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# How and why the visually impaired students socially behave the way they do

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the social behavior of visually impaired students. Most of the students covered by this study were passive and generally had difficulty in interacting with people. However, their indisciplined behavior in schools was found to be similar to that of sighted students. A few intervention strategies, proposed by educationists, are discussed here to help the visually impaired students in adapting themselves to their environment, and thereby secure peer and community acceptance. Such acceptance will eventually help the impaired students in overcoming the feeling of being rejected or neglected by classmates and society.

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*Keywords: Social Behavior; Social Skill; Visual Impairment*

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## Introduction

"The World's Declaration on Education for All" recommends education to all children, regardless of their backgrounds or disabilities. All the countries in the world are accordingly urged to provide free education to all children without any restrictions or discrimination (UNESCO, 1990). Recognizing this need, special education programs are provided for special needs children: children with visual impairment, children with hearing impairment, and children with learning and other disabilities.

The inability of the children to see limits their learning experience and restricts their learning activities, as compared to those of the sighted children. This is because the process of receiving information through visual input will be limited even if they have residual vision (low vision). Therefore, special education programs are provided to fit the unique learning needs and abilities of the visually impaired children. Teaching styles, instructional materials, and educational goals are designed and modified to fit the child's specific learning needs and abilities. This will help them in their visual learning experience through other media of learning: hearing and textual. Most visual impairments need some extra help to succeed in school. This is because of the challenges that visual impairment poses to learning. Special services or "related services" must be included, therefore, in special education programs. These services are provided by professionals in a variety of educational settings (Brasher and Holbrook, 1996).

As regards academics in the classroom, the teachers for students with visual impairment do not have the opportunity to emphasize on learning social skills (Hatlen, 2004). According to Hatlen (op.cit.), for blind children, learning social skills is as important as learning to read. Appropriate social behavior, which is taken for granted as having been learnt incidentally at a very young age, and which is not consciously thought of when one engages in social interactions, adds to the factors that affect social competency of students with visual impairment. According to Friend (2005), and Hatlen and Curry (1987), the absence or lack of visual input can affect the visually impaired,

especially their efforts of development, learning, social skills and behavior. Hill and Blasch (1980) consider that visual impairment is a serious limitation, because 85% of social learning is accomplished through vision. All parties, especially the teachers with the cooperation and support of parents and school administrators, need to plan to increase the level of social skills among students with visual impairment. Those students who fail to master social skills and demonstrate a good social behavior will suffer isolation and segregation from their sighted peers (Guralnick, 1996; 1987; Sacks, Kekelis and Gaylord-Ross, 1992; Sacks and Silberman, 2000; Sacks and Wolfe, 2006).

Previous studies show that placement of visually impaired children in regular classes along with their sighted friends does not affect their academic achievement, but their social skills. And, lack of social skills affects their interaction with the environment (MacCuspie, 1996; 2001). Inability to behave as expected will create difficulty of acceptance by peers and the public. Studies conducted by Guralnick et al. (1996), Guralnick and Groom (1987), Kingsley (1999), Sacks et al. (1992), Sacks and Silberman (2000), and Sacks and Wolfe (2006) show that the visually impaired children often face the problem of being ignored by peers and other children. This is because they show no cooperation or skills in taking turns (turn-taking) during play and no skills in inviting friends to play together. Children with visual impairment also face the problem of maintaining friendships with their classmates, because they are not able to see and learn the skills through observation (Guralnick, 1999; Celeste, 2006). This condition affects their social development. This paper will further discuss the importance of social skills for children with visual impairment.

### **The Importance of Social Skills**

Having good social behavior implies that one is capable of being gregarious, and capable of adapting to unfamiliar surroundings, attracting attention from people, and engaging in social discourse and other group activities (Kail, 2007). In addition, children with good social behavior are expected to be competent in their social skills also. This will help the children to develop friendship and establish relationship with others in their community. Vaughn and Hogan (1994) consider that social skills involve one's ability to interact positively with his family and other people. This would mean that one is also capable of adjusting himself or herself in public and communicate effectively. According to Heiman and Margalit (1998), good social skills enable people to be cooperative, controlled in behaviour and understanding of other people's needs and desires.

What is seen around during child's development forms part of the learning process. The object seen will stimulate the development of child's cognitive mind. Similarly, the behavior seen will be a guide to the child. The child gets the information of social behavior through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1986; Sacks and Silberman, 2000). According to Sacks and Silberman (op.cit.), the inability of children with visual impairment to observe and imitate social behavior in the environment will affect their social behavior. This significantly impacts all aspects of development of their skills (Ferrell, Shaw and Dietz, 1998; Farrell, 1990; Warren, 1984; 1994).

Developing social skills, in children's development process, is as important as developing other skills. Acceptance of the children is based on their ability to interact effectively and behave well. Therefore, it is important that such skills are developed in children while they are at a young age. Apart from parents, schools also play an important role in providing necessary learning experience and other skills, including social skills, to children. In this connection, Schlein et al. (2003) explain how parents of children with special needs hope that their children will be accepted by their peers, and how these children, by being in the school system, can be trained with relevant social skills. As Lavoie (1994) stresses, those parents realize that without good social skills and good social behaviour, their children will face difficulties in adapting themselves to different situations and because of this they may face isolation by their peers.

All children, including those with vision problems, undergo the process of social skills development (Sacks et al. 1992). Agreeing with Bee and Body (2007), Sacks and his colleagues believe that social behavior of children is influenced by several factors, such as their learning experience in the early stages, the support received from family members and their ability to adapt to environment. The children with visual impairment find it difficult to adjust to the environment and therefore have limitations in gaining experience through interaction with the environment. According to Ferrell (1996), children with visual impairment remain relatively backward in terms of social development as compared with sighted children. This is supported by Hasselt's (1983) findings that children and

teenagers, who are blind, are not as good in social competence as the sighted children. This is because they lack feedback on their social behavior, and playing experiences, besides little reaction towards others.

The need for social development program to children with special needs has been stressed by Farmer (1996). He described two factors in support of such need. First, studies on sociometric status show that children with special needs are less accepted by their peers with no special needs. Second, social isolation by such peers can affect the development of children with special needs and this can be seen in their behavior during their adolescent and adult years. Therefore, it is important for children with visual impairment to develop good social skills. Their ability to get along with other people will help them from isolation. Like the sighted children, children with visual impairment must develop good social behavior by watching and interacting with the people around them. This helps them in developing an appropriate social behavior.

### **Intervention Strategies**

For individuals with visual impairment, intervention is a necessity. The modules of intervention should be designed taking into account social skill deficits, and should be addressed through formal learning. Teachers should be trained to implement the proposed interventions to ensure their effectiveness. Following are some of the interventions proposed to be conducted in the classroom for visually impaired students to help them improve their social behavior and maximize social integration (Sacks et al.1992):

- a) Peer-mediated social-skills training: The training strategies are most effective when performed in resource room. The setting provides both visually impaired and sighted students with a variety of alternatives for play and relaxed interaction.
- b) Behavioral contract: The strategy is to reinforce the visually impaired students, who have some difficulty in working independently or interacting effectively in a group, with students of appropriate social behavior in a variety of educational and community settings.
- c) Physical skills: Direct intervention for visually impaired students to teach common assumptions about the utilization of appropriate physical behavior.
- d) Assertiveness training: Used to train visually impaired students who are passive or aggressive, rather than assertive. The activities carried out in the training will foster assertive behavior and the students will have an opportunity to share the experiences.

The intervention training can be used to promote positive social behavior and social exchanges between visually impaired children and their peers in school, in neighborhood and in the community. It is important that any strategy used for intervention is tailored to meet the unique needs of each student and each educational setting. The training packages developed for this purpose try to aid visually impaired students in developing good posture, facial expressions, gaze, assertiveness, gestures and speech. Reinforcements and prompts are used to increase social skill so that their social behavior improves.

Along with a structured social-skills training procedure, visually impaired students can benefit from behavioral contracts that reinforce appropriate social behavior in a variety of educational and community settings. These contracts may incorporate self-monitoring techniques to stimulates appropriate social behavior.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

For visually impaired children, it becomes difficult to imitate other people's behavior. This is because many social interactions are observed and learned visually through imitation and modeling (Bandura 1986). They should repeat the behavior they learned and study the feedback from others to improve their social skills for a better social behavior (Sacks and Silberman, 2000; Sacks and Wolffe, 2006). The children should be systematically taught how to develop relationships with peers and people around them through appropriate facial expressions and eye contact, body posture, use of signals (gestures) and appropriate tone of voice. According to Guralnick (1996, 1987), Sacks et al. (1992), Sacks and Silberman (2000), and Sacks and Wolffe (2006), students who have vision problems are less interested in friendship and have a tendency toward social isolation because they do not receive any feedback or positive response.

With limited activities, the visually impaired children remain passive as compared to the sighted children. However, recent research demonstrates that they show indisciplined behavior in schools just as the sighted students do, but it remains within teachers' control (Khalim and Norshidah, 2009). The main reasons for their misbehavior are their physical handicap, and biological and emotional disabilities (Hyman, 1977). Viewed from biophysical perspective, the biological determinism theory emphasizes that misbehavior may result from unidentified physical disabilities, such as visual impairment, auditory impairment, hormonal imbalance or metabolic disorders.

Some children with visual impairment show stereotypic behaviors, or 'mannerisms' (sometimes referred to as 'blindism'); these include a wide range of behaviors, such as rocking, eye-pocking, headshaking, bouncing, clapping or handshaking. Such behaviors will reduce their personal effectiveness and opportunities for social integration (Webster and Roe, 1998). Teachers and parents should pay more attention to helping the children in desisting from such behavior so as to pave the way for the establishment of social skills. According to Sacks (2006), to succeed socially, students with visual impairment need to develop strong identities as individuals, besides positive self-concept and self-esteem. For this, the teachers must understand the factors that influence or impede the development. In the long run, being selective and competent will help the visually impaired children in their social behavior.

Acquiring social skills is not natural for visually impaired children, but requires training and nurturing throughout the educational years. The opportunities for social-skills instruction are limited not by the program model or by what is readily available but rather, by the ability of teachers and parents to identify the goals based on realistic expectations for individual children and later by the students themselves. For visually impaired students, no philosophy of services is complete if it encompasses only academic needs. The functional needs, particularly the social needs, of visually impaired children must be addressed in every setting by all those who are involved in the children's daily programs. The acceptance of social behavior will help student with visual impairment not only to interact effectively with sighted peers and adults, but to make independent decision, to take responsibility for their actions, and to feel confident and successful within the sighted environment (Sacks et. al 1992).

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