



Look Up! Parenting a Visually Impaired Child

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When a parent learns that his or her child is suffering from a visual impairment which cannot be corrected by lenses or surgery, it usually means a rude shock to him or her. Parents grapple with questions like 'why me?' and over worry about their child's future. However, although your child is visually impaired, you can make a ton of difference in his world by your attitude and upbringing. Nowadays, visually impaired people all over the world are living lives of dignity and independence.

India is home to twenty percent of the world's blind population and many more visually impaired persons. It might be difficult to initially accept a disability, but with the right attitude and care, your child can grow up into an independent and socially conscious member of the society.

Talk to your child

As a parent of a visually impaired child, your most important activity should be to communicate with your child from early on. George Abraham, Founder, SCORE Foundation says, "Parents need to talk of things around the house, around the colony and when travelling describe things that appear around. Read the daily newspaper headlines and news items aloud. This will not only make the blind child aware but also start building his /her interests." George's mother used to read out the sports news to him and that was how he got interested in sports.

Describe everything

Parents constantly need to be conscious of the fact that visually impaired children do not learn by seeing. “Depending on the child’s age, parents should always first give the description of things they want to introduce to the child. They should take him / her along with them and feel the object,” says Madhu Singhal, founder, and Managing Trustee of Mitrajyothi, an NGO working for the welfare of the visually impaired. It mainly depends on the child’s grasping power and family environment which shape the personality of the child. .

Introduce Braille

“Braille is like pen and paper and should be introduced early,” says Madhu Singhal. “Braille should be introduced when the child is about three or four years of age. Combine the teaching of Braille with the introduction of corresponding sounds and associations of the alphabets with objects like A for Apple and so on,” George Abraham says.

Get support

Unfortunately, there are not too many formal support groups for parents of visually impaired children in India. Parents can contact the [Eyeway](#) helpline 1800 300 20469. They could be part of the Access India mailing list where they could share their challenges. “Access India is an online discussion group of blind persons who use technology. Parents can ask questions and appreciate the potential and the possibilities there are in a life with blindness,” says George Abraham. Parents can also get help from Saksham school at Noida and National Association of the Blind, New Delhi.

Introduce Computers with Screen Readers

Today the blind can access computers and the internet through screen reading software like JAWS and NVDA. JAWS stand for Job Access with Speech and it has been described as the most popular screen reader in the world. It is developed by Freedom Scientific, USA and it can be bought from Karishma Enterprises in Mumbai. A blind or partially sighted person can use computers by using keyboard shortcut commands and listening to JAWS with headphones. It is essential to introduce computers with JAWS as early as possible and class 5 or 6 should be a good time to start.

Emphasize on social bonding

Since a visually impaired child does not learn by seeing, it is necessary to tell and guide them. “They could be taught table manners, they could be taught the various social niceties. They should be corrected when mistakes are made. Blind children need to be given responsibilities so that they are trained to contribute in a family, or social context. Parents should all the time look at ways to give inputs to the blind child so that he or she would keep pace with the development schedule. Parents need to be aware constantly that the child’s personality has to be moulded like any other. He cannot see; so alternate methods of communication have to be thought of,” explains George Abraham. Encourage your child to have friends and engage in games and sports. Board games and chess can be played using tactile support and playing cards can have Braille. Visually impaired children can play cricket and football too. They need to use a ball which rattles and the coordination is of the hand and the ear rather than the usual hand and eye.

Organize your home

If your child has some usable vision, the things in the house can be adjusted in such a way that makes him most comfortable. Emphasis on colour, texture, and contrast are important. For example, for a child with low vision, it is easier to make out a red pillow on a white mattress than a white pillow on a white mattress. Also, baby proof your house and avoid clutter or uneven surfaces.

Boost confidence

A child is a child, blind or otherwise, and each child has potential. “Parents must be committed to invest in a visually impaired child. They should have expectations of the child, correct and guide him, and love him. Love should be expressed through physical contact and words. Make the child independent and encourage him to dream and have goals. Identify inherent talents and help develop them,” explains George Abraham. As parents, it is important to build the child’s communication skills and knowledge and involve him in all aspects of family life like one would do with any other children.

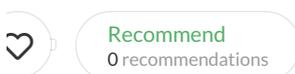
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