

Information for Parents/Guardians of Children and Young People who are Blind/ Visually Impaired

The aim of this pamphlet is to inform parents and guardians of supports and services available for children and young people who are blind or have a visual impairment.



What is a visual impairment?

Children with sight loss can have different levels of vision depending on their condition and how their sight is affected. Visual impairments can fall into one of the following categories: partial sight; low vision or blindness. Some children may have problems with their central vision, others with peripheral vision (they may see things as if they are looking through a tube), others may see things as blurred, others may see things that are close to them but have poor distance vision, others may have enough vision to read but have difficulty with other tasks. Very few children in Ireland are completely blind.

While some children are born with sight loss, other children acquire a visual impairment sometime after birth. This could be due to an accident or childhood disease (e.g. meningitis, measles).

The early days

Sight loss in babies and young children is generally discovered through the child developmental checks carried out by the public health nurse on all babies in the local health centre at 9 months, 18 months and two years of age or through school sight tests. If you have any concerns about your child's vision, you should immediately raise these concerns with your public health nurse or with your GP.

Assessment of Need

The parents of any child born after 1st June 2002 may apply to the HSE for an Assessment of Need if they think that their child may have a disability. Following the assessment, the parents will receive an Assessment Report stating their child's needs, if any, and the services required to meet those needs. Where a need for health supports is identified, a service statement is prepared which specifies the health services to be provided to the child, with reference to available resources.

Getting support

If you discover that your child has sight loss, you should immediately seek the support that is available to you. This support can come from public health nurses, GPs, specialist services from ophthalmologists (specialist doctors) and

optometrists (opticians), National Council for the Blind (NCBI) and other services for children who are blind/visually impaired, your local visiting teacher, other parents/guardians who have children with visual impairment and from family and friends.

People nowadays often use the Internet as a source of information. Please bear in mind that sometimes information on the internet can be exaggerated, misleading or wrong. In matters concerning your child's health and education, you should seek information and advice from the appropriate professional sources.

Your child may have a visual impairment but it is important for you to know that many children with sight loss lead good and fulfilling lives. They receive support in school and many achieve good outcomes and go on to further and higher education.

The most important action that you can take, as a parent, is to make your child as independent as possible, from an early age. This will involve supporting your child to explore their environment, to listen to and learn about the sounds of everyday life, to develop good orientation and language skills, to take part in sporting activities that improve mobility, to learn about shape, size, textures, to use low vision aids and later technology. Developing your child's independence in these ways is very important and will greatly assist later when they come to pre-school and school.

Health and other services available to your child

Children who are discovered to have sight problems are referred to an appropriate consultant, usually an ophthalmologist, for assessment and treatment. If your child's sight is below a certain level, the ophthalmologist will refer you to the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) and will provide the report necessary for you to register with their services. If necessary, your child may be referred to a developmental paediatrician to assess how he/she is generally developing.

Once your child is registered with the NCBI, you will be assigned a social worker who will give you information about all the services and allowances to which your child may be entitled. The services provided by the NCBI for people with sight loss include:

- Early Learning Centre
- Library service
- Technology training
- Low vision service

- Mobility and orientation training
- Professional counselling service

Your Child's Education

Early intervention

It is very important for young children who are blind/visually impaired to receive support as early as possible in life. This will assist their general cognitive development and help them to develop independence. This will help them to develop concepts and good literacy and numeracy skills later in their childhood.

ChildVision provides, in Dublin and Cork, an early assessment and pre-school service for children with visual impairment from birth to five years of age. The State funds a free pre-school place for all eligible children (ECCE Scheme) in the year before they start primary school. More details are available on www.dcyv.gov.ie.

Visiting Teacher Service

Visiting teachers support children who are blind/visually impaired and their families from the time the sight loss is identified. The support service can begin shortly following the birth of the child. They provide advice and support to parents and some teaching to pre-school children in the home, if necessary. They liaise with teachers in schools and provide specialist teaching advice for the child with visual impairment. They provide guidance on assistive technology. They teach children to use Braille and support mainstream teachers to use Braille machines. Visiting teachers can refer children for assessment of low-vision aids and then train the children in their use. They can also refer the child for further mobility instruction if required. Visiting teachers aim to be a support to the parents/guardian, the child and the school. They monitor the progress your child is making both at pre-school and at school. Each visiting teacher is responsible for a particular region.

Your child will be referred to the Visiting Teacher Service (VTS) if s/he is identified as having a serious visual impairment which significantly affects his/her capacity to see and where the visual difficulties are not satisfactorily corrected by the wearing of glasses and/or contact lenses. Children may be referred to the VTS by their parents/guardians, HSE ophthalmology services, school, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) or the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI).

Going to school

The vast majority of children or young people who are blind/visually impaired attend their local mainstream primary and post-primary schools. A small number, with more complex needs, may attend a special school or special class for students with special educational needs. There is one special school for students who are blind/visually impaired, which is located at ChildVision, Drumcondra, Dublin.

A post-primary school on the same campus is resourced to provide a fully integrated education for students of post-primary age who are blind/visually impaired. This school also has a special class for students who are blind/visually impaired and who require a special placement. Special schools and special classes have smaller class sizes.

Your visiting teacher and your special educational needs organiser (SENO) can give you advice on pre-school and school placements for your child. Your child may be supported in school in the following ways:

- The classroom teacher supports children and young people with special educational needs and may adapt lessons or tasks to suit the individual, as necessary.
- Resource and learning support teachers are available to provide additional teaching, if it is required.
- Access to support from special needs assistants (SNAs) is provided for pupils who have significant care needs arising from their sight loss. SNAs are employed to look after the care needs of children while the teacher is responsible for teaching the child. The circumstances in which SNAs are allocated to pupils who are blind/visually impaired are detailed in Circular 0030/2014, available on the DES website at: www.education.ie.
- Assistive Technology (in accordance with the criteria set out in DES Circular 0010/2013), for example, Braille Equipment/Braille Keyboards, CCTV equipment with distance camera, computer equipment for enhanced text reading and online library and audio equipment for audio books.
- Large print books (produced by the National Braille Production Centre) or digital books, depending on the child's needs.

- Special school transport arrangements may be available for eligible children. More information on this scheme is available on the DES website at: www.education.ie.
- Candidates with permanent or long-term conditions, including visual and hearing difficulties, which they believe will significantly impair their performance in the examinations may apply to the State Examinations Commission for a reasonable accommodation(s) (RACE).

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs)

SENOs provide information directly to the parents of children/young people with special educational needs and to schools. SENOs approve additional teaching and SNA supports to schools, where necessary, to support students with special educational needs. SENOs also have a role in supporting and advising parents/guardians.

Your SENO can assist you in a number of ways by:

- Providing support and advice
- Identifying possible school placements
- Liaising with the school, the HSE and other services
- Assisting in planning the transition of children to school, between schools and onwards from school

Department of Education and Skills: Policy

The Department's policy is focused on ensuring that all children, including those who are blind/visually impaired, can have access to an education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities. The policy is to provide for children with special educational needs to be included in mainstream schools unless such a placement would not be in their best interests or the interests of the children with whom they are to be educated. Some children with more complex special educational needs may be supported in a special class in a mainstream school. These children have the option, where appropriate, of full or part-time inclusion and interaction with other children. Other children may have such complex needs that they are best placed in a special school.

Further information

Further information for parents/guardians can be found in the NCSE publications:

- ***Children with Special Educational Needs: Information Booklet for Parents***
- ***Choosing a School: A Guide for Parents and Guardians of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs***
- ***Post-School Education and Training Information on Options for Adults and School Leavers with Disabilities***

Useful contacts

Your local **SENO** may be contacted through the school or from the NCSE website at www.ncse.ie.

Department of Education and Skills: www.education.ie.

Contact details for your **local visiting teacher** are available at: www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Visiting-Teacher-Service/

Local health centre: www.hse.ie.

Information about other supports to which you may be entitled are available on the website of Citizens Information at:

www.citizensinformation.ie/ or from the relevant Government Departments.

Support organisations

ChildVision – National Education Centre for Blind Children: www.childvision.ie.

Deafblind Ireland: www.deafblindireland.ie.

Féach: www.feach.ie (Féach is a support group for parents of children who are blind/visually impaired).

Fight for Sight: www.fightforsight.ie.

Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind: www.guidedogs.ie.

National Braille Production Centre: www.braille.ie.

National Centre for Technology in Education: www.ncte.ie.

National Council for the Blind of Ireland: www.ncbi.ie.

National Parents Council Primary: www.npc.ie.

National Parents Council Post-Primary: www.npcpp.ie.

Please note that this list is not exhaustive and these organisations are listed only for information purposes. The National Council for Special Education may have had no involvement with these organisations and cannot vouch for them or their staff. Parents should always satisfy themselves regarding the appropriateness of providing any information concerning their child to any third-party.



National Council for Special Education

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