



## Children with Vision Impairment returning to school

As children return to school again, there will be challenges for everyone. For children and young people with vision impairment (VI) this will be even more challenging for a number of reasons. It's difficult to provide general guidance as every child and school environment is different, but it is important that staff are aware of the particular challenges children with VI will face and the additional anxiety and fatigue they may cause.

### Challenges

**Mobility and physical environment** – familiar, stable environments free of unexpected hazards are supportive for children with VI, both in terms of mobility and of knowing where to find resources with reduced need to scan and search.

- Older children and young people may usually walk to school with friends and may not have the skills or confidence to walk alone.
- Younger children may rely on following friends or holding hands when moving around school or may be guided / supervised by adults.
- Children may not be in their usual classroom or may have to use unfamiliar routes around school, such as for a one-way system.
- Similarly they may be using different toilets or cloakrooms.
- They may be using different areas of the playground or may be restricted to a smaller marked area.
- Resources may be in different places to facilitate less sharing.
- Children may not be aware of others around them / approaching them unless there are audible clues.
- Children may not see visual markers or signage such as that giving direction around the building or for indicating appropriate distancing.
- Many children, particularly those at secondary schools, struggle with the busyness of the environment, particularly in corridors and at break / lunch times. They haven't needed to manage this while learning at home and so may be anxious about facing this again.

**Routines** – children with VI rely heavily on routines to give them confidence in a busy environment and to give them the 'head space' to concentrate on looking what they are doing / where they are going.

- Routines will all be different – they will have become accustomed to the 'new normal' in school from the autumn term but may have forgotten this or it may be changed again.
- Expectations will be different, in particular the expectation to maintain a distance and not get close to people.
- There will be set bathroom sessions and hand washing routines.
- Lunch service / routines will be changed.



- There will be more lining up / queuing for turns. Lines will be spaced out so more difficult to follow.
- In secondary schools, routine testing will be challenging – young people with VI may not be able to see well enough to drop the test solution or to read the result.

**Learning and interactions** – learning relies on communication and on being able to touch, hear and see the teacher, board, demonstrations, resources and peers.

- Children won't be able to get close to adults or peers to see what they are doing or to see the board / flip chart the teacher is using or the resources the teacher is holding.
- Seeing non-verbal communication is already difficult, even harder if you are 2 m away. So no gestures, waves, smiles, 'teacher stares' will be seen. And knowing you may have / may be about to miss something makes you feel anxious!
- Children with VI generally struggle to maintain appropriate social distance – often not recognising personal space – so will have less understanding of what 2 m 'looks like' and are unlikely to take the initiative to maintain this with others.
- Children and young people with VI will have found online learning at home more challenging than their fully sighted peers so may be anxious about being 'behind' - the things they have missed or work not completed. The pace of online learning and the highly visual nature of it means they may have struggled to keep up and may not have had opportunities to seek help, particularly with pre-recorded lessons. Using a screen for long periods is visually fatiguing and many children will not have had the knowledge or appropriate technology / software at home to make access easier, so will have been working at the limits of their vision which is even more tiring.
- The wearing of masks in secondary school lessons will provide an additional challenge to learning and communication. People with VI already struggle to recognise and interpret facial expressions and tend to use the mouth more than the eyes of other people to 'read' expressions. They also rely more heavily on voice / listening but masks make voices less distinct. Many children with VI wear glasses which steam up easily when wearing a mask, particularly when looking down, such as when writing.

## **Strategies that may reduce the challenges**

### **Transition back to school**

- Give parents as much information as possible about any changes from the autumn term and ask them to talk it through with the child so they know what to expect.
- If possible, place the child with VI in their usual classroom and with at least one familiar adult.
- If the child is going to be in a different room or with a different teacher, make this clear.
- Make sure all adults are aware of the child's VI needs.
- If the child has regular TA support, the TA could record a video / voice message for the child to listen to at home about the changes, particularly explaining that s/he will still be there to help but can't be as close.
- Be aware of the additional challenges of mask wearing. Ensure staff check in frequently to ensure the young person has heard and understood what has been said; be patient if they are slow to follow instructions.

Try to use specific language and don't rely on facial expressions or eye pointing to convey meaning. If the young person wears glasses, ensure they have a suitable mask with a nose strip to reduce fogging of glasses and a suitable soft cloth to clean glasses when needed. Allow them time for fogged glasses to clear after entering the warm building before expecting them to start work.

- Support young people with routine testing. It may help to allow young people with VI to take a test kit home before they have to do their first test so they can look at it closely and so a family member can show them how to use it through close contact / supervision. If the young person isn't able to manage the test independently, consider how this will be managed – for example by home testing or an adult completing the test procedure after the swab has been placed in the solution.

### **Physical environment and routines**

- If possible, place the child with VI in their usual classroom. If this isn't possible, give the child the opportunity to visit the new classroom with an adult at a quiet time before starting lessons.
- Similarly, give the child the opportunity to walk any unfamiliar routes around school with an adult first, such as if they will be using a different entrance, cloakroom, toilet or lunch room.
- De-clutter the environment as much as possible, give the child a clear route from outside to their classroom and from the classroom door to their table / place.
- Try to have all learning in the same place as much as possible to minimise moving around.
- In any situation involving queuing, such as for lunch, toilet or hand washing, make sure the supervising adult calls children in by name and that they talk to the child with VI about where they are in the line and what they need to do.
- If groups of children are being separated on the playground or are using restricted areas, show the child where they can and can't go and mark this area off with high visibility markers such as bright orange cones.
- Ensure any new signage or visual markers are high visibility / contrasting and clear.
- Adults and other children will need to take the initiative when maintaining 2 m distancing as the child with VI may struggle to recognise this. When moving around school, it may be necessary to instruct the child to wait at certain points for instruction before moving. For example waiting by the door before entering a room when the child may not see where others are located. This could be used as an opportunity to teach about distance through fun measuring activities.
- Talk to children and young people, particularly in secondary schools, about how best to manage the busy environment again after time spent quietly at home. Recognise and support new anxieties. Consider early exits from lessons or amended break / lunch times and different locations for eating and / or socializing if the young person wants this support.

### **Teaching and learning**

- Recognize that children and young people with VI will have found online learning very challenging and may be anxious about missed information and unfinished work.
- Adults will need to keep up a good quality 'running commentary' about everything that's happening.
- Accompany any gestures with verbal communication.

- Use children's names when giving instructions or asking questions so the child knows when these are or aren't directed at them.
- It will be even more important than normal that any teaching to the group is done with very precise language. The child with VI may need a copy of any visual material as they won't be able to get close enough to access anything from the board, or resources held up by the teacher, without getting too close to the teacher. For children who use binoculars or a monocular, this could be a good opportunity to encourage their use.
- In a situation where a TA would normally scribe for the child on a small whiteboard or show them pictures / pages of a book during teaching, perhaps have a 'my turn / your turn' set up – whiteboard on a side table which the child can go to look at when it's their turn then sits back down for the TA's turn (while s/he writes something new / changes the picture).
- If an adult is working one to one with a child and *has* to get closer than 2 m, this should be side by side rather than directly in front to minimise face to face contact.
- Modelling / demonstrating things will be very difficult if the child can't get close to adults – perhaps one solution could be to use short videos which can be watched on a tablet. (Ensure they're visually accessible to the child with VI!) Again, this could be a great time to use binoculars / monocular if the child has them.
- If an object is held up / used for teaching and can be easily cleaned / wiped down, clean it and hand it to the child with VI for closer inspection.
- For routine resources, such as pencil, glue, scissors, crayons, give the child their own set to reduce the need to touch other resources when collecting things.
- For shared resources, such as a picture or object used for a lesson, all children can have their own rather than sharing.

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