

First Steps in the World for Children with Visual Impairments

Becoming parents of a child who has a visual impairment can appear to be challenging at first. Many questions may certainly already have popped into your head, and are turning in circles, about the development of your baby and his or her future as a child and an adult.

This brochure will provide you with some information to assist you, and your child.

Development of your child

During the first years of life, sighted children, mostly learn through incidental learning, by observing and imitating their parents, family members, caregivers and friends.

Due to his or her visual impairment, your child will not be able to learn through incidental learning. **However, it does not mean that your child will not be able to learn**, just that your child will learn differently.

Children with visual impairments may develop at a slower pace. It doesn't mean that your baby won't develop like other babies, just that your baby will reach those same developmental stages a little bit after their friends, because he or she will rely on different senses to develop and reach those stages.

To help your child develop and learn about the world around him or her, you will need to interact, communicate and explain what is happening. Thus, he or she will be able to relate to previous experiences to built on.

Another way to make your child discover his or her environment will be through concrete objects. When playing with your baby, make him or her feel, touch and discover new objects, textures, tastes, shapes, and even smells. Help your baby explore his or her environment, room and home. When growing up, continue to discover new textures and tastes with him or her, while cooking, gardening, and continue to explore new environments.

Services needed for your child

The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is a document that determines what services a child with disabilities needs. Those services are usually provided in the child's natural environment (generally at home). The IFSP focuses on the child and family, and the services that a family needs to help them enhance the development of their child.

The IFSP is based on assessments of the child's needs, and the needs and concerns of the family. It contains the present level of development, outcomes for the child and family, and services they will receive.

Development Tip

Using learning by doing, also called hands-on learning, with concrete objects, as well as exposing him or her to a variety of experiences will be huge for your baby's development.

IFSP Tip

The IFSP will follow your child from birth to 3 years old. It is usually reviewed every 6 months before 3 years old.

Assessment of your child

Due to your child visual impairment, an IFSP will be developed **to determine the services your child and you needs** to help him or her to enhance his or her development. To do so, **assessments will be conducted to better understand how your child's vision is affecting his or her development.**

Those assessments are performed by an early intervention professional. Some assessments are specifically related to your child's visual impairment, while other tests will look at his or her overall growth and development.

You should participate, as an equal partner, to your child's team to set goals for your child. You can provide important information about your child, and share what you see him or her doing at home and around.

Set realistic goals for your child. Also prefer contextual skills rather than specific skills. Contextual skills will encompass a variety of specific skills, and will put less pressure on you and your child to reach it, compare to specific skills. For example, prefer *"My child will ask for a specific food item"*, rather than *"My child will say 3 words in a row"*.

Future of your child

What after 3 years old? The IFSP will be replaced by an IEP (Individualized Education Program) that will follow your child throughout his or her school years, between 3 years old and 21 years old.

How will your child do at school? The Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) is a framework develop to enable students with visual impairments to access the general core curriculum when starting school. It contains 9 domains. Each domains are as important as the others. They are enabling students to be academically successful, as well as enabling them to work and live as independently as possible.

It is important to start working on the 9 domains of the ECC with your child, as early as possible, to develop his or her fullest potential, and prepare him or her to become a successful student.

Assessment Tip

Don't be worried, these are not tests that you can pass or fail. They are simply looking at how your child is progressing, and what areas he or she needs help with.

Outcome Tip

You are the expert on your child and you know your child's strengths and needs. Don't hesitate to participate on your child's team.

ECC Tip

Interacting with your baby will have a positive impact on each domain of the ECC.

Examples by domains:

1. Compensatory Access

Being read to while playing with objects related to a story

2. Sensory Efficiency

Eating textures and solid foods
Exploring familiar settings
Discovering different textures to touch and taste

3. Assistive Technology

Being read to while playing with objects related to a story

4. Orientation and Mobility

Using different types of transportation
Rolling, crawling and walking
Experiencing hand and finger play

5. Independent Living

Eating textures and solid foods
Helping with bath time and teeth brushing

6. Social Interaction

Being exposed to multiple family members and friends

7. Recreation and Leisure

Experiencing family and community events

8. Career Education

Searching for objects of interest
Being encouraged to be independent

9. Self-Determination

Being praised realistically for accomplishments

Advocate for your child

As parents of a child with a visual impairment, you will need to advocate for your child, as well as educate other adults interacting with your child.

Sighted babies are aware of the people around them and their environment. Your child will not be aware of the people around him or her. He or she will not know if someone approaches to touch or grab him or her. It can be very scary and frightening for him or her. Remember how scared you were the last time someone you know but did not notice arrived next to you by surprise. Thus, you will need to educate the adults that will interact with your child.

In the community

Educate family members, friends and caregivers to speak out their presence to your baby before interacting, touching or grabbing him or her. Thus, your baby knows that someone is there.

At day care

Educate educators and personnels to clearly announce themselves and their intentions towards your child before having any physical interactions with him or her. Thus, your child knows what to expect. Depending on ages, other children should also be educated.

At the hospital

Do not be scared of doctors, and do not hesitate, for your child, to educate doctors and nurses about speaking out their presence and their intentions prior to have any physical interactions for any exams. Thus, your baby will be less stressed, knowing that hospitals are already stressful places.

For you and your child, **do not hesitate to ask questions to doctors** about your child's visual impairment. If something is not clear or if you want more explanations, **do not be scared or shy to ask further questions** to doctors. It is essential that you know and understand your child's visual impairment to be able to explain it and advocate for him or her.

Example of questions you may ask your child's eye doctor:

What is my child's eye condition (diagnosis)?
What caused my child's visual impairment?
Does my child visual impairment stable or will it evolve with time?
Was my child born with it?
Is my child's visual impairment inherited?
Is there any treatment?
Howmuch my child is seeing?
Will eyeglasses help my child?

Interacting with your child will not only help him or her develop and learn, but it will prepare him or her to the future as a student and beyond.