

TX SenseAbilities

A Bi-Annual Publication about Visual Impairments and DeafBlindness for Families and Professionals

Spring 2018

Volume 11 | Number 2

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TX SenseAbilities is a collaboration of the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired and the Texas Health and Human Services Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program (BCVDDP)



Lessons learned from Middle School

Lee Sonnenburg, Parent

Abstract: *A father of a teen with visual impairment shares the lessons he and his family learned when his daughter attended middle school.*

Key words: *accommodations, electives, transition*

This past weekend, Scout participated in her 8th grade banquet, the culmination of her middle school career. Our family has had many adventures as we traversed the ever-changing landscape of middle school. Scout did not just survive middle school, but she thrived. We experienced some rough spots as we learned to create a successful environment for her, but she also

had several raving successes, which were wonderful boosts for her self-confidence. I wanted to share just a couple of our take aways from middle school.

Scout has congenital glaucoma. The progression of the disease and a couple of surgical complications have led to her visual impairment. She can see color in



Photo of Scout with her family

her right eye. Both of her pupils are blown so she suffers from severe photophobia. Scout has functional vision in her left eye, but her eyes tire easily. She uses an iPad and CCTV to enlarge schoolwork, and all handouts are enlarged on 11x17 blue paper to help reduce glare. Scout is the youngest of our three children. Her older brother and sister have paved the way for her academically. All three kids participate in the gifted and talented program. Our kids have attended all the same campuses and have had many of the same teachers over the years. Many of the middle school teachers knew of Scout before she arrived on campus.

Here are a few things we learned during our journey through middle school.



Photo of scout in her swimming suit and cap at the Lubbock Swimming Club



Photo of Scout's art entry into the Panhandle South Plains Fair and her first place ribbon awarded for her drawing

1. Start early and lay a good foundation with middle school staff.

Scout's ARD meeting in 5th grade was lengthy and the room was packed. Administrators, teachers and diagnosticians from both her current elementary and future middle school were in attendance. Scout also attended this ARD meeting, her 2nd to attend. Current accommodations, and why they were needed, were explained to all new attendees. We requested that Scout receive any summer reading requirements for 6th grade English before the summer started and in a format which met her accommodations. In August, after the teachers had returned to work but before classes started we had a meeting with all of her new middle school teachers. Scout told her teachers about her visual impair-

ment and how it affected her education. We discussed her accommodations and why they were necessary. For example, Scout has preferential seating in her classroom. The white board must be on her left side. We explained that because she has no vision in her right eye, she is writing and reading into her vision loss when taking notes. When the board is on her left side it reduces the strain and work required on her eye. After the meeting, we walked through her school schedule with her TVI and her O&M specialist. We met with each teacher individually, discussed where Scout should sit and where her CCTV should be located, and answered any specific questions that the teacher might have. We had this meeting before both her seventh and eighth grade year. Subsequent years had fewer attendees as we only met with new teachers.

2. Know your principal's preferences on handling questions, concerns and complaints.

Paula and I were both very involved in our kid's elementary school, volunteering in the kid's classrooms and serving on the PTA board. When issues or concerns arose with Scout's accommodations, it was easy to stop in and chat with the teacher to develop a solution to the problem. We had a great relationship with the principal and teachers so this method worked well for us. Middle school was a different story and I wish I had known the principal's preferred method of handling issues and concerns before I walked into a hornet's nest. In sixth grade, Scout received a failing grade on a writing assignment. I called to speak to the teacher to determine the issue. By the end of the conversation, I was extremely frustrated and the teacher was being evasive about



Photo of Scout and her sister, Sadie in matching t-shirts. Scout's t-shirt has the message "If Lost Return to Sadie." Sadie's t-shirt says "I am Sadie."

whether or not she was meeting Scout's accommodations. Long story short, after our phone conversation, the teacher went to the principal's office in tears and left school for the day. I received a terse phone call from the principal informing me that I was to bring my concerns and questions to school administrators only, never a teacher. This was not what we were used to but we did comply with his request. Suffice it to say, I already have discussed this with Scout's high school principal and we are all on the same page.

3. Choice of Electives.

Scout's middle school has seven class periods a day; five core subjects, one elective and one PE or athletics. Scout is exempt from taking a PE class for two reasons; her visual impairment limits what she can safely do in a regular PE class and she is a member of a competitive swim club who provides documentation of Scout's participation. In sixth grade, Scout participated in Band and Art. She also was up late, sometimes until 11 p.m., working on homework.



Photo of Amber, and Scout with her cane, Zeus, before their 8th grade banquet



Photo of Scout leaving Color Guard practice, carrying her flag

It takes her longer to complete assignments because of her vision, and swim club practice was every evening as well. In seventh grade, she had art twice a day as an elective. We would use her second art class to schedule sessions with her TVI, her O&M specialist as well as for local doctor's appointments. Her art teacher would allow Scout to work on other homework assignments in her second art class, but Scout still was up late working on homework. In eighth grade we asked that Scout have a study hall as one of her seven classes so she could work on homework at school and have access to teachers if she needed assistance. The school was able to accommodate our request with some creative scheduling. Scout's study hall was her last period of the day. Her study hall was in the Resource/Inclu-



Photo of Scout participating in cane training with Orientation and Mobility specialist, Steve

sion classroom, but during the teacher's conference period. Scout was able to complete a large percentage of her homework each day during study hall, which allowed her to participate in swim club and still get to bed at a decent hour. We used this time as well for braille sessions with the TVI and lessons with her O&M specialist. The high school operates on a block schedule, four classes per day. We have arranged with her new principal that Scout will have three academic classes each day. Her fourth class each day will be one of her electives, Art or Color Guard.

4. Small accommodations can have huge impacts.

Scout has some accommodations that are

not included in her IEP. Scout does not eat her lunch in the cafeteria. The cafeteria has floor to ceiling windows and is extremely noisy. Scout started having daily headaches when she was in sixth grade. We realized that the combination of bright lights, loud students and tired eyes were causing her headaches. We asked that she be allowed to eat lunch somewhere other than the cafeteria and that she have a friend join her so she would not have to eat alone. During sixth and seventh grade she ate lunch with her best friend in the art classroom. For eighth grade she moved to the library since the art teacher's lunch no longer matched up with Scout's. Scout is also allowed to leave her classes early or arrive late to avoid traveling during the passing periods. She feels safer traveling the halls when they are not as congested. Both of these are small and simple accommodations but have a huge impact on her day to day life in middle school.

We had our transition to high school ARD meeting in April. Paula and I laughed after the meeting because the two most common phrases in the meeting were "Scout is amazing" and "Is that coming with her?" (in reference to her assistive devices and reams of blue colored paper). Scout will be in the opening class of our high school's ninth grade center (campus). We already have arrangements to tour the building before school starts and have our annual meeting with teachers. The principal is excited to have Scout in his building and is already making arrangements for her to be successful. We are looking forward to a new season with many new adventures, not the least being Scout's participation in the high school marching band's color guard. Friday nights will be very exciting for the 'Bergs – a percussionist, an athletic trainer, a member of the color guard and two very enthusiastic parents cheering from the stands.

Would a Service Dog Be Beneficial for my Child?

Rachel Simpson, Family Engagement Specialist, TSBVI

Keywords: *service dog, therapy/facility dog, emotional support dog, dog handler, responsibilities*

Abstract: *This article contains some basic information about the use of service dogs, therapy/facility dogs and emotional support dogs.*

What is a service animal?

The Americans with Disabilities Act states that a Service Animal is any animal that has been trained to provide assistance specifically for the benefit of a person with a physical or mental disability which substantially limits one or more of the person's major life functions. The description in Texas legislation mirrors the federal description, including the stipulation that the service animal must perform tasks that are directly related to the person's disability.

What legislation supports the right to use a service animal?

Texas law and the federal Americans with Disabilities act guarantee the right of a person who is blind or has other disabilities to be accompanied by a trained service animal in all public places. The most recent legislation in Texas was passed in 2013 and speaks to the rights and responsibilities of people who use service animals.

What type of animal can be a service animal?

Texas law states specifically that a "service animal" or "assistance animal" must be a canine. In some states, miniature horses can be used if certain criteria are met.

What types of disabilities must a person have to use a service dog?

The first type of service dog was a guide dog (or dog guide) which is used by a person who is blind or visually impaired. Today, people with many different types of disabilities use service dogs. There are now service dogs for many different disabilities, such as:

- Blindness/Visual Impairment
- Mobility Impairment
- Hearing Impairment or Deafness
- Autism
- Psychiatric Disabilities
- Medical conditions, including diabetes and seizures.

Who can train a service dog?

The current law allows for a person to train their own dog, go through a private trainer or attend a program at a service dog school. As a previous service dog user, I have gone through a private trainer and a service dog school to get a trained service dog and found advantages in each method. I do not know anyone who trained their own dog.

Because guide dog schools have been in existence so much longer, the expectations for the dogs and handlers are more standardized. For other disabilities, the training of service dogs is relatively new. Apparently because of the diverse population served and the relative newness of the field, my experience is that there is much less standardization in dog training and terminology that service dog trainers use, outside of guide dog schools.

What is the advantage/disadvantage of having a service dog?

The main advantage of having a service dog is that the dog can do the various tasks that help offset the effects of the disability. If you're a dog lover, having a dog around all the time can be a real perk. In my opinion, the disadvantages are that it can make social situations awkward. In addition, people are drawn to the person with a service dog, but their attention

can be disruptive to a typical social situation. The other disadvantage is that you have to take the dog out to relieve it in all kinds of weather. Also, they are not perfect little robots. They are just dogs with their own quirks and personality traits, both good and bad. I've had three service dogs, so obviously the positives outweighed the negatives for me. Although my health has improved and I no longer need a service dog, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

What are the responsibilities of the service dog user?

The handler must keep the dog under their control at all times. The handler must have the dog on a leash unless the disability does not allow for leash usage. The handler must relieve the dog regularly and clean up after the dog. The handler must also pay for any damages caused by the animal. The handler pays for all grooming, veterinary care, and gear. The gear can include things like the harness or vest, leash, portable water and food bowls, etc.

At what age can my child get a service dog?

It depends on what tasks you want the dog to do, who the handler will be, and the guidelines of the individual trainer or school you are using. In most cases, very young children do not serve as dog handlers. The parent is typically the handler for children under 16, but this varies.

Are there other types of support animals?

The terminology varies by region and sometimes by the trainer or school used. Typically, Therapy or Facility Dogs are those that have been trained with specific commands to provide comfort and affection to people in hospitals, schools and other facilities. You may have heard of reading programs for children in which the children read to the dogs. A dog in that situation would typically be referred to as a Therapy or Facility Dog. This type of dog provides assistance to people in a certain facility, situation (such as a disaster) or program. The dog does not provide services to

the handler and does not have access to public places. The dog would only have access to serve people within a designated facility, situation or program.

An Emotional Support Dog is one that provides emotional support and companionship to a person with a disability, just by being a dog. They do not have access to public places except when needed for transportation. In order to use an Emotional support dog during a bus ride or during a flight, the person must generally get a recommendation by their physician. The best way to approach this is to learn the guidelines of the bus or airline carrier you are using.

Service Dog Etiquette: To Pet or Not to Pet

Although it varies by the needs/preferences of the service dog handler, the standard is not to pet or give attention to the service animal. If the dog is interacting with you, it is distracted from helping the handler and will limit the handler's ability to accomplish his/her task. In addition, it can result in an injury to the dog or handler.

I hope this article has provided you with some basic information to help you decide if a service dog may be of assistance to your child or if it merits further investigation.



Photo of Rachel and her service dog, Ruby at Palo Duro Canyon. Ruby is wearing her red service dog vest

IEP Letter to Families

Molly Black and Patti McGowan, Pennsylvania Deaf-Blind Project Family Consultants

Abstract: *The authors, both parents of young adults with DeafBlindness, share their advice for parents being effective partners in their children's educational team.*

Keywords: *Family Wisdom, Special Education, DeafBlindness, Visual Impairment, Effective Partnership, Self-Determination, Transition Planning*

Dear parent or family member of a child or youth with deaf-blindness,

We want you to know that you are the most important person on your child's individualized education program (IEP) team. You are the most consistent IEP team member and you know the student (your child) the best! Set extraordinary expectations for both your child and your team. Allow the IEP to tell your child's story, set high goals, and utilize your child's strengths to support and overcome any weaknesses that may be discussed during your child's IEP meeting.

Your child's unique and specific needs, not his or her disability classification, should drive the IEP discussion. Keep in mind that you are the expert on your child. Be prepared to share your triumphs, challenges, hopes, dreams, observations, and concerns. Success for your child should be the goal of all IEP team members while developing your child's IEP.

If your child already has an IEP, make sure you review and familiarize yourself with his or her current IEP prior to the meeting. If your child does not yet have an IEP and is currently not receiving services, talk to other parents and families of children with deaf-blindness about related services and supports that have been beneficial to their child. Your child may attend and be present at his or her IEP at any age, when appropriate. In Pennsylvania at age 14, your child has the right and should fully participate in his or her IEP and be a valuable member of the IEP team.

An IEP meeting can be requested and held at any time during the school year, if necessary. Having regular team meetings (e.g., monthly, quarterly) in addition to your IEP meeting, to discuss progress or concerns can be advantageous for the entire team. Having a strong IEP team and practical goals supported by educational services will allow your child to develop, learn, and be successful and happy. The IEP process can certainly be daunting at times, so hopefully the following links will help you during your own IEP "season." Remember – knowledge is power!

Editors' Note: Molly and Patti's original article included resources specific to their state. They invited us to share our favorites for Texas:

Special Education Resources

SpedTex Special Education Information Center:

www.spedtx.org The Texas Special Education Information Center (SPEDTex) delivers accurate and timely answers to questions about special education to stakeholders across the state of Texas. Our purpose is to optimize information and respond with technical assistance in a succinct and useful format that is user friendly, culturally responsive, and accessible to all individuals. SPEDTex provides supportive state-wide leadership that promotes collaboration, meaningful communication and participation in the development and delivery of services to children with disabilities.

Parent Handbook for Special Education by Region 13 Education Service Center:

http://www4.esc13.net/uploads/facilitatingIEPs/docs/SPED_ParentHandbook.pdf

This handbook is intended to give parents a basic grounding in the special education process and the use of collaborative strategies and facilitation skills and techniques to improve that process.

IDEA Manual, A Guide for Parents and Students About Special Education Services in Texas, 2016 Edition:

<https://www.thearcoftexas.org/idea-manual/>

The newest version of what has become known as The IDEA Manual. This manual is designed to help families become familiar with the requirements of IDEA and Texas law so they can act as an equal partner in planning their child's education.

Websites designed for parents that include Special Education topics:

- Texas Project First: texasprojectfirst.org
- Navigate Life Texas: www.navigatelife-texas.org
- Parent Companion – the first five years: www.parentcompanion.org
- Crossroads: texasdeafed.org

Dear New Parents of a Deaf and Blind Child, From a DeafBlind Adult

Amita Srinivasan, DeafBlind Citizens in Action Member, Austin

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Keywords: *Family Wisdom, DeafBlind, disability awareness, self-determination*

Abstract: *The author shares her personal story in order to explore the impact of labels for DeafBlind individuals.*

As a society, we label people. Rich, poor and smart are but a few of the labels we unconsciously use every single day. Labels give us a sense of control and enable us to gather information, but they also box people into neat little categories. In that sense they also limit us. Let me explain. I am DeafBlind. I have CHARGE syndrome. These labels can seem overwhelming to observers. They can make me seem unapproachable. “How do you even talk to a Blind and Deaf person?”

Labels can obscure the person behind the label. Since I am writing this article to address the parents of children who have received a similar diagnosis, I would like to tell you my story. When I was born, the NICU doctor who diagnosed me told my parents “your child is severe to profoundly deaf, is blind with bilateral colobomas, and

has paralyzed vocal cords.” They were part of my diagnosis, but these labels took on a life of their own.

Deaf, Blind, Mute. They just seemed insurmountable, a veritable Mount Everest in front of my two hapless parents and associated members of my family. Many in my family were scared and shocked. Many just shut down and wrote my life off. Many looked at me with pity. “How do you even begin?” My parents heard the labels, took their time to digest them and but then saw right through them to the real me. They saw the mighty fighter in the tiny fragile infant hooked up to multiple machines and tubes. They heard the challenge in the hoarse cries, saw the determination in the dark eyes and felt the power in the tiny hands trying to pull out the irritating breathing tubes. They chose. They chose to focus on

the person rather than the labels. My parents harnessed the information contained in the labels to provide therapy and medical care for me, but they never lost sight of the actual baby before them. They were scared, but then tried to reach out to all the resources they could: the internet, nurses, doctors, other parents and teachers, in order to help me. I got fitted with behind the ear (BTE) hearing aids at two months old when doctors ruled



Photo of Amita on the University of Texas campus

out cochlear implants. Believing communication was critical, my parents went to local classes to learn sign language (SEE 2). My mom took intervener training online to help me with tactile learning since my ophthalmologist was not sure about how my vision would develop. My dad glued pictures around the house to help me learn to use my residual vision. But in between all these

doctor and therapy appointments, my parents found the time to take me out on walks in the stroller, hang out at the park and to simply have fun with me. In fact, now I really do not remember much about the surgeries, the scopes and the intense medical intervention, but I can still remember going out and catching ladybugs in spring, signing Brown Bear Brown Bear a hundred times a day, and visiting the public library to pick out my favorite books.

My parents made mistakes too. They were scared I would be isolated and would not let me discuss my disabilities with anyone. They thought they would wait and see how my vision would develop instead of teaching me cane skills right from the start. I use a cane now, but I am always uncertain in new places. Even if they did make some mistakes, they never lost sight of giving me a happy and fun childhood with great memories in spite of anxious moments of medical tests, emergency room visits and painful surgeries. They used all those scary labels as a starting point for information and worked with them.

As years pass, 19 of them to be precise, some labels have faded while new labels have emerged. My parents now have collected a few labels of their own: middle aged, grey haired, Ph.D. and manager. I have also earned a few more labels to add to Deaf-Blind: student, honor graduate, college freshman (hook 'em horns!) and photographer. And I am proud of all of them because I am confident in who I am. Disability is just a part of me but not all of who I am.

Labels can be overwhelming. To a new parent they can be scary and paralyzing. Never let labels obscure the person or baby before you. Those neat little categories, those labels: they do not define the person before you. So to answer the question I posed: How do you even talk to a Blind and Deaf person?" The answer: Just like with everyone else, you will find a way to communicate!

Maximizing Literacy Opportunities in Everyday Experiences

By Gwyneth McCormack, Director, Positive Eye Ltd.

Abstract: *Gwyneth McCormack of Positive Eye Ltd. has developed fun, engaging and easy to use activities using buckets to bring stories and hands-on experiences to children with visual impairments. Students with visual impairments can explore the objects as they learn the topic or review the experience. The use of story buckets promotes the development of concepts and allows children to experience literacy in a meaningful and interactive way.*

Key Words: *emergent literacy, concept development, experiential learning, reading readiness, story boxes, story buckets*

Sighted children develop a huge amount of knowledge and experience through incidental learning. During the first few years of life they have exposure to a vast range of visual symbols that convey meaning. This access to the literate environment doesn't occur naturally for the child with visual impairment. Our goal is to expose the child with visual impairment to a rich variety of concrete experiences involving as many objects, people, places and activities as possible. This should be done systematically, as early as possible and as often as possible. Building this solid foundation of reading readiness skills and fun experiences from infancy is

critical. Using a theme-based approach during the emergent stages of literacy development enables us to offer a multitude of rich, meaningful literacy learning opportunities linked to everyday situations, as well as ensuring we maximize the literacy opportunities from within fictional books.

We are surrounded by a vast array of learning opportunities which can be used to support the learning development of children with visual impairment. These start in the home, in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the garden and beyond. A holistic approach harnessing the child's everyday environment, embraced by professionals and parents offers the opportunity for exciting, creative and fun ways to develop the child's skills. These skills— all crucial to the child's emerging literacy pathway include: auditory and language skills, concept development, tactile and fine motor skills, book and story skills.

Key to concept development is that you 'milk' and 'reinforce' each learning opportunity as much as possible. You are teaching the child about objects, their characteristics and qualities, how they are made, where they are stored and what their purpose is in different contexts. The child needs to feel, smell, taste (if appropriate) and look at objects and develop appropriate and meaningful language to support their understanding. I call this the 'ness' of the object.

A popular Positive Eye concept building activity to demonstrate this is the 'woodenness of wooden spoons'. Gather a collection of wooden spoons (different lengths and



Photo of the author, Gwyneth McCormack Holding the character Marvin along with her Book Marvin's Market Adventure and Grandma's Special Birthday Picnic

types); explore how they are made, where they are kept, what they are used for and where they can be purchased. Investigate the sounds that can be made, explore the textures and feel of each spoon and taste food from them. We are looking at developing a clear understanding of 'Process, Form, Shape and Purpose'.

Experience and maximize the learning opportunities by organizing spoons from the shortest to longest, thinnest to widest, or smallest head to biggest; or measure using each spoon as a unit of measurement. Visit a local store and buy a wooden spoon, wash it, feel it when it is wet, dry it, put it in the drawer. Make beans on toast, feel how many beans fit on the spoon, try eating the beans from the spoon, does the spoon fit in your mouth? If not, whose mouth does it fit in?

Then, building on this approach, collect a Basket of Everyday Objects, and develop and progress to include greater concept development, tactile discrimination and fine motor skills. Use different textures, make sounds, play and extend the learning – rattle the spoon in the cup, fill the cup and the jug with water and find out which holds the most, squeeze water from the sponges, match the socks or categories the brushes, such as toothbrushes and paintbrushes.

These approaches form the way Story Buckets work. They offer a fun, creative way of cueing the child into enjoying a meaningful literacy experience linked to either a story or everyday learning opportunity or both. A practical example of this approach is Positive Eye's 'Marvin's Market Adventure and Grandma's Special Birthday Picnic'. This is a story about Marvin who was a kind little boy. He loved to visit his Grandma and help her to look after her beautiful garden. One day he decided he would surprise her as it was her birthday and he wanted to make her a special picnic. He wrote his list of all the things he would need for the picnic and set off to the market to make his purchases. He would buy a beautiful flower for her garden and a little shiny fish for her pond.... little did he know that he was in for a surprise when

he arrived at the market!

Our story demonstrates how to support and develop a theme based approach using a fictional story, based on the rich learning opportunities within the everyday experience of the market place. It embraces the 'marketness' of the market place.



Photo of Marvin and pages from the book Marvin's Market Adventure and Grandma's Special Birthday Picnic

Using an appropriately sized bucket with a bucket apron fitted around it provides a convenient portable carrier and a place from which to bring the story to life. The pockets of the apron create exciting storage spaces to place the objects for the child to find, while larger objects can fit into the bucket itself. Blank credit cards with large print and Braille labels are attached with Velcro to each pocket to encourage the child to read the label, letter or word.

Here is a list of some of the things gathered for the story bucket:

Bucket, bucket apron, Marvin (boy doll), sunflower with tatty leaves, silver fish, vegetables and fruit. Piggy Bank, purse, shopping list, shopping bag, real or plastic flowers. Bread rolls, gingerbread men, cake, lots of little and big shiny fish cut out in card,

picnic cloth, bottle of lemonade, big and little plastic boxes for big and little fish, real vegetables and fruit. Red hat and apron, flat cap and apron, fisherman's hat and wellington boots, baker's apron and hat, paper bags, birthday candles.

As the story is told the child is cued into the critical features of the objects as they are introduced. With encouragement and support they can locate, explore, feel, press, touch, lift, hold, grasp, look, smell and taste (as appropriate). Talk to the child and use meaningful language to describe and explain purpose, shape, form and process as the story unfolds.

Here are some examples of the wonderful learning opportunities that lie within Marvin's story.

Here are some examples of the wonderful learning opportunities that lie within Marvin's story.

Main story

- Read the story and give the child the real objects to hold whilst they listen
- Provide labels for all the items and have the child match the Braille/print label to the item
- Dress up and role play the story



Photo of the characters from the story sitting inside a story bucket

- Make a simple model of a market stall
- Make a book of main characters and key words
- Make a shopping list; handwrite, type, record using audio labeller
- Count money into wallet, sort coinage
- Flora Flower's Stall
- Plant flowers and vegetables - measure growth
- Feel the parts of the flower, petals, stalk, leaves
- Talk about how flowers are used to signify different occasions: birthdays, weddings, saying thank you
- Veg Man Vernon's Fruit and Vegetable Stall
- Buy and explore real fruits and vegetables, count, sort, categorise, discriminate, smell, taste, cut, cook, eat,
- Make vegetable prints, add sand to paint to create texture
- Explore a vegetable patch, grow own vegetables
- Fishman Phil's Stall
- Visit a fishmonger (grocery store), buy a fish, feel and explore, smell, cook and eat!
- Talk about where fish live, pond, seas, rivers, lakes

Grandma's picnic

- Make/buy/decorate a birthday cake
- Make gingerbread people: count, buy ingredients, make, bake and eat
- Lay table for picnic, count how many plates, glasses, spoons are required

To sum up, literacy opportunities are all around the child waiting to be explored and experienced. Remember to add 'ness' onto everything you talk about, the 'bucketness' of buckets, the 'fishness' of fish, the 'cake-ness' of cakes and more!

Keep it concrete and purposeful with learning maximized to the full, but most of all keep it fun!

For more information visit:

<https://www.positiveeye.co.uk>

Recognizing and Building Abstract Thinking in the Child with Visual Impairment

Marnee Loftin

Abstract: *This article explores how to identify problems with and help move towards abstract thinking in children with visual impairments. It was originally published on Marnee Loftin's blog on www.pathstoliteracy.org*

Key Words:

Abstract thinking, concrete thinking, problem solving, cognitive abilities, cognition, generalization, concept development, creative play, dramatic play, teaching.

Editor's note: *Marnee Loftin is a retired psychologist who worked for the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired for 28 years. She maintains a small consultant practice that provides psychological and educational evaluation of children with Visual Impairment as well as doing workshops. To continue to benefit from Loftin's wealth of knowledge, visit : <http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/blogs/marnee-loftin>*

Marnee Loftin's book, Making Evaluation Meaningful, originally published in 2006, is being updated and should be completed by early summer of 2018. Meaningful evaluation depends on the on the knowledge and ability of staff to administer and interpret results. Evaluation and assessment results are essential to provide a foundation for the educational planning process. This publication provides guidance to evaluation personnel, teachers of students with visual impairments, and families in making the best possible decisions regarding student evaluation.

Maria is a second grader who currently uses braille for most of her learning, but supplements the materials with audiotapes. She was quite successful in first grade and was often complimented on her amazing memory. Maria could often quote stories verbatim and quickly answered each of the questions posed by the teacher. It is now the end of second grade and Maria's teacher is quite concerned about her difficulty with comprehension of stories. Maria is able to provide a great deal of specific details about the stories. While she can list the name of different people in the story as well as the specific action taken, she is not able to state why a particular action occurred or the overall meaning of the story. For example, when reading a story about elephants and the problems they experience in captivity, Maria is apt to only understand that elephants often perform in circuses. There is concern

that Maria might have a specific learning disability.

Maria is exhibiting some difficulties in school that are often noted in children with visual impairment. As the world (and academic tasks) becomes more complex, they begin to experience more difficulties in performing at their potential. These problems may be related to a specific learning disability or cognitive abilities. However, it may also be a problem in moving from concrete to abstract ways of thinking.

What do the terms "concrete thinking" and "abstract thinking" really mean? Psychologists have long recognized that children essentially learn "how to think" about objects and events as they develop and mature. The young child tends to think of their world in concrete ways. They learn

facts and information about objects and experiences they have actually encountered in their world. The emphasis in concrete thinking is often on recitation of facts. Typically, the child gathers a great deal of information, but it all focuses upon learning about the single item or experience. For example, a young child will easily recognize that their stuffed animal is called a “dog” and will slowly add more information to this single concept. Concrete thinking represents a level of thought that is most often focused upon gathering pieces of information and reciting it back to others. Maria’s ability to demonstrate skills such as a recall of facts about a story is an example of a child who is engaged in concrete thinking.

In abstract thinking, children learn to engage in problem solving or truly “thinking” about their world. It allows a child to develop ways to classify objects and experiences. It also allows a child to begin to deal with concepts that are not immediately present in their world. This type of thinking is the reason that children can answer question that require them to draw their own conclusions from specific material that has been learned previously. For example, abstract thinking allows a child to broaden the concept of “dog” to a broader concept of animals. It also allows them to add new information to a previously-learned concept, e.g. animals can be household pets or wild animals. Children develop the ability to master new concepts that they have not directly experienced, e.g. understanding the meaning of freedom. Maria’s difficulty in answering questions about the theme of the particular passage about elephants represents a difficulty in abstract thinking.

How do children move to abstract thinking? Is it automatic or does it need to be taught?

The young child moves from concrete thinking to abstract thinking as they begin to experience their world. As they acquire more

concepts, they are able to mentally sort through these concepts and identify similarities and differences. They become more able to predict how new situations might develop. Abilities to predict the outcome of events become more sophisticated. Many of these things happen simply as a result of experiences and interacting with their environment. However, there are some issues that affect this movement into abstract thinking that do not seem to be related to experiences.

What are these other issues that affect moving into abstract thinking?

There is also a great deal of research that suggests that some of these skills will not simply develop as the result of experiences. Cognitive abilities will set some broader limits to the development of abstract thinking. Children with cognitive limitations will experience more difficulty in developing skills in abstract thinking. Some children with cognitive limitations will never develop consistent skills in abstract reasoning; they will always require additional support. Children with superior cognitive abilities will develop these abstract thinking skills at an earlier age and to a more advanced degree.

Additionally, improvement in abstract thinking is also related to physical changes associated with the brain. Much of the current research in brain biology stresses the importance of the later development of the frontal area of the brain, a critical factor in abstract thinking. Research indicates that most of the abilities that we associate with abstract thinking are a function of the frontal lobe in the brain. This area of the brain does not fully develop until the early 20’s, explaining some of the difficulties with decision-making noted with teenagers.

Can we control the extent to which a child develops the ability to exhibit abstract thinking?

Some limits are present on our ability to

impact the development of abstract thinking. These are most often imposed by three factors. The first is the environmental experiences of the child. The child who has little opportunity to interact with their environment, as well as little stimulation in thinking about different situations, implications, and concepts, is likely to be delayed in development. Again, both the internal cognitive abilities of a child and his physical maturity will determine some outer limits for abstract thinking. Even as adults, we demonstrate significant differences in our abilities to engage in abstract thinking. For example, many college students will struggle with understanding the meaning of a particular poem. Concepts of physics may be difficult for others who prefer types of learning that are based upon repetitive pieces of information.

Are there special issues associated with visual impairment?

Children with visual impairments (VI) often have additional difficulties in developing these skills in abstract thinking. Little research has occurred to determine the possible reasons for this. However, it is frequently noted as a problem once children with VI begin to move out of the early primary grades. As with Maria, the child who has been quite proficient at answering questions about stories in the first grade begins to have difficulty in the second and third grade. The expectations for proficiency have changed. Children are asked to engage in behaviors such as problem solving, as well as making inferences for different characters. This is often a difficult transition and period of learning for children with VI.

How do I know that educational performance is being impacted?

Both parents and teachers often recognize these difficulties for the child with VI. It is often noted when children are in the second grade. Prior to that time, most tasks involve asking a child to answer a series of questions about an activity or story. Typically,

these questions involve gaining simple information about who performed an activity and what happened as a result. Often the child with VI has a superior memory and is quite successful in answering these questions about specific information provided. However, by the second grade, questions begin to encompass more abstract qualities, as well as the basic exchange of information. The concern is often expressed that a child can answer any number of questions about “who” or “what” might have occurred in a story. However, the child often has difficulty in responding to the question of “why” this might have happened.

Why does this seem to be an issue for children with VI?

Again, there is little research that examines this issue. However, several issues seem to be relevant to the discussion. The first is related to the vision itself. Often children develop the ability to generalize simply from observing and experiencing the world. The child with vision is able to play with both dogs and cats, observe the similarities as well as the differences, and develop the more abstract concept of “animals” and “household pets.” The child with VI will need to be taught these differences. This typically requires a different type of learning that requires more time and intervention on the part of the adult.

Often the difficulties are made even more apparent through differences in the instructional process. Adults are often eager to provide a great deal of information about a concept in order to help a child with VI understand a particular word or concept. For example, a parent might provide a great deal of information about the word “fort” indicating that it was surrounded by walls, had cannons, was staffed by soldiers, etc. However, they do not provide information about the general concept of a fort being used for defense or protection. The information uniting these descriptors is often not provided. The child may not have a general idea of

the purpose of the fort or ways in which it is related to things that they might experience in their lives, e.g. ways that it relates to a current military base or police station. It is true that the child with VI needs a great deal of specific information to broaden their awareness of a concept. However, it is equally important that the broader concepts be introduced as well as related to previously-encountered learning.

Additionally, creative play is a crucial factor in beginning the process of abstract thinking. Some of the first examples of abstract thinking occur when a child is engaged in creative play. A child realizes that the plastic teapot may be recognized as a coffee pot and that tipping the pot allows a stream of imaginary coffee to be poured. For the first time, objects that are not present in their life are represented and “thought about.” This is typically considered to be the original step toward moving into abstract thinking. Typically, creative play is a challenge for children with significant visual impairment. It does not seem to occur spontaneously for most children and must be actively taught.

Now I know that there is a problem...how can I help my child? Or even better...how do I avoid the problem?

There are many different types of skills that need to be mastered. However, the following items identify some of the critical factors that help move from concrete to abstract thinking. All children require the ability to complete the following tasks:

- Engage in problem solving
- Identify similarities within disparate objects
- Plan and sequence a series of tasks to a reasonable conclusion
- Identify and evaluate possible solutions to problems

The immediate reaction is often to simply help a child determine “why” something might have occurred through an additional

series of questions. However, we often misunderstand that the ability to answer these types of questions is based upon some previously-mastered skills. Unless the child has developed these other skills, teaching the answer to a “why” question will be difficult. Children may quickly develop a rote answer to “why” questions that does not reflect true understanding of the concept.

Development of skills in answering these “why” questions will require a base of other earlier skills in thinking. Many skills form the basis of abstract thinking. Developing each of these skills will help a child become successful in movement from concrete to abstract thinking. It is always ideal when the child with VI learns these skills at approximately the same age as their sighted peers. However, even for the older child, it will be important to attempt to develop the identified skills if currently missing.

What activities will help develop these skills?

Movement into the process of abstract thinking remains a developmental process. Although some suggest that it cannot simply be taught, there are a multitude of activities that will encourage a child in development of this skill. These activities form a basis for development of these skills, as well as an impetus to move along the continuum toward the development of abstract thinking. A few of these suggestions are listed below.

1. Encourage dramatic play with use of real, as well as representational, items. Begin by focusing upon familiar stories and previous experiences. Continue by acting out how future events might unfold.
2. Develop new stories to be acted out using these items. Encourage the format of beginning, middle and end of a story.
3. Give words to your own thoughts.

When you prepare a meal or an activity, verbalize in brief comments the steps that you are taking.

4. When solving a particular problem, provide words to describe the steps that you are taking to solve the problem. Keep the language short, but clearly related to your solution.
5. Try to get your child to think of new ways to use a familiar object. For example, ask about different ways that you can use a bedspread or pillows. Ask a child to consider different ways that you might use a single egg that is in the refrigerator.
6. Use everyday situations and ask a child to “think about” reasons that it occurred and possible solutions. For example, if you are out of milk, ask child to develop ways that you can deal with the problem. Ask about ways that you might avoid the problem. Keep the problems simple and relevant to everyday situations.
7. Help your child think of analogies in relationship to everyday life or favorite books. Ask the child to identify stories that remind him/her of the current story. For example, what book has he read that also reminds him/her of the story about pigs. Identify the similarities between the two books or ask the child to clarify his/her thinking.
8. Develop problem-solving skills that can be used in multiple situations. With the older child, encourage comparing one situation to another that has been experienced. Provide structure, such as asking who was involved, what occurred, what might have been other responses, how other responses might have impacted the situation. Keep questioning to a minimum, but help the child see how different responses might have occurred. Evaluate the efficiency of these responses in relationship to the situation, i.e. “did it help solve a problem?”
9. When teaching abstract concepts, employ the thinking-aloud strategies used at an earlier age. Talk through your explanation stopping at discrete steps. Try to compare abstract concepts to real-life situations. For example, when discussing different branches of government, relate these branches to aspects of a family. Be sure to summarize the specific ways in which they are alike, as well as different.
10. Realize that it is much easier for a child to focus upon ways in which situations, objects, or concepts are different. Encourage them to look for similarities, even in items or events that are quite different on the surface. Use real objects at the beginning, so that similarities will be obvious. For example, ask the child to determine ways in which a flower and a carrot are the same.
11. Talk about ways in real life that experiences are the same as one another. Start with experiences that have many similarities and move to experiences that are seemingly quite different. For example, talk about the similarities between a trip to the store and a trip to the dentist.
12. Encourage creative thinking in determining similarities between these situations, objects, or concepts. Perhaps develop one list that could be considered “Silly Similarities”, as well as one that is more reality-bound.
13. Avoid the tendency to ask a number of “why” questions. If you do ask these questions, help the child by “thinking aloud” as you determine possible answers. Help the child understand that there are often multiple answers to this question. This not only encourages abstract reasoning, but also helps

build creativity. For example, instead of beginning by asking the child “why do we have to clean up water that has spilled on the floor?”, provide multiple reasons, such as “we need to clean up the water that spilled on the floor because someone might slip”. Begin with this type of concrete example of response to “why” questions, rather than abstract ones, such as “why do the stars twinkle?”

14. Help the child to evaluate the “success” of a particular experience. This helps identify the emotions that the child is feeling, as well as giving a sense of independence from the feelings of others. Prior to this activity, help the child develop a limited number of characteristics (i.e. no more than 4) of a successful (or pleasurable) activity.

15. Plan a party together. Divide responsibilities into four parts, e.g. planning, inviting, hosting, and cleanup. Ask the child to determine 3 different activities within each of these responsibilities. After the party is completed, ask the child to review the responsibilities. Which tasks were not necessary? Which tasks should have been included?

Development of abstract thinking skills is a critical factor in ensuring academic success, as well as in dealing with the complexities of life. Support from parents as well as teachers is essential if a child with VI is to reach his/her potential to live as independently as possible. Intervention is most effective when problems are recognized, interventions are planned, and both teachers and parents are consistent in implementation of strategies.

A New Paradigm: What the Anat Baniel Method, Lilli Nielsen’s Active Learning and Christine Roman’s Cortical Visual Impairment Intervention Strategies Have in Common

Sara Kitchen, with assistance from Kate Hurst and Lynne McAlister, TSBVI Outreach

Abstract:

Anat Baniel is trained as a clinical psychologist, dancer, and was a close professional associate of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais for over a decade. She is the founder of the Anat Baniel Method® out of San Rafael, CA, and Author of “Kids Beyond Limits” and other books. She developed an approach, that uses movement to impact brain function. This approach is based heavily on current research related to learning and neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to form new neural connections and “rewire” itself throughout a person’s life.

Dr. Christine Roman-Lantzy, author of “Cortical Visual Impairment: An Approach to Assessment and Intervention” and director of the Pediatric VIEW Program in Allison Park, PA, is a leading expert in the study of Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI) in the United States. Cortical Visual Impairment occurs as a result of damage to the area of the brain that processes visual information.

Patty Obrzut is an Occupational Therapist and Assistant Director of Penrickton Center for Blind Children in Michigan. Penrickton utilizes an approach developed by psychologist and educator Dr. Lilli Nielsen of Denmark known as “Active Learning”. The foundation of this approach is that all human beings learn through doing, especially in the earliest stages of learning. Obrzut trained extensively with Dr. Nielsen and was authorized to provide training as an expert on Active Learning.

This article discusses some of the many parallels within each of the three presenter’s body of knowledge and work.

Key Words:

Anat Baniel, ABM, Neuromovement®, brain plasticity, nine essentials, attention, movement, neuroscience, Christine Roman-Lantzy, Christine Roman, CVI, Comparative Language, Salient Features, Cortical Visual Impairment, Patty Obrzut, Active Learning, Dynamic Learning Circle, Discrimination, Differentiation, Integration.

Anat Baniel, Christine Roman, and Patty Obrzut were presenters at the recent Texas Focus Conference in Austin in March, 2018. During the time they spent in Texas they had opportunities to visit with each other and they shared some of their perceptions of each other’s work with conference organizers. We’d like to explore some of the points raised by Anat Baniel and explain how they relate to what we know about other techniques that successfully and methodically target neuroplasticity, as explained by Patty Obrzut and Christine Roman.

Anat Baniel has described very thoughtfully what our children have been teaching us for years. Lilli Nielsen, Jan van Dijk, Barbara Miles, Christine Roman, and many other great minds within the field of visual impairment have spoken of and written about these ideas using different language, and all come back to consideration of and working within the perspective of the individual student. Anat Baniel’s work with Michael Merzenich, the “father of neuroplasticity”, validates these tools even more. Our traditional approach to learning in public education may eventually change and catch up. In the field of visual impairment, we may add to our toolbox or continue to use these “cutting-edge” strategies that are backed by prominent neuroscientists. We can feel reassured that at least within our community,

we are providing the best learning situations for growing and developing the mind of each child, and can explain what we are doing and why, knowing we are backed up by the latest research on learning.

Brain friendly learning takes advantage of neuroplasticity and can be provided in any situation by applying what Anat Baniel has dubbed the “Nine Essentials.” For more information on the nine essentials, please go to:

<https://www.anatbanielmethod.com/about-abm/the-nine-essentials>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6pl-6BiKvAM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-56hA6fTVcc>



Anat Baniel offering information at Texas Focus 2018

The Job of the Brain

“The ‘job’ of the brain is to put order into the disorder, to make sense of the nonsense.”

-Anat Baniel

In the field of visual impairment, we understand that many of our children have experienced barriers to accessing perceivable, relevant information. A lack of sensory input does not give the brain enough information to organize and create a comprehensive whole. Information is fragmented and the brain has few opportunities to make sense of what it does receive.

The brain will get good at things it does often. When neurological connections are not reinforced by repetition they will wither and disappear. This occurs naturally in all humans during the first few years of life when thousands of connections are made and then pruned away as the child establishes greater understanding of the world and how it works.

Our task as educators and parents is to ensure a child is provided with information frequently enough that organization (creation of neural networks) can occur. This information must be provided through whatever senses are available to the child. A child needs many opportunities to use and strengthen neurological connections. Anat Baniel brings this about through facilitation of slow, thoughtful movements.

In Active Learning, we bring instructive materials close to the child and allow them to act upon them in whatever way they are able. In order to be perceived, objects are often in direct contact with the child’s body. Each time a child acts upon an object and then notices the sensory information they get in response (a sight, sound, vibration, weight, etc.) they are able to build connections and “make sense of the nonsense.”

A child with CVI may have difficulty discriminating what visual information is relevant and useful. She may not have the visual memory it takes to make any association with visual input. Modifying this child’s environments to maximize vision within the correct range of visual functioning is another way to help the child ‘make sense of the nonsense’.

The Underlying Process of Learning

“The underlying process of learning: Discrimination, Differentiation, Integration.”

Anat Baniel

The process of learning has been presented in stages by each of these three experts. Mirrored in each other’s work are divisions referred to as stages, levels, phases, etc., and are all necessary aspects of the process of learning. Though these stages are linear in appearance, all humans cycle through them when they begin learning something new or relearning how to do something old.

Discrimination

“Information equals the perception of a difference (signal to noise ratio).”

Anat Baniel

According to Wikipedia, the signal-to-noise ratio is defined as “the ratio of the power of a signal (meaningful information) and the power of background noise (unwanted signal).” In other words, the signal must be significantly greater than the noise.

Perception is a key word. If something is not perceived, it does not exist for an individual. Huge chunks of information are absent in the world of the child with visual impairments, especially if they have additional disabilities. Even with some vision the quality, depth, and breadth of perceptual information is missing in every conceptual area.

Anat Baniel uses slow movement to give the brain time to perceive both the movement and the effect it has on the rest of the body - the difference. She referred to this as “movement with attention.” When we try to do something quickly or faster, we will do whatever we already know and will not learn anything new because we can’t perceive any difference at that rate. We have to slow down and attend to subtle information.

In active learning we teach basic concepts of how the world works by creating activities and environments that interest the child. Through close observation we can begin to understand what qualities the child perceives and finds interesting such as taste, weight, temperature, sound, and movement. We share many things and activities that are similar to the experience which caught the child’s attention hoping the child will perceive the differences. If there is no interest, perception of the difference is unlikely because humans tend to ignore what isn’t interesting.

The discrimination phase of the Active Learning approach relates to Stage One of the Dynamic Learning Circle: the learner becomes aware and interested. (See on the Active Learning Space website <http://active-learning-space.org/dynamic-learning-circle>.) The learner becomes aware that something is there.

In the case of CVI intervention, our students spend a great deal of time learning to see. Initially the child may only notice visual qualities like movement and light and then over time may begin to notice very familiar items. Initially, visual items must stand out from the environment and distractions must be extremely reduced if not eliminated entirely. In CVI Phase I, “building visual behavior,” the learner becomes aware of visual information by the reduction or elimination of all other

competing sensory information. The learner finds out that visual information isn’t just more nonsensical visual noise and so becomes aware of what he sees. For this to happen for someone functioning in Phase I of CVI, visual clutter, auditory clutter, and positioning must be considered among other things. Examples of adaptations include turning the lights low or off and lighting a single target, using a CVI Den (<https://strategytosee.com/diy-projects/cvi-den/>) in which one target is visible, turning off televisions and radios, and reducing or eliminating background chatter.

Often, when we do not approach instruction from the child’s perception of a difference, we may find that our efforts fail. If the child experiences failure over and over again, this may become ingrained in the child’s self-perception and shut down learning.

Differentiation

“Perception of differences leads to differentiation, i.e., creation of new connections which open the opportunity for integration of new patterns.”

Anat Baniel

Anat Baniel notes that two repetitions of a random movement that creates an awareness of a ‘difference’ for the child will result in the child making a purposeful third movement. From the literature on Active Learning, once a child can begin to compare how one activity/object is different from another, she can begin to hypothesize about items. This leads to categorization of information or building the internal scaffolding on which the child can hang new information.

The differentiation phase within Active Learning relates to Stage 2 of the Dynamic Learning Circle: the learner is curious and active. By repeating an action over and over on an object the child learns what it will do, how it feels, and so forth. This experience can be compared with other similar experi-

ences to see what is “the same” and what is “different”. A child then tries to act on a new object in an old way and he learns it responds differently from other objects he has experienced before. So the child employs a slightly different pattern of movement to get additional or new information. The child builds a new pattern that can be used with a new object to get different information. For example, a child with a visual impairment may play with an object placed on either side of his body by batting it. He may experiment with batting this way and that way for quite some time or may pause in his play with his hand on the object. The child could be unaware that the activity on his right side and that on his left side can ever be related, since he has no visual information to confirm this.

If at some point, while his hand rests on an object to his right, he bats the object on his left causing the object to touch his right hand he may experience a great surprise! The child may stop and think about what just happened, and try to make this new and different thing happen again! This experience if repeated enough could lead to two-handed exploration at midline, a skill that is integral to many functional activities.

At the moment we see a child make a new connection both Lilli Nielsen and Anat Baniel tell us not to interrupt the learning by saying something like, “Good job!” We mean well, but it takes the attention away from what is being learned and puts the focus on the relationship the child has with us. Children’s learning is not about trying to please an adult! We have to retrain ourselves to express our excitement by calmly describing what the learner did when they are ready to talk about it. It is exciting to see connections being made, but too much emphasis on the adult’s feelings can take the success away from the child.



Patty Obrzut points out important aspects of movement for Active Learners at Texas Focus 2018

Differentiation within CVI can be characterized during Phase II, “Integrating Vision with Function,” when the learner begins to meld the visual information they are now aware of with other sensory information. This is a situation in which a CVI den can be very beneficial for moving from Phase I to Phase II, when the learner realizes her movements affect the visual information she has begun discriminating. Not only can items be seen, but those same items can be touched, moved, and can make a sound when the learner acts upon them. In a CVI den made from a tent with an attached bottom layer, even the learner using his legs to kick can create the noticing of a difference, as the items will move when the tent is moved.

Intervention regarding CVI tells us that once familiar items are perceived consistently, the teacher or parent can begin to draw the child’s interest to the qualities that make these things different or the same from one another. Visual attention must be drawn to a difference (or a likeness) for children with CVI based on what the child finds interesting. Otherwise the child might overlook that difference and only focus on the familiar aspects of the objects.

Comparative language can be used to highlight salient features, such as pointing out similar and dissimilar visual qualities

between different breeds of dogs. (For example, this dog has long, black, hair and this dog has short, white hair.) If the child is interested or curious about the dogs' hair and we take the time to discuss it with him, we can awaken and/or reinforce visual curiosity. We should mention this is not a time to quiz or test. It is a time to interact and enjoy the discussion using the child's interests, language, and pace.

Integration

Anat baniel describes integration as a process that can be refined when increasingly smaller, more subtle bits of information have been compiled through differentiation.

In Stage 3 of the Dynamic Learning Circle in Active Learning the learner completes learning from his repeated action. The formerly new action becomes a natural part the way he gets information about other objects in the world, even those that are already familiar. This opens up a whole new set of possibilities for the learner. Instead of just having one way to explore, he now has two ways to learn about his world.

In Stage 4 of the Dynamic Learning Circle, the learner becomes ready for new challenges and the process starts over with a new item or quality of an item. The learner becomes aware of something and gains a more complex understanding of the object or its qualities. The old and new information is connected or integrated in the child's understanding. As more exploration schemes are added by the learner, the more subtle and refined elements of objects can be integrated into a more representative holistic concept of the object. The function of the object may now be introduced.

During Phase II of CVI, familiar items are presented in an environment in which visual information can be accessed and then acted

upon. This happens repeatedly enough so that the child can begin to visually recognize the item before acting upon it. Once an item is so familiar that it can be viewed easily, the child may become interested in and curious about the visual details. The child is so good at using his vision in this instance that he is not working so hard just to see, rather he is using his vision easily and naturally along with other senses, like someone with more typical connections between their eyes and brain. The pleasure associated with the ease of looking at something may serve as motivation to find other situations in which looking is easy, if the child is able to control some aspects of his own environment. Proper intervention allows multiple opportunities to build and strengthen these connections.

In Phase III of CVI, the learner also starts over with the process, learning to discriminate, differentiate, and integrate increasingly smaller and subtler types of visual information. This fine-tunes the brain's ability to quickly identify visual information paired with the associated concepts, and strengthens visual memory.

Through environmental modifications and guided learning, the learner's ability to discriminate, differentiate, and finally integrate visual information allows for "seeing to learn" as opposed to learning to see. Throughout life individuals with CVI face challenges when novel items and environments are experienced. This is why even though an individual's vision appears much more typical, the learner and educational team need guidance and strategies provided by a knowledgeable professional in CVI throughout their educational career.

Connecting

"We can only integrate elements into new neural networks (skills) with the current achieved level of differentiation." Anat Baniel



Dr. Christine Roman-Lantzy stresses the importance of using brain-friendly CVI strategies at Texas Focus 2018

Anat Baniel suggested a paradigm shift for educational staff and caregivers; we need to move away from the idea of “fixing” the child and move toward the idea of “connecting” with the child. When we move from fixing to connecting, we let the child teach us what it is that they are ready to learn. We gain this knowledge by observing them intensely.

Baniel stressed that if a child could do what is being requested by her teacher, she would do it. We must provide the information and environment their brains need to make the connections in order to learn the skills we want them to have. The brain will get there if the correct information is provided.

This is why intensive observational assessment is a first and necessary step. We must first determine where the child is right now. What movement skills have already been achieved and what skills are not yet present? When we provide more practice in strengthening neural pathways and networks at the current level, the brain becomes ready for what comes next. When we push a learner to do something without first helping them build a framework to store the information this ability may not be generalized to other environments or materials. This is training not learning.

When the brain has had enough discriminable and differential information with enough experience to integrate the information, new interests will begin to emerge. Children show us that they are ready for a new step by changes in their behavior. In Active Learning, we examine fine and gross motor skills and fine-tune our activity using other areas of assessment, such as spatial relations and emotional skills, to provide appropriate learning environments. We then reassess to make sure what we are providing is continues to interest the learner and document new skills that are achieved. For Cortical Visual Impairment, we use the CVI Range to gather information about how a child uses their vision in various environments. We then provide appropriate learning environments based upon that information and reassess as the child changes her use of vision.

A New Paradigm

“Discrimination and Differentiation seem to be the ‘orphans’ of the process in many of the clinical and theoretical frame works.”

Anat Baniel

When we begin to consider discrimination and differentiation while providing intervention for children, we will automatically change our way of thinking. Consideration of what is perceivable and interesting to a child shifts our focus from a system-centered to an individual-centered approach. This frees us up to truly know and connect with the children we serve and let go of what has not been successful. The techniques described by Christine Roman, Anat Baniel, and Patty Obrzut each provide us with a structure and method that allows freedom to be individual-centered, are backed by current research in neuroscience, and are validated by the children who teach us what does and doesn’t work.

Strategic Planning at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

William Daugherty, Superintendent, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Abstract: *The author shared information on the school's strategic planning session to determine how the school will continue to meet its mission.*

Key Words: *Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI), blind, visually impaired, strategic planning*

In June of 2017, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) held a strategic planning session with statewide stakeholders to help the school make decisions on how to best meet its mission over the next several years. The large group that gathered on the campus was comprised of educators, parents, adult service providers, consumer organizations, graduates of TSBVI, and members of the school's Board of Trustees. The day was largely devoted to what is working well at TSBVI; what outside trends, factors and challenges the school should attend to; and how the school might improve its programs and services. The next day, the TSBVI Board of Trustees met with the school's administration to review the previous day's input and to come forward with ideas of their own.

It was very gratifying for TSBVI to hear from its stakeholders how much they valued the school and its mission both on its campus and through its statewide outreach services. Among the many statewide challenges noted by the group included concerns about educational and federal funding; the growth in the number of students with multiple disabilities; high caseload numbers among teachers and specialists; rapid changes in technology; and post-school outcomes for all students. The discussion of how TSBVI could improve its services garnered ideas on helping ISD

diagnostic teams better evaluate students; increasing expertise in autism; finding ways to support early childhood learning; and reaching out to general education teachers on how to make curriculum and instruction more accessible.

TSBVI has a statewide mission, and the many of the stakeholders voiced statewide issues as noted above. While there were challenges and concerns brought forward by the group that are largely outside of TSBVI's sphere of influence, for example Medicare funding, the majority of statewide issues noted have already found their way into the plans and activities of the school and its collaborative partners in the Education Service Centers, teacher training programs, parent groups, and others. Take for example the issue of large caseloads among Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI) in Texas school districts. TSBVI hosts a statewide group called the Texas Action Committee that, under the leadership of Dr. Rona Pogrud of Texas Tech University, developed a tool called the Visual Impairment Scale of Service Intensity of Texas (VISSIT). While not developed to establish caseload numbers for TVI's, the VISSIT does help TVI's establish the amount of services and supports individual students need based upon their learning requirements. Ultimately, this helps schools determine their staffing needs in the area of visual impairment and blindness.

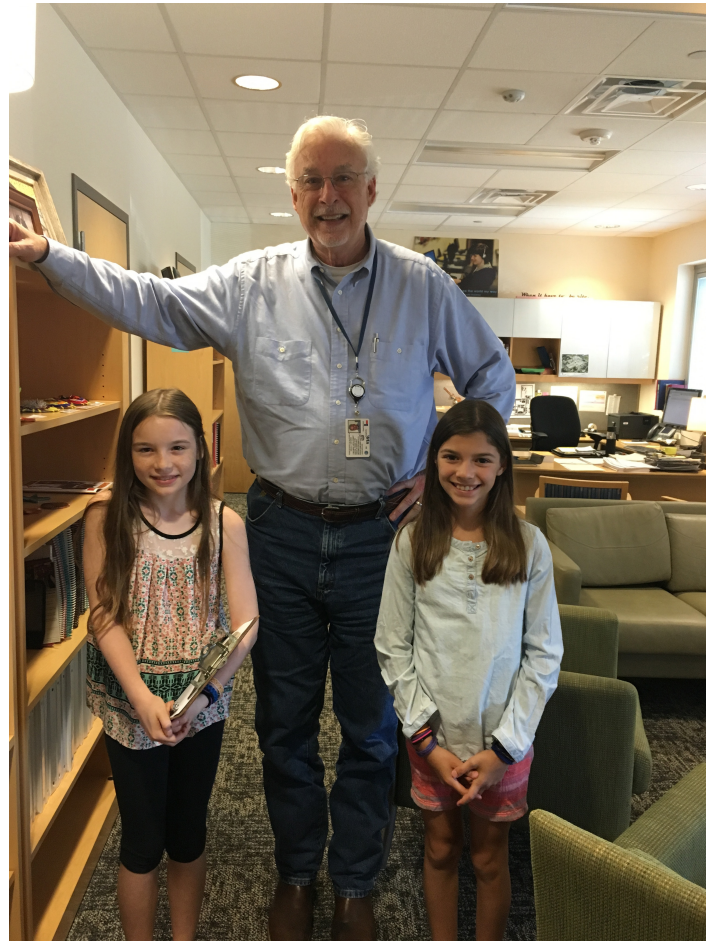
Overall, TSBVI was encouraged to hear how much the school's current statewide efforts and plans aligned with the issues that the statewide stakeholders identified. This is likely due in large part to the fact that TSBVI has such a connected statewide presence among parents and educators that their issues have long been informing the type of programs and services the school develops and provides.

Inputs on the school's two campus-based programs, Comprehensive Programs and Short-Term Programs, also indicated that TSBVI is largely on the right track. Among the recommendations for Comprehensive Programs was the need to achieve better post-school outcomes (higher education, employment, community living) and to improve the transition process for students returning to their local school districts. Recommendations for Short-Term Programs included more program options and finding ways to serve more students with complex learning needs such as those who are Deaf-Blind.

The TSBVI Strategic Plan is still a work in progress, but here is a representative sample of what it will likely contain.

- TSBVI will increase its statewide capacity to provide on-line training for parents, educators and students over a wide range of topics.
- The school will work with its collaborative partners in the ESCs to provide more training supports to diagnosticians and school psychologist regarding the impact of visual impairment on learning needs. And,
- The school will establish a Low Vision Clinic on its campus in order to help students maximize their visual efficiency for learning, daily living and recreation.

TSBVI also has a number of internal needs that fall into the strategic plan. Sufficient legislative funding for the school is a perennial concern. In addition, having an effective and efficient staff development system is essential for the school to provide a state-of-the-art education in a setting that includes instruction both during the day and during residential, after-school hours. For any SenseAbilities readers who participated in the strategic planning session, TSBVI owes you a large debt of gratitude. You made a valuable contribution to this process and demonstrated why Texas is among the best in the nation when it comes to statewide collaboration that lifts all boats. Thanks!



TSBVI Superintendent William Daugherty with Gullet Elementary students Olivia Escalante and Ava LaWare. Photo: Gullet Elementary PTA

New Management in the Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program

Keisha Rowe, Director, Office of Independence Services,
Health and Human Services Commission

Abstract: *The Blind Children's Program remains committed to providing quality services to meet the needs of children and families while adapting to new managerial changes.*

Key Words: *Blind Children's Program, blind, visually impaired, quality services*

It is my pleasure to announce the selection of Lauren Cox as the Blind Children's Program (BCP) Manager with the Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program. Cox, a graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University, has extensive knowledge of the program, having worked in various positions with BCP throughout the state. Prior to her tenure with BCP, she worked as a preschool teacher and as a vocational rehabilitation transition counselor. Cox's breadth of experience makes her uniquely qualified to lead the BCP program into the future.

Cox believes in the potential and abilities of the children and families in our program. She is committed to ensuring each child receives high quality, individualized services to help them meet their needs, overcome barriers and reach their goals.

The BCP management team will continue working together to ensure that the children we serve receive the same high quality services that they have grown accustomed to over the years. While the program may undergo organizational changes, our commitment to the children we serve is unwavering. Our steadfast goal is to build upon the historical excellence of the program.

While we welcome new team leadership, we also say goodbye to a dear friend. After 21 years of doing what she calls, "the best job on the planet," Al'An Kesler will retire from BCP on March 31, 2018. She requested that

the following message be shared with our readers:

"To all of the children, families and professionals with whom I have had the honor of knowing and working, thank you for the most amazing and wonderful journey of my life. It has been a privilege and a gift to have traveled this road with you. You will continue to be in my heart and prayers forever."

BCP continues to adapt to changing times and strives to consistently meet the needs of the children and families we serve. As we modify our program to meet demand and streamline services, the fundamental values and goals of BCP remain unchanged. We are committed to helping your child reach his or her maximum potential and become a gainfully employed adult. We will continue to assess any and all barriers your child may encounter along the way and will work with you to plan, develop and deliver services that will provide your child with the tools and skills he or she needs to overcome obstacles.

If you are interested in learning more about BCP or need help accessing services, please contact us:
512-438-2404

BlindChildrensProgram@hhsc.state.tx.us

hhs.texas.gov/blind-childrens-program

Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Students with Disabilities

Tammy Winkenwerder, VR Transition Program Specialist, Texas Workforce Commission

Abstract: *In this article, Ms. Winkenwerder describes the impact of Vocational Rehabilitation in her life and the federal changes that will create new opportunities for students with disabilities.*

Key words: *Vocational Rehabilitation, disability, Texas Workforce Commission, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, pre-employment transition services.*

Think back to the events that made the most impression on you as a child or adolescent. We know the experiences in the early years of life shape our lives as adults. I have a physical disability, and one of my memories is of the time when I was about 14 and the school district arranged for a vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor to visit my parents and me. She told us about opportunities and ways that I could do things to be independent, like drive a car! After this meeting, my parents were still apprehensive about letting go, but I remember feeling motivated to pursue more of life. Like most of my peers, I wanted to be a part of society and live a life of independence, but there were many skills to learn before I could get there. Everyone must learn those skills before transitioning from high school to adult life. However, those of us who have a disability need extra support and training from people who are passionate about helping us succeed and who recognize innovation and opportunity.

The people who support young people with disabilities can be parents, family, friends, teachers, and institutions that comprise school administrators and government programs such as the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) VR program. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 went into effect the year I was born, and it is the reason I am an independent adult. The Act was amended when

on July 22, 2014, President Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) into law. WIOA is designed to help job seekers get access to employment, training, education, and support services so they can succeed in the labor market by providing skilled workers for employers. WIOA also oversees state VR programs; it made some substantial changes to focus more services and funding on the beginning of the VR continuum, when students with disabilities are thinking of possible careers and transitioning to life outside of high school. Our government leaders have realized the importance of providing opportunity and innovation early in a person's life.

WIOA focuses on the importance of preparing young people with disabilities for employment not only by having VR programs invest more funding into transition services but also by encouraging VR programs to develop partnerships with education agencies, school districts, workforce boards, employers, colleges, and universities. Through these partnerships and services, young people with disabilities can receive five areas of training: job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy. These areas of training are known as pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS).

Pre-ETS activities are for students with disabilities who are between the ages of 14 to 22 and who are eligible for or receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. WIOA also allows VR programs to provide Pre-ETS to students who meet IDEA and Section 504 criteria but have not been determined eligible for or even applied for VR services, which is something new to VR state programs. If the student will need disability-related services that are outside of Pre-ETS, then he or she will have to apply to the VR program. However, the most important factor regarding Pre-ETS is that the five areas of training mentioned above must occur before the student leaves the school system so that he or she will have an optimal transition to postsecondary life.

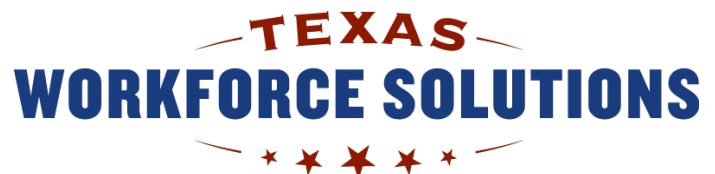
The upcoming issues of the Texas SenseAbilities newsletter will include articles that focus on each Pre-ETS area, but an overview of each Pre-ETS activity might be helpful. The five required Pre-ETS activities are described below:

- Job exploration counseling—Helps students explore job opportunities to foster motivation and promote informed decision making about career goals.
- Work-based learning experiences—Provides students with actual work situations to give them the knowledge and skills that will help them connect school experiences to real-life work activities and future career opportunities.
- Counseling on opportunities for postsecondary educational programs—Informs students of postsecondary education programs and requirements and assists students in deciding which path is most appropriate for them to facilitate success.
- Workplace readiness training—Helps students develop work readiness skills, sometimes known as soft skills,

which are a set of skills and behaviors that are necessary for any job. This will help the student identify skills he or she has as well as those that need some additional work so that the student may succeed in employment.

- Self-advocacy—Trains students with disabilities to advocate for themselves, including discussing disabilities and accommodations that are needed. Students with disabilities also learn to express their strengths and the contributions that they can make to the community.

I think that what is most important about WIOA is its ability to create opportunity for students with disabilities before they leave the school system. Parents, teachers, VR professionals, and the students themselves can seek out Pre-ETS activities that can be significant no matter how large or small the scale. As I said at the beginning of this article, that first meeting with a VR counselor made an impression on me that is still with me today. Sometimes it takes a team of supporters and organizations to make success happen. The result is a person who has the same opportunities as those without disabilities and a life that he or she envisioned, despite disabilities. I encourage you, if you are a student with disability, to call a VR office and see what doors will open for you.



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Texas Education Agency Updates

Vicki DePountis, Texas Education Agency,
Program Specialist for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Abstract: *In this article, Ms. DePountis discusses how TEA has improved identification, evaluation and services for students and their work with individuals both within and outside the agency to support the unique needs of students who are blind and visually impaired.*

Key Words: *TEA, blind, visually impaired, Deafblind, special education*

Exciting things are happening at the Texas Education Agency (TEA)! Over the past year and a half, the agency has completed numerous activities to improve identification, evaluation, and services for students, as well as communication with families. Perhaps most exciting, TEA has increased its capacity to provide technical support by hiring individuals who possess a great deal of expertise in various functional areas related to special education. These program specialists focus on areas including behavior, response to intervention (RTI), educator support, deaf and hard of hearing (DHH), the child centered process, child find and evaluation, low incidence disabilities, high incidence disabilities, family support, post-secondary transition, residential placement, pre-school, visual impairment, and state performance plan data. Their primary function is to provide expertise and leadership as it relates to the provision of technical assistance to local education agencies (LEAs) directly, through the educational service centers (ESCs), and through improvements to the existing state-wide leadership grant networks and projects.

The program specialist for the blind and visually impaired collaborates with individuals both within and outside the agency to support the unique needs of students who are blind or visually impaired, including students who are DeafBlind (DB). The agency continues to support the Texas Deafblind Project by contracting with the DeafBlind Outreach Team at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) to provide training to those working with students who are DeafBlind throughout the state. The new State VI Plan and State

DB Plan which set priorities and guide service development and provision for students with visual impairments and DeafBlindness respectively, have been completed. Working with professionals at TSBVI, the Health and Human Services Commission, the Texas Workforce Commission, advocacy groups, and university professional preparation programs will ensure sharing of information and resources.

TEA has also hired twenty-eight liaisons who spend 75% of their time at the regional service centers and 25% of their time at TEA. The liaisons work closely with districts to develop innovative ways to address challenges in special education and improve professional development practices. The liaisons support implementing best practices to address issues such as significant disproportionality. They have technical assistance related to all focus areas, including visual impairment, immediately available. Program specialists and liaisons share information about successful and innovative instructional approaches in order to build capacity throughout the state.

In November of 2016, the agency provided a letter to all school districts that clarified child find obligations, the use of response to intervention strategies, and policies and procedures designed to prevent misidentification and disproportionate representation of students for special education services. The Parent's Guide to the Admission, Review, and Dismissal Process has been revised to provide additional information for parents. The agency has also developed a corrective

action plan to address the three areas of noncompliance identified in the January 10, 2018 letter from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). TEA leaders facilitated focus group engagement sessions with various stakeholders in each of the twenty regional education service centers. Separate sessions were hosted for educators, administrators, families, and students, and all attendees were encouraged to provide input about the draft plan. In addition to the face-to-face visits, an online survey was available on the TEA website to gather input from a wide a range of perspectives across Texas. TEA leadership also met

on a bi-weekly basis with representatives from the special education advocacy community. Additionally, TEA staff interacted at multiple meetings and conferences at which input and feedback was sought throughout the progression of the plan's development. While waiting for feedback from OSEP, TEA continues to identify and engage in activities that clarify the differences between RTI, the state dyslexia program, Section 504, and IDEA. The TEA continues its commitment to working toward the vision that every child in Texas is an independent thinker and will graduate prepared for success in college, a career, or the military, and as an engaged and productive citizen.

Infants with Congenital Zika Virus Syndrome Suffer Serious Visual Impairment

Jason Winkler, MBA, Publisher

Article reprinted from Elsevier <http://www.sciencenewsline.com/source/Elsevier>

Abstract: *This article shares information from two studies confirming that 100% of Brazilian infants with confirmed and suspected Zika were born with visual impairments.*

Key Words: *blind, visual impairments, Zika, pediatric ophthalmology, cortical visual impairment*

San Francisco, CA, September 13, 2017

Although one of the most serious consequences of the Zika virus (ZIKV) in infants is microcephaly, there is a broad collection of anomalies now known as congenital Zika syndrome (CZS). Some of the most serious are ophthalmologic, including macular scarring, retinal defects, low visual acuity, strabismus, and nystagmus. Two papers published in the Journal of the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus (AAPOS) evaluated visual function among infants with suspected and confirmed CZS. Both studies found that while about 40% of patients had ocular abnormalities, 100% of children tested had

visual impairment. Thus, cortical visual impairment might be the most common cause of blindness among children with CZS.

In a study conducted in Brazil, 70 infants with microcephaly were examined at CAVIVER, a nongovernmental organization clinic and referral center dedicated to visually disabled children in Fortaleza. A team of ophthalmologists, neurologists, geneticists, and pediatricians, led by Marcia B. Tartarella, MD, PhD, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Science, Federal University of Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil, evaluated the infants from January to May 2016. Twenty-five had ophthalmologic changes: 18 with intraocular abnormalities, including macular chorioretinal

atrophy, mottled retinal pigment epithelium, and optic nerve pallor; seven with strabismus or nystagmus without intraocular abnormalities. Eleven infants who could be tested for visual acuity, were all below normal range. Investigators noted that although they could not obtain specific serological tests that would confirm ZIKV infection in these patients, all were screened for other infectious conditions that could cause microcephaly.

According to Dr. Tartarella, “All systemic and ocular characteristics of CZS do not necessarily occur in the same patient. The ophthalmic features with unique anatomical characteristics may help to identify CZS in patients born without microcephaly.”

Another study, which included 32 infants born in Pernambuco, Brazil from May to December 2015 with confirmed ZIKV infection, found visual impairment in all patients. Fourteen patients exhibited retinal and/or optic nerve damage and had neuroimaging or neurological abnormalities detected at birth. Twenty-six mothers reported symptoms or signs compatible with ZIKV infection during their pregnancies, 13 during the first trimester, 9 during the second, and 3 in the third. Twenty-six infants were born full-term while six were pre-term.

However, according to lead investigator Liana O. Ventura, MD, PhD, of the Altino Ventura Foundation (FAV), and the Department of Ophthalmology, HOPE Eye Hospital, Recife, Brazil, such retinal involvement is not always present. “Surprisingly, the present study revealed that, regardless of fundus involvement, all infants presented with visual impairment, suggesting that the visual impairment is most likely related to the extensive damage to the central nervous system. These findings reinforce our supposition that brain damage is the main etiology for visual impairment in CZS.”

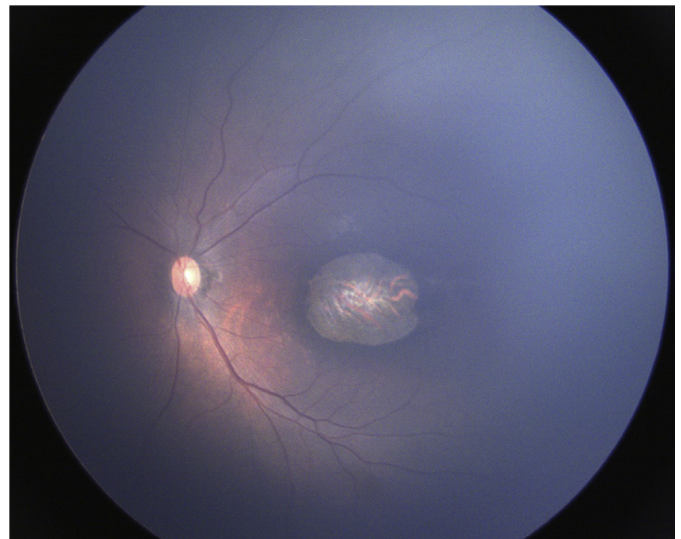


Photo: Involvement of the retina can take several forms. Wide-angle fundus image (RetCam) of the left eye of a child with congenital Zika syndrome showing large chorio-retinal scar in the macular region.

In an accompanying editorial, (available at [http://www.jaapos.org/article/S1091-8531\(17\)30547-5/fulltext](http://www.jaapos.org/article/S1091-8531(17)30547-5/fulltext)) Sonja A. Rasmussen, MD, MS, and co-authors suggest that as our knowledge of the effects of Zika virus infection evolves, we can learn from the experience with rubella infection during pregnancy. Beginning with an astute observation in 1941 by ophthalmologist Norman Gregg, followed by descriptions of a wide array of manifestations, the full effects of congenital rubella infection became understood.

Dr. Rasmussen explains, “Limited data are available regarding the rate of ophthalmologic findings in infants born to women with ZIKV infection during pregnancy. As most studies have only carefully examined infants with presumed or confirmed congenital ZIKV infection who have microcephaly, more studies are needed to understand ocular findings in those infants with congenital ZIKV infection without microcephaly. In addition, it is unknown how often infants born without recognizable abnormalities of ZIKV infection will later develop problems (e.g., cognitive impairment, hearing loss, ocular findings), as has been seen with other congenital infections, for example, rubella.”

Resources of Interest

American Council of the Blind (ACB) Special Education Presentation

<http://acb.org/education>

Attention Parents, teachers, and student advocates! ACB's Special Education Committee has put together a useful two-part podcast on advocating for children inside and outside the classroom. This web series provides an overview of existing laws, regulations, procedures and best practices. ACB believes this will be a helpful tool for parents and teachers as they prepare for IEPs.

Western Oregon University's Regional Resource Center on Deafness

<http://www.dbinterpreting.org/>

We are pleased to announce WOU has received funding to establish a national center on deafblind interpreting. Within a framework of evidence-based practice, the deafblind Interpreting National Training and Resource Center (DBI) will enhance communication access for persons who are deafblind by increasing the number of interpreters able to effectively interpret utilizing tactile communication and other strategies.

Uber App Offers Basic Sign Language Tips to Chat With Deaf or Hard of Hearing Drivers - Mac Rumors

<https://www.macrumors.com/2017/09/29/uber-app-sign-language-hard-of-hearing-drivers/>

New tool allows DeafBlind people to independently 'watch' TV

<https://www.rt.com/news/389254-deaf-blind-television-app/>

Spanish speakers looking for iPad games?

Here's a recording of a 4 minute audio demonstration of the game Blindfold Gesture Bop, in Spanish:

<https://www.spreaker.com/user/6942838/demostracion-del-juego-blindfold-bop-par>

You can get Blindfold Gesture Bop here:

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/blindfold-bop/id1272873004?ls=1&mt=8>

American Foundation for the Blind

Have students transitioning to college this year? Check out this new info @ AFB:

<http://www.afb.org/info/living-with-vision-loss/for-job-seekers/lesson-plans-for-teachers-and-professionals/transition-to-college-program-activity-guide/1234>

Editor in Chief

Holly Cooper (512) 206-9217

cooperh@tsbvi.edu

Assistant to the Editor

Melanie Schacht

schachtm@tsbvi.edu

Website Editor

Stacey Rayos

rayoss@tsbvi.edu

Family Wisdom Editors

Edgenie Bellah

bellahe@tsbvi.edu

Rachel Simpson

simpsonr@tsbvi.edu

Effective Practices Editor

Ann Adkins

adkinsa@tsbvi.edu

News and Views Editor

Gay Speake

gay.speake@hhsc.state.tx.us

Available in English, Spanish and audio on the TSBVI website:

www.tsbvi.edu

The audio version of TX SenseAbilities is provided by Learning Ally, Austin, TX.

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TSBVI Outreach

1100 West 45th Street

Austin, TX 78756

**Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired**

Outreach Programs

www.tsbvi.edu | 512-454-8631 | 1100 W. 45th St. | Austin, TX 78756

**Texas Health and Human Services Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program**

<https://hhs.texas.gov/services/disability/blind-visually-impaired/blind-childrens-vocational-discovery-development-program>

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This project is supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Special Education Program (OSEP). The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily express the position of the United States Department of Education.