

Visual Impairment (VI)

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

When a child has a visual impairment, it is cause for immediate attention. That's because so much learning typically takes place visually. When vision loss goes undetected, children are delayed in developing a wide range of skills at a critical time in their development. While they can do virtually the same activities and tasks that sighted children take for granted, visually impaired children must learn to do them in a different way or using different tools or materials. Central to their learning will be touching, listening, smelling, tasting, and using whatever vision they have. Vision is one of our five senses. Being able to see is a vital part of learning about the world around us - people's faces showing various emotions and expressions, what different things look like, how big or small they are in relation to other objects, and the physical environment we live in including approaching dangers to be avoided.

TYPES OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

As individuals are different, not all visual impairments are the same. The term visual impairment may be used to describe generally the consequence of an eye condition or disorder. Like our other bodily organs, the eye has different parts that work together to create the ability to see. When a part of the eye doesn't work right or communicate well with the brain, vision is impaired. Most of us are familiar with the visual impairments of nearsightedness and

farsightedness. Less familiar visual impairments include:

Strabismus-where the eyes look in different directions and don't focus immediately on a single point.

Retinopathy of prematurity-occurs in premature babies when the light-sensitive retina hasn't developed enough before birth.

Cortical visual impairment (CVI)-caused by the damage to the part of the brain related to vision, not to the eyes themselves.

Because there are so many causes of visual impairment, the degree of impairment a child experiences can range from mild to severe (up to and including, blindness). The degree of impairment will depend on:

- the particular eye condition a child has;
- what aspect of the visual system is affected (ability to detect light, shape, or color; ability to see things at a distance, up close, or peripherally), and
- how much correction is possible through glasses, contacts, medicine, or surgery.

The term "blindness" does not necessarily mean a child cannot see anything at all. A child who is considered legally blind may be able to see light, shapes, colors, and objects, although indistinctly.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Children with visual impairments can learn and do learn well, but they lack the easy access to visual



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learning that sighted children have. The enormous amount of learning that takes place via vision must now be achieved using other senses and methods.

Hands are a primary information-gathering tool for children with visual impairments. So are the senses of smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Until the child “holds” the thing to be learned and explores its size and weight, such as a stuffed toy, dog, or salt shaker, he or she cannot grasp its details. That is why **sensory learning** is so powerful for children with visual impairments and why they need to have as many opportunities as possible to experience objects directly and sensorially. Being able to see enables us to capture the “whole” of an object immediately. This is not so for children with a visual impairment. They cannot see the “whole.” They have to work from the details up to build an understanding of the whole.

SIGNS OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

It's very important to notice and address visual impairments in children as soon as possible. Vision screening may occur at birth, especially if the child is born prematurely, or there is a family history of vision problems, but wellness check-ups beginning at 6 months should also include basic vision screening. Common signs that a child may have a vision impairment include:

- Eyes that don't move together when following an object or face
- Crossed eyes; eyes that turn out or in; eyes that flutter from side to side or up and down, or eyes that don't seem to focus
- Eyes that bulge, dance, or bounce in rapid rhythmic movements
- Pupils that are unequal, or appear white instead of black
- Repeated shutting, or covering of one eye
- Unusual degree of clumsiness, frequent bumping into things, or knocking things over
- Sitting too close to the TV or holding books or toys too close to the face
- Frequent squinting, blinking, eye-rubbing, especially when there's no bright light present

If any of these symptoms are present, parents should have their child's eyes professionally examined. Early detection and treatment is very important.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

If you suspect (or know) that your child has a visual impairment, you will be pleased to know that there is a lot of help available from IDEA, beginning with a free evaluation of your child. According to IDEA, the nation's special education law, all children suspected of having a disability should be evaluated without cost to their parents to determine if they have a disability, and because of that disability, need special education services under IDEA. It is important to understand that a medical diagnosis does not mean the same as having a disability in education. Those special services are:

Early Intervention-a system of services to support infants and toddlers with disabilities (birth through age 2) and their families. If a child is found eligible



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for Early Intervention services, staff work with you to develop what is known as an Individualized Family Services Plan or IFSP, which will describe your child's unique needs as well as the services he will receive to address those needs. Contact Alabama Early Intervention Services at 1-800-543-3098.

Special Education and Related Services-Services available through the public school system for school-aged children, including preschoolers (ages 3-21). The federal special education law called

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IDEA and AAC have defined Visual Impairment as:

Visual impairment that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.

290-8-9.03(13)(a)

IDEA, and corresponding state law called Alabama Administrative Code (AAC), require that special education and related services be made available free of charge to every eligible child with a disability, including preschoolers. These services are designed to address the child's individual needs in the classroom resulting from the disability.

REFERRAL AND EVALUATION

If you feel your child is in need of special education and related services, the first step is to make a referral to your child's school indicating the challenges you've noticed, and request that he be evaluated for a disability. The referral team will meet with you to review existing data including

school performance data, behavioral reports, parental concerns, and reports from health care professionals. The team will review all data, reports, and parental concerns to determine if evaluation is necessary. If the referral is accepted, a formal referral form is completed, and you must give written consent for the evaluation to be done. The school has 60 calendar days from written consent to complete the evaluation process. If the referral is not accepted, written notice is given to the parent, and the child is referred to the problem-solving team.

Keep in mind that a child does not have to fail in school to be eligible for special education services. A referral for special education should never be denied based solely on the student having passing grades.



An evaluation is the process of gathering information about your child, their potential disability, strengths, weaknesses, and areas of need. If your child is struggling in school and you are concerned about their learning, educational progress, social skills, or behavior, comprehensive



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special education evaluation may be the information that can help you and your child's school to meet your child's educational needs. The initial evaluation will serve to answer these questions:

- 1-Does my child have a disability?
- 2-Does his disability affect his educational performance?
- 3-Does my child need special education and related services?

Just the mere presence of a disability does not automatically qualify your child as "a child with a disability" under special education laws. Your child must meet the criteria listed for Visual Impairment using certain minimum evaluative components. The evaluative components include passing a hearing screening, and an optometric/ophthalmic evaluation with data indicating that the individual has a visual impairment. There must be a statement of how the impairment adversely affects the educational performance of the child, and documentation and description of research-based interventions/accommodations used in the regular education class but were deemed unsuccessful. Interventions/accommodations may be documented through teacher interviews that are specific to the child's disability, classroom observations, health records, anecdotal records, therapy evaluations, and intervention strategies. There must be evidence of visual functioning that adversely affects educational performance as evaluated by a certified vision specialist through one or more of the following; a learning media assessment, a functional vision assessment, and/or

an orientation and mobility evaluation. Children with vision impairments must be given assessments appropriately developed and/or modified to meet their needs.

DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY

When the evaluation process has been completed, the team has 30 days to review all the assessment data and scores, meet with all the other team members, including parents, and make an eligibility decision.

The team will collaborate and create a written report of the testing results. The report will describe your child's strengths and needs, how your child's skills compare to others of the same age or grade level, whether your child has a qualifying disability, and what individualized instruction and related services are recommended to help your child. If you disagree with the report, you have the right to request an independent educational evaluation or IEE, paid for by the school. The school is also allowed to deny your request for IEE, but it must take additional steps to prove its evaluation is appropriate.

If your child is identified as "**a child with a disability**" and determined to be eligible, a meeting to develop the Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be held within 30 calendar days of the initial eligibility determination. The data obtained during the evaluation is used to determine what services are required for the child to make educational progress. An IEP must be developed and in effect before special education and related



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services are provided. The school must obtain written informed consent from the parent before the initial provision of services to the child.

Sometimes the test scores and data do not meet the qualifying criteria for disability, and your child is denied eligibility for services. If you disagree with the ineligibility decision, you have the right to appeal this decision and should inform the school at once. You will receive a written copy of your Special Education Rights from the school, which contains information on due process procedures to follow. You can ask the school about evaluation for a 504 plan. You can also contact our staff for assistance.

RESOURCES

Alabama Department of Education, Special Education Services www.alsde.edu/sec/ses/

Children's Rehabilitation Services
www.rehab.alabama.gov/crs

Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind
<https://www.aidb.org/>

American Foundation for the Blind
<https://www.afb.org/default.aspx>

Family Connect <https://www.familyconnect.org/>

Alabama Early Intervention Service
<http://www.rehab.alabama.gov/individuals-and-families/early-intervention>

National Center on Accessible Educational Materials <http://aem.cast.org/>

Alabama Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

<http://aplsws1.apls.state.al.us/aplsnew/content/bphmain>

Eye Foundation Hospital Resource Directory

<http://www.eyesightfoundation.org/resources/>

YOUR OPINION MATTERS

Stakeholder opinion is very important to our center. We invite you tell us what you think and make suggestions for trainings and publications. Complete a brief survey, call our center, or join our advisory committee. Your input is always welcome.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ALPTI>



APEC IS HERE TO HELP

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