

Information from the Vision Support Team

Children with severe or profound vision loss returning to school (EHCP)

Challenges for schools to consider

As children gradually return to school - *whatever that might look like* - there will be challenges for everyone, but for children and young people with a severe or profound vision loss this will be even more challenging. Every child and school environment is different, but it is important that staff are aware of the particular challenges VI children will face and the additional anxiety and fatigue these challenges may cause.

Challenges – Communication

The critical communication distance for any CYP with reduced vision is usually within 2m as beyond that they miss social cues (facial expressions and body movements). If their vision is profoundly affected, they are taught to move towards the person they want to communicate with and being told to keep distance may cause distress and a feeling of isolation. In a busy environment, they need to be within 1-2m of a person so consideration of how this will be managed needs to be made.

Social distancing requirements mean routines will change. VI children rely on routines to reduce their visual load as they depend on environments being familiar. The combined effect of struggling to see either near or over distance and learning new routines will lead to fatigue above the norm.

VI children need to hear, as well as 'see' to communicate well. They are taught to face the person who is speaking and to move closer where they can get some visual information (if possible) or use tactile cues. This again needs to be addressed and managed appropriately to reduce stress for VI CYP.

VI children will be particularly disadvantaged in playground situations due to distancing and noise levels.

Challenges – Moving around (Habilitation)

VI children issued with canes may require additional supervision when using them as they may need a revision of skills (use on stairs etc). Children need to regularly clean and sanitise their own cane.

VI children and students rely on learning safe routes around their school environment and things staying in the same place. They use environmental cues (such as specific furniture, door colours, sounds and smells) to help them move around safely. Coming back to a school where furniture has been moved to

accommodate the 2m distancing rule, learning new routes (one-way systems have been suggested) and not moving to 'get closer' to learn will all be big challenges.

Playground times will be particularly challenging especially if areas have been marked or cordoned off that were not before or if environmental cues (eg coloured bins) have been moved.

VI children and students are taught to trail walls with their hands to reinforce where they are and to maintain their safety, this means they will be touching furniture and walls as they move around.

Challenges - Equipment and Maintenance

Some VI children will not have been using their VI equipment while they were working from home for the last few weeks. They will need time to reengage with their equipment and become familiar with using it again. This has to be considered as a challenge to their access and ability to produce work at the same rate as their peers.

Challenges - Learning and interactions

Children will not be close enough to adults or peers to gain a clear view of facial expressions or visual support materials. Inadequate visual support creates anxiety in a VI child. VI children naturally move close to their friends and peers to communicate because this helps them hear, understand better and use touch and other senses to learn. Following lessons at the same speed as their peers and keeping pace, without the ability to use tactile equipment and interact with staff and peers, will be extremely challenging if not impossible.

Strategies that may reduce the challenges

Transition back to school

Treat it like a starting school transition – give parents as much information as possible about what school will be like and ask them to talk it through with the child so they aren't expecting it to be the same as school usually is.

Place the child with VI in their usual classroom and prior to them starting give them time to familiarize themselves with the new layout and furniture arrangements.

Make sure adults are aware of the child's VI needs and ensure the child has a named person they can ask for if they are finding things difficult.

Explain the differences there will be during the school day. (entering through different doors, sitting at one desk, eating lunch at one desk, going to the toilet with social distancing, outside areas and social distancing rules)

The Specialist VI TA may only be providing modified work in line with the schools risk assessment and following union guidelines.

Communication and Moving Around (Habilitation)

VI children who have been issued with long canes or symbol canes will be more easily identified by other students and staff if they use them to travel during social situations and it may support them to maintain social distancing.

VI children should return to a familiar classroom as this will already have been assessed for light quality and ease of access to toilets, outside areas and dining areas. This means the VI child may still know the 'routes' but they will still need re-familiarizing to use them under the new school protocols.

VI children will need to be seated on a desk that is close to their equipment and external doors that will be used as they have been taught to track (touch) walls and furniture to maintain their own safety. Their positioning will need to be carefully considered.

High need VI children do not have the distance vision to 'see' others maintaining the new rules regarding sitting and moving around the setting. The subliminal and incidental reinforcement other peers get with regard to signage and general behaviour during these new ways of working will be missed. VI students will require additional support and reminders with regard to this. Staff should be made aware that this may cause distress and anxiety as their peers become more adept at the new ways of working and should support this sensitively.

Anticipated changes to routines will need to be explained prior to, and again upon school return. A tactile or modified visual timetable could be introduced to support children's understanding of the changed routines, including new routines such as frequent handwashing times.

When unplanned changes occur, an adult will need to check the VI child has understood there is a change of plan, what that change is.

Positioning of VI children will need to take in to account their particular visual needs and the equipment they may use to access teacher led activities or board work.

Ensure supervising adults in the playground and for lunch times are aware of the support needs of the VI CYP to ensure their safety, especially if the area they play in has been changed or cordoned off.

Equipment and Maintenance

Equipment will need to be checked on return to school, daily after that and as needs arise. **Please follow the DfE guidance provided to prevent infection risk.**

Schools will need to provide 70% alcohol wipes and gloves or alcohol gel to prevent infection risk associated with equipment handling, using tactile learning aids, braille reading and touching furniture or walls to find their way around.

Learning and Interactions

Use children's names first when giving instructions or asking questions so the child knows when these are or are not directed at them.

Name children before you take contributions or questions, and repeat peers' contributions which the VI child is unlikely to have heard properly.

VI children should have their own copies of key lesson information either in a modified or tactile format (All teaching materials can be requested to be modified by the Vision Support team so children have their own copy)

Repeat key learning points and instructions and check regularly that the VI child has understood.

School staff will need to be made aware of the advice and support outlined in the students VI assessment report.

If the child has a Specialist VI TA unable to support due to health reasons, shielding or union advice please contact the Vision Support Team for further advice.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions or concerns about a child with a vision loss returning to your setting. You can contact us via our centralised email at ISDC@northlincs.gov.uk or by phoning 01724 407988 so that your query can be directed to the correct person.

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