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ABSTRACT

Certain play situations are very difficult for young visually impaired children. This booklet focuses on three areas of play: exploring toys and materials, making transitions from one activity to another, and playing with other children. Through anecdotal descriptions of common situations encountered by caregivers, the booklet discusses why these areas of play sometimes pose problems for blind children and shares suggestions for resolving them. (JDD)

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LEARNING TO PLAY

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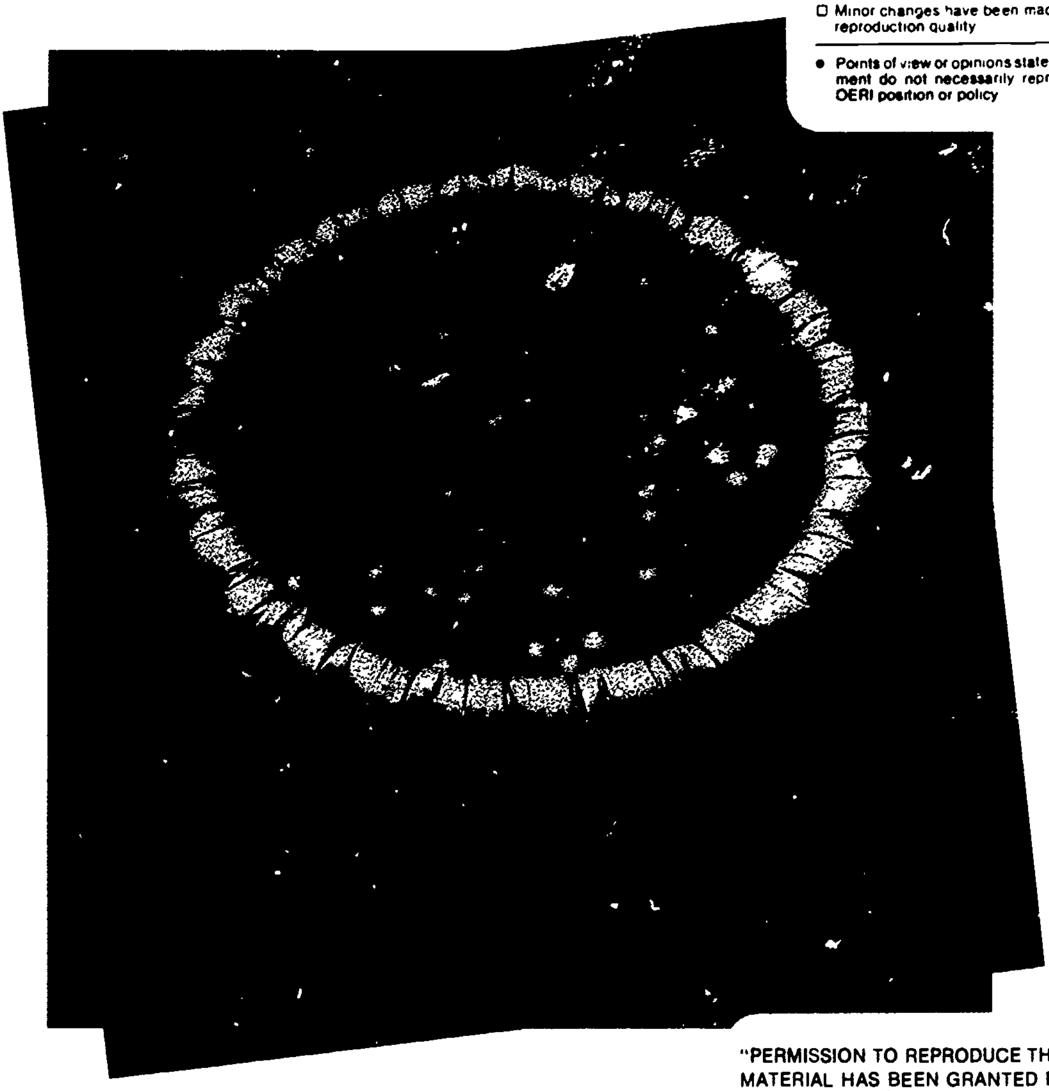

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Common Concerns for the Visually Impaired Preschool Child

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INTRODUCTION

Parents and professionals agree that play is an important and necessary part of children's development. Through play, children have the opportunity to learn and practice new skills at their own pace. ◆ Different factors influence the way a child plays, such as his individual temperament, his activity level, and the kinds of toys and games he likes best Over time, each child develops his own style of playing. There is no one "right" way to play—the important thing is that children enjoy doing it. ○ For most children, play seems to come naturally; it doesn't need to be taught. Sighted children learn by watching and imitating what others are doing. They learn how to relate to objects and people through their many opportunities for what we call "incidental learning," or learning how things are done simply because they can see them happening in the course of their daily activities. ▬ Visually impaired children don't have the same opportunities for incidental learning, nor do they have the ability to readily imitate the behavior of others. They often need more time and extra help to learn what to do with toys and how to interact with people. ◆ We have found that certain play situations seem to be especially difficult for children who do not see. In this booklet we will focus on three areas: exploring toys and materials, making transitions from one activity to another, and playing with other children. We will discuss why these areas sometimes pose problems for blind children and we will share some of the suggestions we've gathered over the years from parents and professionals

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EXPLORING TOYS AND MATERIALS

Eddie sat on his blanket surrounded by a variety of colorful infant toys, chewing on his leather shoe Each morning his babysitter was careful to provide different toys for him She had learned how important it was to make sure that blind children had something to do with their hands so they wouldn't get bored Eddie's babysitter knew that most 12 month-old babies were very interested in exploring different toys But no matter how interesting she tried to make the toys for Eddie, he invariably ended up chomping on that old leather baby shoe She was beginning to feel like it wasn't worth the time to try to give Eddie special toys when all he cared to do was suck on his shoe anyway Why not just give him the shoe and be done with it?

Like many visually impaired infants, particularly those who are totally blind, Eddie has found a favorite thing to explore and is "stuck" on it Though his shoe may not seem like an appropriate plaything to his babysitter, the shoe does have some very appealing qualities for him: it starts out on his foot and he always knows where to find it, it is made of leather, and has a texture, taste and smell of its own, different from most plastic infant toys, it may have little eyelets made of metal and cloth shoelaces which can be chewed and pulled on it has an outside and an inside part, which nicely accommodates his hand or fingers These may be some reasons why Eddie is so interested in his shoe But what really concerns his babysitter is Eddie's disinterest in everything else

Eddie's lack of interest in different toys is common for many blind babies Designed to be visually enticing or to help coordinate movements between the hand and the eye, most infant toys have little meaning or appeal for blind children. Parents have told us that their visually impaired children often prefer exploring household objects, particularly those made of wood or metal To a young child, the taste and feel of an object and the fun noises it can make, are much more important than its actual use

Even the most appealing objects may not motivate a visually impaired baby to reach out and explore as a sighted child would Blind babies often don't begin new activities on their own, which makes it hard for their parents to know when they are becoming bored with an old routine or if they are ready to play with other toys We have found that most blind babies must be given extra time and help to discover what and where their toys are and what they can do with them

When your visually impaired baby is first learning to bat at objects, help him to stay in touch with his toys by fastening them to his crib or hanging them overhead, within his reach Allow him time to discover and rediscover the same toys in the same places so that his play environment becomes more predictable. Let your baby hold and touch a rattle or bell before you try to entice him to reach for it, so that he knows what it is that's making the sound

Infants play for a longer time and with greater interest when adults give them feedback about their play activities For a blind child this becomes especially important because he cannot see the toys available to him or the

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effect that his actions have on them. Take some time each day to sit with your child as he plays, talking with him about what he's doing. "You've found those keys again, Michael. Don't they feel cold against your cheek? You like to taste them too. Oh, such cold, hard keys in your mouth!" You can also help your child to make connections between one toy and another, and to move from one activity to another. "Those keys are made of cold, hard metal just like your little metal cup. Let's find that cup."

It's important to remember that your blind child cannot really understand how a toy works without being shown in a way that makes sense to him. At first, you can take his hand in yours, helping him to reach out and explore the toy. Describe the toy as he feels it, and explain how it works. "When you turn that handle on the jack-in-the-box, Joey, a clown will pop out at the top. Let's find the place where he pops out from." It may take a while for your child to discover his own enjoyable ways of playing with toys, which may not always be exactly what you had in mind. Over time, you will get used to this different way of playing, too!

Two year-old Laura sat at the table ignoring the ball of playdough in front of her. Her mother, feeling a little embarrassed that Laura seemed to be the only one in the group who completely refused to touch it, was trying her best to imitate all the techniques the teacher had shown her to encourage Laura's involvement. "Ooh, I love squishing my finger into this big glob of dough," she said. "It feels so soft and sticky, kind of like peanut butter. Let's make a ball... here it comes, rolling over to you, Laura." As soon as the ball made contact with the edge of Laura's finger, she flung up her arms, knocking the playdough to the floor and began banging her head on the table. Her mother scooped her up out of her chair, apologetically telling the others in the group that Laura had a cold and had been extra fussy over the last few days. She knew that really wasn't the reason for Laura's behavior. This seemed to happen every time a messy activity was introduced at school. Why was Laura so resistant to this, she wondered, and worse yet, why was it that she couldn't get any of the techniques which worked with the other kids to work for Laura?

Sometimes called "tactile defensiveness," this refusal of Laura's to touch messy textures is not unique to blind children, but does seem to be more common among them. Professionals often concern themselves more with the blind child's resistance to touching materials because in the absence of vision it takes on a new significance. If Laura can't see the playdough, and won't touch it, how will she ever get to know what it is or what she can possibly do with it?

Many young blind children are resistant to touching new or different textures for several reasons. Sometimes a child may associate touch with pain, particularly if she has had frequent hospitalizations or unpleasant medical interventions. Some children seem to be particularly sensitive to tactile stimulation and may be more easily irritated by certain types of textures. Others simply don't like messy activities. Whatever the reason, introducing a resistant blind child to a new texture can be difficult at first. And though a reaction like Laura's might seem unusual, from her 2-year-old point of view she feels perfectly justified in displaying her anger. Just think for a moment how it might feel to bump into a cold gushy lump of mush, or worse yet, to have someone force your hand into one against your will!

We have found that the best way to help blind children get used to touching different textures is to introduce them to a variety of tactile experiences as early as possible Desensitizing a toddler or preschooler who has never liked touching messy things can be difficult, and may take a very long time

If your child is like Laura, you can help her get used to the idea of touching messy activities very slowly You may want to start out with something less threatening than sticky playdough, such as a big bowl of dry cereal Give her the chance to touch it, smell it, and taste it on her own, and to make a mess with it if that will get her involved Once she is able to tolerate this, try something gooier. Don't expect her to jump into an activity like fingerpainting You may have to start by placing just a drop of finger paint on her hand, gradually increasing the amount over time while encouraging her involvement in the process

Laura may need lots of time to get used to this—and she may never really like doing it Sometimes taking away the pressure of expecting her to participate makes a big difference. Once she is able to relax and stop worrying about the messy stuff being on her, she may be able to realize that the other children are having fun and she's missing out on something

Sometimes we become so concerned about what a child won't do that we can lose perspective on how important it really is in the greater scheme of things Whether or not Laura ever in her life touches that playdough is not really going to make a whole lot of difference What does matter, though, is how Laura ultimately feels about using tactile exploration in new situations

MAKING TRANSITIONS FROM ONE ACTIVITY TO ANOTHER

Billy, 18 months has been blind since birth He and his mother have been attending a Mommy and Me class for the last several months with a group of sighted infants and their mothers Music time is Billy's favorite part of the class He knows that it always comes after snack and before recess His mother really enjoys singing the songs and playing the finger-games with him. But each time music comes to an end, Billy falls apart. While the other kids are getting ready to go outside, Billy usually cries and refuses to give up his favorite tambourine His mother feels that it's important that he follows the school routine, but sometimes she wishes she could just let him sing and play the instruments for as long as he wants to Then she wouldn't have to go through this struggle every time

Though most young children have trouble making transitions at one stage or another, for blind children this seems to be particularly difficult At 18 months, Billy probably has a hard time understanding why he has to end music and go on to something else

The other children in Billy's class may enjoy music time as much as he does, but they have the advantage of being able to see what the next activity is, and that everyone else is preparing to do it This added incentive acts as a wonderful distraction, and makes the transition easier From Billy's point of view, this change signals both the end of his favorite activity and an onslaught of confusion Going out to the playground takes so much more work than sitting in his little chair inside. No wonder he doesn't want music

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time to stop. Merely hearing his mother describe the "fun" that lies ahead at recess hardly makes up for ending an enjoyable activity.

Though Billy may never make this transition with enthusiasm, there are some ways to make it easier for him. Preparing him before the transition takes place might help him get used to the idea, even if he doesn't like it. Try to actively involve him in the process so that he feels that he has more control over the situation. During snack say something like "After we eat our crackers we're going to have music time. Then we'll go out to play." Before the last song you might remind him again "After we sing Row, Row, Row Your Boat it'll be time to put on your sweater to go out to play." After the song, it might help if you have his sweater ready, rather than expecting him to go find it when he's already having such a hard time. Again, taking things one step at a time seems to work best.

Some children have an easier time if they can hold onto a transitional object of some kind, like a small toy that goes outside with them each day. Instead of struggling with Billy to take away his tambourine, offer the toy as a replacement to help him prepare to go outdoors. "Here's your car, Billy. We can take that outside with us and play with it like we did last week."

> *Three year-old Melanie was busy playing with her favorite toy when her mother came into the room with her jacket and hat. "Come on, Melanie, time to go pick up your brother at school. We've got to hurry so we won't be late." When she took Melanie's arm to help her on with her jacket, Melanie wrenched it away from her and continued playing. Melanie's mother placed the toy aside and took Melanie onto her lap. Melanie began to tantrum, kicking and screaming "toy, toy." "Oh honey, I know you want your toy, but we really have to go now. You can play with it later when we get home." Melanie continued to tantrum as her mother took her kicking and screaming to the car, wrestled her into her carseat, and sped over to school. By the time they got home Melanie was still crying and her mother felt frustrated and angry. "Why does it always have to be like this?" she asked herself. "Melanie just doesn't seem to understand that things can't always be her way."*

This scene might sound familiar to many parents. Melanie has been going along to pick up her brother after school every day for months, and her mother feels she should be used to it by now. From Melanie's perspective, however, not only is her activity being ended abruptly by someone else, but she is also being forced to do something that she really doesn't want to do.

Blind children tend to be more resistant to change in general than their sighted peers. Change means going from the known to the unknown when you don't have the advantage of seeing the signals that prepare you for what will happen next. Sighted children depend on visual cues to help prepare them for what's to come. Think of all the additional information that would be available to Melanie if she could see. As her mother entered the room, she would see that she had her own jacket on, and perhaps her purse and car keys in hand. She would see that her mother was holding her jacket, a sure sign of preparing to go outdoors. She would probably know from the look on her mother's face that she was in a hurry. Though all of this information eventually came to Melanie through her other senses, she missed out on the advance warning that the sighted child would have had. She didn't

have the same opportunity to prepare herself for what soon would be expected of her

It isn't possible to prepare your child for every transition that she might have to make throughout the day. Sometimes we have to change or stop our activities mid-stream without any advance warning. But when you do have the time, a little preparation can make a big difference in how your child will respond to a change. Just giving Melanie some advance notice by saying, "In ten minutes it will be time to put away your toy and get ready to pick up your brother at school," would be a good place to start. It might also be helpful to give her a small timer that you can set together, and let her be in charge of telling you when it goes off. Then go together to get your jackets so that she is involved in the process of preparing to leave. Melanie might like to have a special toy to bring along, or a tape to listen to in the car. Just as a sighted child might watch the same familiar sights along the way, Melanie will be establishing her own familiar routine for the drive to school.

It might also make it easier for Melanie to leave with you if she is given a stronger sense that she will be able to return to her favorite toy. You might say something like "Let's put your special music box right over here on the table so we're sure to know where to find it when we come home." Then be sure to remind her of where it is after your return, so she'll know that when you tell her she can have it again later, you mean what you say.

Dont be discouraged if your attempts don't seem to be effective at first. It may take some time and practice before you find what works best for you and your particular child. There may be times when you feel you don't have the patience to deal with all this preparation. And there will most definitely be times when your child doesnt either. Over time, it will become easier to tell when she can best respond to this type of direction, and when she may just be too tired or crabby to deal with it. As one mother so aptly put it, "Sometimes we have to just forget about how wed like things to be going, and go take a nap."

PLAYING WITH OTHER CHILDREN

Mrs. Howard was looking forward to seeing her three closest friends and their children. Her 3½ year-old daughter Jenny loved being with the other kids, but sometimes she had a hard time keeping up with them. Mrs. Howard knew that the other children didn't really understand about Jenny's blindness. She couldnt expect them to play differently because of her. The last time they came to visit, Jenny ended up playing quietly with her tape-recorder in the corner, while the other three children played together. After awhile she came to find her mother and kept asking the same questions over and over again just to get her attention. Mrs. Howard wished that for once she could enjoy talking with her friends while her child played happily with the others. But at the same time, she knew that it was hard for Jenny to understand what they were playing, and she wished she could do something to make it easier for her.

We have found that many parents of visually impaired children share Mrs Howard's feelings Though their children may play adequately when they're alone or with an adult, sometimes they shy away from groups of children, or behave in ways that make other children shy away from them

When blind and sighted children play together, they may need extra time to familiarize themselves with each other's style of playing The quick, unpredictable movements of sighted children can be disorienting, perhaps even frightening at times for a blind child It's hard to prepare for unexpected bumps, or to know what they mean Blind children often respond more slowly to new activities, which may cause a sighted child to lose interest Different children play in different ways Some children are able to size up a situation and join in easily Others may have a harder time doing this on their own Exactly how you go about helping your child to play with other children will depend on her particular needs and your individual style of interacting with her.

Your child and her sighted playmates can all benefit from your support A simple statement like, "I always tell Mary when I'm going to throw her the ball because she can't see that it's coming," can give both children a framework for playing together It lets your child know that she doesn't have to worry about the ball coming at her out of nowhere, and it cues her sighted friend to use words to describe what he's about to do before he does it Saying something like, "It's okay if Mary just listens now Maybe she'll join in a little later," can help a sighted child understand that your child may not respond to him the way that other sighted children do at first

When your child has successful experiences playing with other children, she'll be more motivated to do it again. Extra input from you can help to make the play situation less threatening. Keep the first play experiences short; set up situations with just one other child, and be available to "interpret" for both children until they become more comfortable on their own In these ways, you can help to make your child's interactions easier

Mr and Mrs Blackburn were delighted that their son Jeremy had been invited to his friend Tommy's fourth birthday party Jeremy, blind since birth, hadn't had too many opportunities to be with sighted children Since he was an infant he'd been attending classes at the preschool for the blind, where he seemed to enjoy playing with the other children But there weren't many children his age in the neighborhood, until Tommy moved in across the street several months ago The Blackburns had really tried hard to get the boys together for short periods of time when Mr or Mrs Blackburn could sit with them and help them play together, as Jeremy's teacher had suggested It had been working out very well and it seemed that Tommy and Jeremy were beginning to play together on their own a little longer each time On the day of the party, Jeremy seemed very excited about going He talked about Tommy's party all morning He knew they'd have cake and ice-cream, and would play games and open presents But

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when he got to Tommy's, he was very reluctant to have his daddy leave. He seemed overwhelmed by all of the children and when Tommy told him it was time to play musical chairs, he burst into tears. Mr. Blackburn tried to cajole Jeremy into joining in the fun, but Jeremy continued to cry until his father took him home.

Though Jeremy may have been to Tommy's house before, this time the furniture may be rearranged, there are lots of people, and it is probably much noisier than usual. Birthday parties like Tommy's can be confusing for any child, but being able to see what's causing the confusion makes it much easier to understand. There may be a birthday cake and presents, games and a table set with paper plates and napkins with a familiar child's motif. All of these things give the sighted child a sense of what will happen. For Jeremy, there is mostly the noise and confusion.

Though the Blackburns did their best to prepare Jeremy for Tommy's party, and though Jeremy may have seemed very excited about going, the reality of being there was a little more overwhelming than he had expected. Group events like birthday parties can be very overstimulating, even for sighted children. Most parents are confronted with a situation like this during the preschool years, but parents of visually impaired children seem to have to deal with this for a much longer period of time. It's often difficult to decide when to give your children that extra push toward independence and let them try to handle a new situation on their own.

Before you expect your child to play in a larger group, be sure to provide a lot of opportunities for him to have fun with just one or two children. You might begin by having him play with one friend for 10 minutes in his own backyard. Work up to a trip with the same friend to a nearby park, where you can watch them play among other children in a new surrounding. You can help prepare your child by telling him what to expect from a new situation ahead of time. "Tomorrow we'll be going to Sally's house to play. She has a new baby brother who cries sometimes. He's too little to know how to talk yet."

Sometimes simply describing what a place will be like or what will happen there won't be enough to put your child at ease. He may not feel comfortable at first going into a new situation alone. When it comes time for him to be part of a larger group, let him know that you will stay with him if he wants you to. Knowing that you are close by, "just in case," can be very reassuring. After the first few times, try leaving for 10 or 15 minutes, gradually adding more time as he gets more comfortable. Be sure to tell him when you are leaving, where you'll be, and when you'll be back.

It takes time for blind children to gain the skills and the confidence they need to enjoy playing with other children. Learning to find the right words to express their feelings and to ask for what they want takes lots of practice. In some situations this will be easier than in others. The important thing is that your child knows that with your help he can learn to do it on his own.

Sometimes a blind child
needs extra time
to become comfortable
playing with other children

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A FINAL WORD

The information provided in this booklet is based on our experience with many visually impaired children and their families, but you know your child best. You may have other concerns about your child's play that are not covered in this booklet. If you feel that your child's play behavior is unusual, or that he persists in repetitive play behaviors that you find difficult to understand, talk it over with his teacher, doctor, or therapist. If you would like any more information, please feel free to call us at the Blind Childrens Center, (213) 664-2153. ○

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