts of the brain that process vision, this is known as cortical or cerebral visual impairment and is one of the most common causes of visual impairment in children, but often goes unrecognised.

### Signs of visual impairment in babies and children

It may not always be obvious from the appearance of a child's eyes that they have a visual impairment. Signs that a baby may have a problem with vision include trouble focusing on familiar faces or objects held in front of them after about eight weeks of age, baby's eyes jerk or move quickly from side to side, baby shows extreme sensitivity to light, or their eyes don't react to bright light, and if their pupils appear cloudy or pale rather than black.

Older children may rub their eyes a lot, hold things close to their face, turn or tilt their head when looking at things, report feeling tired after tasks that require looking at things closely, find it hard to focus or to see objects at a distance, seem to see better during the day than at night, or seem to be clumsy.

# The effects of visual impairment on child development

Vision plays a critical role in a child's development. Sight gives us information to help us interpret and understand the world around us. Even before a child can reach with their hands, sit, or crawl to explore the environment, their eyes provide information and stimulation important to help them learn.

Problems with vision may affect many areas of a child's development. For example, they may have difficulties in the areas of:

- communication. Your child may not be able to make eye contact or may not see someone waving, smiling, or interacting with them.
- speech development. Your child might not explore and interact with objects in the environment so people might not name things for them, meaning that learning the names of objects and developing speech may be delayed.
- interacting and socialising with others. Your child might not be able to read non-verbal gestures and cues, may not follow a game, may be clumsy, or have trouble making friends.
- sitting, crawling, and walking. Your child may not be motivated to move around because they cannot see any toys and interesting objects available to them.
- playing. Your child might be nervous to explore the environment and feel afraid of unknown areas or unusual textures they can't see.
- learning to read and write.

If your child has a visual impairment, you might notice their learning is slower than other children's. Your child's abilities will continue to develop with time, but it is important they have the support they need to learn new skills.

## Ideas and tips for supporting your child's early development

It's important to think of all the other ways that a baby can experience and learn about their environment using their other senses.

- Regular routines can help so they can start to understand what is happening next. Try to include sensory clues which can help them to have fun and recognise the routine such as songs at bath time, smelling bubbles and shampoo, experiencing different skin sensations, and labelling parts of the body. At bedtime, familiar textures such as soft blankets, reading stories with lots of repetition, and using calming music can signal to baby the transition to nighttime and help them settle down.
- Infant massage can support a baby to develop their tactile responses and body awareness. It can also help to build a bond between you and your child.
- Talk to them and explain routines and plans. It might be helpful to give them an object to feel and hold to represent different places that you go, like a ball when going to the park or a specific toy when going to visit grandparents, to help them make links and understand what's happening.
- Using objects or textured cards can help your child to make choices. You could make touch cards to represent different songs and rhymes, like a coil of string for 'round and round the garden' or cotton wool for 'baa baa black sheep'.
- Give your child plenty of tactile experiences and encourage them to explore touch, smell and sound. You could make a 'treasure box' with interesting tactile fabrics which could include a chiffon scarf, foil blankets, silky or bumpy materials, and toys. Any object which feels interesting and has compartments, holes, or different textures can be a toy. This could be brushes, shower puffs, or wrapped containers with something inside.

- Remember that it's ok for them to explore in different ways with their hands, feet, and mouth. Encourage experimenting with waving, shaking toys, banging things together; dropping things, and putting things inside another. This can help them to become more confident at handling and exploring unfamiliar objects and textures.
- Make sure your child is positioned and supported well to be able to explore things around them.
- Often children with reduced vision will have difficulty with visual complexity. Busy pictures or spaces can be too challenging. Your child may respond best to pictures that are simple with marked contrasts, and spaces clear of clutter and visual distractions.
- Moving a toy around can help your child to see it. You could also try using a black background and putting a bright, shiny object on it.
- Think about the light source in the room as it may be easier for your child to focus on an object if the light comes from behind. You could try darkening the room and shining a torch on the object. However, observe your child in different situations and try to work out what they like. Some children will find glare from light uncomfortable and need subdued lighting.
- For some children using toys of one highly saturated colour can help them when introducing new things. Watch for your child showing a preference to a certain colour. This can be especially common with children with a cerebral visual impairment (CVI). You might notice they prefer looking at a certain colour. You can then use objects of this colour to help them with routines throughout the day. This could be a red bowl at mealtimes, adding a red ribbon to their bottle, or putting a red object on their changing mat, car seat, or bed.
- Children with cerebral visual impairment may also need time to react to things presented visually. Be patient and encouraging. Watch for if your child responds more to objects that are placed in a certain area of vision.
- Use simple and descriptive language during play, with noises and songs to engage your child. If a toy rolls out of reach, encourage or help your child to move to the toy rather than handing the toy back to them.

## Ideas for toys to support your child's play and development

### Early exploring

- Toys that light up or glow may attract their attention.
- Babies may enjoy shiny and reflective moving toys such as pinwheels.
- Sesame Street toys or other single saturated-colour teddies can be useful for children that show a preference to one colour.
- Wrist and foot finder rattles to encourage movement before they can sit up.
- Textured balls to encourage them to explore shapes and textures.
- Toys with different sensory features may encourage your child to explore. Lights and colours on the toy are a good contrast against the white background.

## Early learning

- Cause and effect toys
- Slinky toys can be an engaging way to learn about shape and movement
- Single colour toys will provide better contrast
- Chunky shape stacker puzzle with pegs and holes
- Musical light-up shape sorters
- Sorting toys will help your child to develop awareness of shape and encourage hand skills and manual dexterity.

## Early books

Try books that are visually simple with highly saturated colours and contrast.

The Living Paintings postal library is provided free of charge to blind and partially sighted people in the UK. <https://livingpaintings.org/our-library/about-our-library>

## Toys and activities using lights

You can get light up or flashing balls, tambourines, and building blocks.

If your child finds it easier to focus on objects with lights, a light panel can be a really engaging way to explore light, colours, and textures. A perspex tray can be placed on top to allow for illuminated messy play. As your child develops they can also practise in handwriting and grasp based activities using the light panel.

## Important considerations:

- The toys featured in this information sheet are suggestions, to give an idea of the kind of things that might help support children with learning through play. However, every child is different with unique strengths and areas of need. A trial-and-error approach is recommended to find out what your child enjoys and responds to best.
- It will help your child to have an enthusiastic play partner. Try to engage in their play, have fun exploring together, and support them rather than doing things for them.
- Bear in mind that many toys are visual representations of objects, but otherwise have little resemblance to real objects for children who rely mostly on touch, smell, or sound. Plastic food and plastic animals, for example, do not teach children a lot about the things that they represent, besides the visual appearance. Considering a multi-sensory approach can help your child to learn about the world around them.

There are more suggestions about this in the very useful Play Guide by the Royal National Institute of Blind People, to which a link is provided below.

## Websites providing further information and support

- The RNIB have an excellent range of resources for parents including a play guide to support development and with suggestions for toys as well as information on choosing a nursery or school and accessing financial or emotional support.

[www.rnib.org.uk/advice/children-young-people-education](http://www.rnib.org.uk/advice/children-young-people-education)

- RNIB also offer many services which may be useful as your child grows up, such as the newsagent supplying newspapers and magazines in an accessible format, and the talking books service.
- The Sight Advice FAQ website aims to provide a single point of information for people seeking information about support for partially sighted and blind people.

[www.sightadvicefaq.org.uk/children-young-people-families](http://www.sightadvicefaq.org.uk/children-young-people-families)

- Victa parent portal, supporting families of children who are visually impaired:

[www.victaparents.org.uk](http://www.victaparents.org.uk)

- Dorset Blind Association <https://dorsetblind.org.uk/>

- Dorset library services for visually impaired people

[www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/libraries-history-culture/libraries/find-your-local-library/library-services-for-visually-impaired-people.aspx](http://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/libraries-history-culture/libraries/find-your-local-library/library-services-for-visually-impaired-people.aspx)

- There are many blogs written by parents providing really useful ideas and information from their own experiences, for example <https://littlebearses.org> for children with cortical visual impairment, and also blogs by young people who have grown up with a visual impairment. Some suggestions are here: <https://welleyenever.com/blogs-sight>

## Contact details

### Children's therapy services

Telephone number: **0300 019 2936**

Opening times: 8am - 4.30pm

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