

Adapting the classroom for visually impaired children

Pat Jenkins explains how to help visually impaired children reach their full potential.

Over the years, more and more children with special needs are joining our schools and nurseries. At my nursery, Children's Montessori Nursery in Gamlingay, Bedfordshire, we have had a number of children with vision impairments, which has included everything from lazy eye to being legally blind. As I originally trained as a teacher for the blind, I have been able to put my experience to good use.

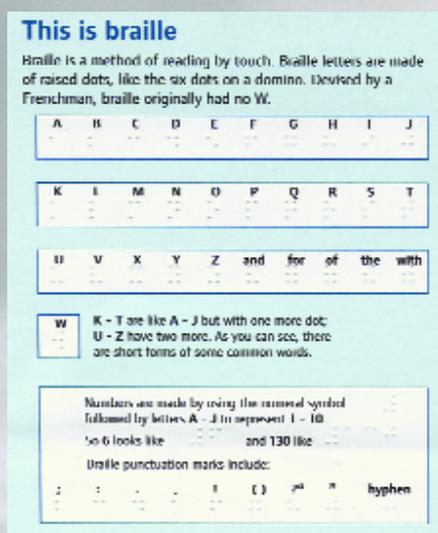
Many teachers panic when they hear that they are having a visually impaired child in their class; they are unsure of how to prepare for them. The first thing you need to do is to get to know the child. If possible, do a home visit or have the child come in for a few short visits.

Each child is different and will use what vision they have to different degrees. I had a child who was totally blind but who never bumped into anything; another had reasonable vision but was always walking into the furniture. As you get to know your child, you will have to adapt as needed.

A further thing to note is that some children's vision will always stay the same while others will deteriorate. I have had a child who had vision problems due to a head injury, but his vision improved over the time I taught him.

If your child is registered with a vision problem, he or she should be assigned a county vision teacher who will support you. This person may be able to get special equipment and arrange for books to be enlarged or Braille.

You can also get help from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), which has equipment for sale and booklets on how to help someone with a vision impairment. The RNIB sell a machine that produces Braille labels. This has the letters in print for you and then punches out the letters or numbers in



The Braille alphabet.

Braille on sticky labels. This is great for labelling equipment like the spindle box or making your own card to introduce the letter in a three-period lesson.

It is vital that we help visually impaired children become independent so they can reach their full potential. As such, you will find below a list of ways to adapt your Montessori classroom and equipment. You might only need to use some of the ideas. Always observe and follow the individual child.

Setting up the classroom

1) CLOAKROOM:

- Partially sighted children: enlarge the name tag, and place at child's eye level.
- Totally blind children: the name tag should be in Braille, and with a raised symbol (shape button).

2) PRACTICAL LIFE:

- Partially sighted and totally blind children: keep items in the same place. As new items are put on the shelves make sure you let the child know, even if the activity is yet to be introduced.

3) SENSORIAL:

- Partially sighted children: there are no particular problems.
- Totally blind and colour blind children: these children will not be able to do colour boxes or any matching that depends on colours.

4) MATHEMATICS:

- Partially sighted children: depending on the amount of vision the child has, he or she may need enlarged numbers (the spindle box, numbers and counters, and hundred board, for example). It may also help to use a definite contrast, such as black on white or white on black.
- Totally blind children: these children will need to use Braille numbers rather than sandpaper numbers. Braille numbers can be put on the spindle box and Braille number cards can be used for numbers and counters.

5) LANGUAGE:

- Partially sighted children: materials may need to be made bigger for these children. Big books are good for a partially sighted child. Other books need to include clear pictures without a lot of items on each page. Use a style to go around the inset, as this can be turned over and the child can feel the shape he or she has made. A small table easel to hold the book up can help a partially sighted child get closer to the book without blocking out the light. Dark, thick line paper is easier for the child to see for writing. Try raising glue lines for the child to draw or trace between.
- Totally blind children: instead of using sandpaper letters teach letters using Braille. It is possible to get Braille books from the RNIB.

6) ART:

- Partially sighted and totally blind children: the more the child can try the better. You may need to have a bowl of water available for washing-up after, which is better than going to the sink if it is not near.

7) GEOGRAPHY:

- Partially sighted and totally blind children: the sandpaper globe is fine for both the partially sighted and totally blind child. The children also enjoy using raised maps.

8) SCIENCE:

- Partially sighted and totally blind children: most material can be adapted. For pictures use glue to outline the shapes. It is better to use 3D objects if possible. ■

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