

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

■ Definition of Visual Impairment under IDEA

Visual Impairment including blindness means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness. 34 CFR 300.8(c)(13)

TYPES

The terms partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, and totally blind are used in the educational context to describe students with visual impairments. They are defined as follows:

- "Partially sighted" indicates some type of visual problem has resulted in a need for special education;
- "Low vision" generally refers to a severe visual impairment, not necessarily limited to distance vision. Low vision applies to all individuals with sight who are unable to read the newspaper at a normal viewing distance, even with the aid of eyeglasses or contact lenses. They use a combination of vision and other senses to learn, although they may require adaptations in lighting or the size of print, and, sometimes, braille;
- "Legally blind" indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye or a very limited field of vision (20 degrees at its widest point); and
- Totally blind students learn via braille or other non-visual media.

Visual impairment is the consequence of a functional loss of vision, rather than the eye disorder itself. Eye disorders which can lead to visual impairments can include retinal degeneration, albinism, cataracts, glaucoma, muscular problems that result in visual disturbances, corneal disorders, diabetic retinopathy, congenital disorders, and infection.

INCIDENCE

About one in 1,000 school-aged children has a visual impairment. Most children who are visually impaired have low vision, meaning they use vision for learning along with some tactile and auditory adaptations. About 10 percent of children with visual impairments are blind; they have insufficient vision to help them learn, and their education depends on tactile and auditory methods.

POSSIBLE CAUSES

There are many possible defects or diseases of the visual system, but, many of them appear after the first few years of life. There are still many malformations, defects, diseases, infections, and disorders that can affect the visual system in infants and toddlers. It is not the purpose of this document to describe them all, or even to list them, as it is presumed that medical follow-up to screening will identify and prescribe treatment. The following selected terms include only a few of the many visual disorders found in young children.

- Cataracts
- Glaucoma
- Cortical Visual Impairments
- Infections
- Malformations
- Ocular Trauma
- Optic Nerve Defects
- Retinoblastoma

POSSIBLE SIGNS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The effect of visual problems on a child's development depends on the severity, type of loss, age at which the condition appears, and overall functioning level of the child. Many children who have multiple disabilities may also have visual impairments resulting in motor, cognitive, and/or social developmental delays.

A young child with visual impairments has little reason to explore interesting objects in the environment and, thus, may miss opportunities to have experiences and to learn. This lack of exploration may continue until learning becomes motivating or until intervention begins.

Because the child cannot see parents or peers, he or she may be unable to imitate social behavior or understand nonverbal cues. Visual handicaps can create obstacles to a growing child's independence.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Children with visual impairments should be assessed early to benefit from early intervention programs, when applicable. Technology in the form of computers and low-vision optical and video aids enable many partially sighted, low vision and blind children to participate in regular class activities. The law also requires that schools provide accessible instructional materials to all students who need them—this can include large print materials, books on tape/CD, and braille books.

TEACHING TIPS/INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Whatever the degree of impairment, students who are visually impaired should be expected to participate fully in classroom activities. Although they may confront limitations, with proper planning and adaptive equipment their participation can be maximized.

The Classroom

- Reserve a seat in the front row
- Have room for seeing eye dog
- Keep isles clear and drawers and cabinets closed

The Teacher

- Face the class while speaking
- Permit lectures to be taped
- Provide large print versions of classroom materials
- Be flexible with assignment deadlines
- Consider alternative assignments
- Consider alternative measures of assessing achievements
- Translate material to Braille and adaptive electronic media
- Be specific with directions
- Provide "hands-on" learning experiences
- Use real objects so the student can experience them by touch
- Supply students with tactile diagrams and graphs (by outlining them with liquid glue)
- Use appropriate scale when possible
- Ask the student if they have any suggestions
- Keep communications open

The Rest of the Class

- Instruct others to yield the right of way
- Instruct students to help when asked
- Instruct students to ask if help is needed
- Instruct students not to harass seeing eye dog

THIS INFORMATION DEVELOPED FROM THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

- **Teaching Students with Visual Impairments, Dawn Kuna**
www.cedu.niu.edu/~shumow/itt/VisualImpairment.pdf
- **American Foundation for the Blind**
www.afb.org/section.asp?Documentid=1374
- **Science Instruction for Students with Visual Impairments, ERIC Digest Kumar, Ramasamy, Stefanich, 2001**
www.ericdigests.org/2003-1/visual2.htm
- **Teens Health**
www.kidshealth.org
- **National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities**
www.nichcy.org/pubs/factshe/fs13txt.htm
- **Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired**
www.tsbvi.edu
- **Council for Exceptional children**
www.cec.sped.org
- **Oklahoma School for the Blind**
www.osb.k12.ok.us