

Supporting the achievement of apprentices with vision impairment (VI)

What is vision impairment?

There are many descriptors used to describe sight loss: totally blind, blind, vision impaired, visually impaired, partially sighted, sight impaired, visually challenged and sensory impaired.

The current accepted term used in education is “vision impaired” (VI) and VI is the acceptable acronym/short form.

However young people will use the term they are most comfortable with and it is important to ask them how they like to refer to their sight condition.

Blind:

The term “blind” infers that there is no vision. This is unlikely to be the reality. A small proportion (around 16%) of “blind” people have no useful vision. The majority will have some **residual vision** but their sight loss causes them to experience difficulties in undertaking day to day tasks for which sight is needed.

Partial sight:

This term refers to severe sight loss but is more difficult to define as it is a collective description which covers a wide continuum with many variables.

- Reduced vision
- Good daytime vision but has “night blindness”
- Additional medical conditions that cause a fluctuating sight loss
- Dependent on lighting and contrast

Meeting a vision impaired young person

When meeting a person with severe VI it is important to remember that non-verbal communications may be unhelpful and not get a response.

Introduce yourself directly to them, do not assume they will automatically recognise your voice. Address them by name. If you do not know their name a gentle and appropriate touch on the arm or shoulder as you speak will ensure they know they are being addressed.

It is important at the end of the conversation that you inform the other person that you are leaving and do not just walk away.

A safe working environment

Things to be aware of:

- Trailing wires

- Drawers and doors left open
- Levels of lighting - good task lighting, reduced glare
- Stairs – need to be clearly marked and well lit. it is preferable that they do not rise or fall directly behind a door or opening. When warning a young person with VI of a flight of stairs it is important to let them know whether they are going **up** or **down**.
- Bags and other hazards on the floor

It is important to provide the young person with VI with a tour of their environment to enable them to build up a picture of the layout and to identify potential risks - wall mounted fire extinguishers, free standing display stands etc. Once they have familiarised themselves with the environment it is important that things are not changed around.

This should also include an explanation and “walk through” of the fire exits. It will be necessary to agree the level of support needed in the event of a fire alarm, with the young person.

Communication/Technology

It is estimated that about 80% of the information we acquire is through vision. If this is absent or severely compromised then it may be helpful to describe what is happening by way of a “running commentary”. It is important though that this builds on existing knowledge and areas of skill and that any new **concepts** and **jargon** are properly explained. A young person with VI may have heard the words before, but it doesn’t necessarily follow that they have understood the **concept**. It is always worth checking – “tell me what you understand by.....”. There may be some occasions when a more systematic audio description is required – for example to enhance video materials used in training.

But the most significant area will be **written communication**. Some young people will use braille, some large print, some will use ordinary print with a magnifier or CCTV. It is important to know this information and the implications for the workplace.

Hand in hand with this will go the adaptive technology which the young person is familiar with.

This is most likely to be speech software (JAWS/NDVA) or magnification (Zoomtext). It may be non-computer based magnification (CCTV) but it will be essential to be aware of this and to ensure that it is in place (anticipatory duty).

With the right technology (including mobile phones) it should mean that the young person with VI is able to effectively use e mail, open documents including using a scanner with voice output, and text.

Smart phone and tablet technology is used through “gestures” to navigate the screen and then accessed through voice activation.

Some young people with VI will choose to use “low tech” solutions – hand held magnifiers and telescopic devices.

It is important in the workplace that the solution fits the task in hand.

Social/emotional considerations

Young people with VI do report that they often lack friends and the opportunities that brings. They don't always have the same opportunities for developing their independence. They are less likely to have had previous experience of the work place by way of weekend/holiday work, and this will often have resulted in diminished confidence and resilience.

It is important though that an apprenticeship enables the young person to develop that confidence and independence. So, it is important that the social and emotional aspects are considered. It is important that the young person is able to become as independent as possible as quickly as possible so they will need to be shown and learn:

- Where the toilets are, and the best route for them to get to them to minimise their reliance on others
- What the arrangements are for breaks and lunch so they can determine the best way of managing (using the microwave/packed lunch/easiest route to the sandwich bar)
- Who and how to ask for help/guidance

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