



Sensory Support Service Vision Support Team

Learning to be Social

Humans are social beings. From the very early days infants respond selectively to different stimuli: voices, smell and vision. They learn to recognize their caregiver's voice and familiar smells, e.g. breast pad with mother's milk. They can imitate mouth movements from a few hours old and learn to recognize their caregivers' face.

Caregivers establish a strong relationship through handling the infant by talking singing and vocalizing, making eye contact and facial expressions.

Many of the behaviours that enable young children to respond, initiate interactions and maintain contact with caregivers rely on vision. Babies use behaviours (eye gaze, smiling, crying) that are interpreted by caregivers as intentional social signals.

- **Establishing eye contact** - if babies do not establish eye contact with caregivers it can make the caregiver feel that the baby is unresponsive; a baby's stilling may be misinterpreted. It is important to interpret arm/leg movements/vocalisations, staying still, etc.
- **Play dialogues**-eye contact is used to initiate and close interaction. Early patterns of interaction are the beginnings of language. Caregivers and babies engage in 'play dialogues', which involve getting the baby's attention by singing, handling, eye gaze, exaggerated facial expression, and vocalisation. These interactions have turn taking elements as each of the players reads and interprets the other's behaviours and signals. Throughout this interaction the caregiver makes comments and uses language to interpret behaviours and give them meaning. This is the same pattern that will develop later in conversations. Infants come to expect a response to an action long before they can speak.
- **Caregivers look at what** the baby is paying visual attention to. Once caregivers identify what the object of interest is they usually comment on it. It is much harder to interpret child's interest if the caregiver is not clear what it is.
- **From 6 months** the baby will follow caregiver's gaze, i.e. can follow to look where caregiver is looking. If the child is unable to respond to this it is hard for the caregiver to communicate their own interest and the child may not use pointing or reaching as clues to their interest.

- **Vision** also plays a part in helping babies learn about themselves as 'separate' from the environment through their actions on objects in the physical environment and by having an effect on them.
- **Pointing 12-14 months** children use pointing not only to get a desired object but also to change the caregiver's attention. At this stage children understand that others have different intentions from themselves. By about 9 months blind children show their intentions and desires through vocalisation and body movements (instead of eye and finger pointing). These signs can be more difficult for caregivers to interpret – it is important to observe children who have a visual impairment and to learn to interpret their behaviours. Sighted children and their caregivers read each other's emotions and intentions from facial expressions, actions and body posture.
- **15-18 months pretend play**-this often does not appear till end of 2nd year for a blind children. Imitation is pre-verbal predictor of language.

Importance of Social Interaction with Peers

When interacting with young children, caregivers are more likely to understand the needs of the child, adapt their language and direct the child's attention to something that is likely to motivate them. Many children with a visual impairment prefer to interact with adults and caregivers rather than other children.

Why is it so important to interact with other children?

When children interact with other children of their age they have equal status which means that they need to learn to cooperate, to share, to deal with conflict in a different way from when they interact with caregivers.

When children interact with their friends they are more likely to have less hostile conflict situations and to be able to resolve them. Friends are more likely to use reasoning and take into account the other person's point of view and feelings. But to have friends children need opportunities to interact and learn how to develop friendships.

Friendships give children opportunities to care about and try to understand others and to respond to the feelings, needs and concerns of their friends. This is crucial for children's social understanding.

When a child plays with a friend they establish a shared world in which language and play helps children develop their understanding of the links between what people think or believe and how they act.

Socially competent children are more likely to be confident and develop positive self-concept, use successful strategies to deal with conflict -often by ignoring provocative behaviours and avoiding conflict.

Socially competent children also use a range of strategies to join a group but this involves reading the situation in a non verbal way, i.e. observing the non verbal behaviours of other children and start behaving in the same way, establishing common interests rather than imposing their own interests, etc. This can be challenging for children with a visual impairment.

How does early social interaction between children start?

Usually young children spend a lot of time watching their peers, they imitate each other's behaviours, initially in a non-verbal way, offer objects as a way to initiate interaction, etc.

What are the challenges for children with vision needs?

Getting information from the environment

It is harder for the child with visual impairment to get information from their environment, for example:

What are the other children doing? They may get too close to other children to see what they are doing.

What objects are there to offer? The child may not know where objects are or what there is around them, they may not be aware that another child is trying to offer an object, etc.

Finding their friends particularly in large outside areas, e.g. playground.

Dependence on others' language

Language helps the child with visual impairment as they receive extra information to compensate for the limited visual information they receive. Caregivers can more easily adapt their language to provide extra information; other children will find this difficult as all young children are learning about how to use language.

Difficulty of others in interacting with the child who has a visual impairment

It is not necessarily the child with visual impairment who finds it difficult to interact with other children; it is often other children who find it difficult to interact with the child with a visual impairment. When a child offers an object to another and the object is not taken or accepted the child does not know what to do. They do not necessarily understand why the child did not take it and may interpret it as lack of interest.

Sensitive caregivers who understand the needs of the child can mediate interaction and help all children communicate and learn how to interact with each other. Children learn quickly particularly to use strategies used by the caregiver.

What is important to consider when a child is starting at an educational setting?

The child needs time to get to know the physical environment, other children and caregivers, routines and rules, and to experience a range of activities.

The caregivers working with the child need to understand the child's needs and how to promote social interaction and play as well as keep the child safe, stimulate them etc.

Caregivers need to be sensitive and good observers. They need to let the children interact, interpret what is going on, observe what the child is interested in, what other children are trying to do and then mediate social interaction, e.g. if a child is trying to give an object to another and there is no response the caregiver can remind the child to use the child's name, ensure that the child can see/touch the object, etc.

It is important that children with visual impairment have opportunities to interact with socially skilled peers because these children will be good role models; they are more likely to be able to adapt their language to the child's needs, etc.

An organized environment is also important as it helps children become more independent in finding their way around, knowing where objects are kept, etc.

Caregivers need to view good interaction as the presence of positive social interaction rather than lack of physical or verbal abuse.

Caregivers can promote positive social interaction by providing a stimulating and safe environment, mediating interaction, teaching children to join in simple games with other children, etc.

Early Years settings, Support Services (such as The Vision Support Team) and caregivers need to work together to make this happen.