



Children and youth with a visual impairment

What is needed to obtain successful inclusion?

1 The current situation



Children with visual impairments, (VI), grow up and live with their families to a greater extent than before. There are still institutions in many countries but the number is decreasing. It has thus become a common approach for blind and partially sighted children and youths to attend mainstream schools.

In Europe today, with the trend set out after the Salamanca Declaration issued in 1991 as a first strong policy statement, inclusive education is the point of departure in a majority of schools.



It is important that families and other persons who frequently meet a VI child, for instance in schools, have the necessary knowledge to create an environment for the children that develops their potential, skills and knowledge. All persons concerned with a VI child must understand their specialist needs in order to support them. The resources that are available in schools do not always reach families or others close to the children.

Often, VI children live far from each other due to the fairly low occurrence of visual impairment and consequently they have limited opportunities to meet children in the same situation. Likewise, and for the same reason, their parents have an equally limited opportunity to meet other parents with blind and partially sighted children.

The children concerned have few opportunities to obtain a feeling of security relative to their visual impairment and their whole identity as such due to the very limited possibility of meeting VI peers.

There is also a strong trend towards low demands being made on blind and partially sighted children and youth as they are subsequently faced with very low expectations. This is true in the family setting as well as in school and leads to serious problems as it affects the process of socialization and may lead to a low degree of empowerment and weak self-confidence.

In the day-to-day lives of VI children and youths, many adults are involved and tend to surround them and be in their immediate vicinity. Consequently, they relate much less to persons of their own age. Blind and partially sighted children and youths regrettably experience a lot of loneliness in school and during their leisure time. They have less opportunities and offers to participate in leisure activities. The composite effect of the above facts may lead to a lower degree of academic performance, poorer grades and may, consequently, lead to poor psychological health.

Many blind and partially sighted children are deprived of the opportunity to do exercise and sports at school or after school and they become overweight and tend to move slowly and less securely.



Children may also acquire modes of behavior or certain odd habits that may lead to a degree of marginalization. While sighted youths can correct and modify their behavior and oddities by observing their environment and peers, this is not possible to the same degree for VI children who are dependent on direct instructions and demonstrations. Therefore they are not subject to an immediate socialization process through observation.

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2 What is the way forward;

EBU PROPOSALS ON CHANGES AND PROGRESS

It is essential that the rights of blind and partially sighted children, alongside those of other children with disabilities, be promoted and respected, as specified in article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



The blind and partially sighted children and youths of today are the future of the movement and the leaders of tomorrow.

A structured early intervention and support system must be developed and maintained nationally with focus on VI children and their families.

Habilitation services must include the offer for VI children to meet in groups or one-to-one to train in all necessary skills and capabilities and to fortify the sense of genuine individual identity. Support must be rendered by all relevant areas and professions dealing with visual impairment in a coordinated and holistic manner.



Support systems must be developed and maintained, targeting parents and other resource persons that liaise with children in order to ensure an optimal and well prepared support for blind and partially sighted children in their development. Parents must have the opportunity and be made conscious of the necessity to encounter visually impaired adults to obtain increased knowledge and hands on experience about what it means to live with a visual impairment.



Organisations representing persons with a visually impairment must offer additional training and education to the basic habilitation services. Examples of such offers may include summer camps, family encounters, specific training of parents and meetings specially arranged for children and youths.

During such gatherings, children can be stimulated to acquire all the necessary basic compensatory skills and competencies, activities to challenge boundaries and limitations and strengthen their self-reliance. Through such activities, VI children will make friends who are also blind and partially sighted and find role models. Parents will also realize the value of creating their own networks.

With the current technological development and opportunities, children, youths and parents as well as professionals such as habilitation trainers and teachers can easily contact other persons in the same situation and facing the same challenges despite distances and across borders. Such electronic means for exchange of experience must not, however, exclude the establishment of physical meeting places and training spaces.

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