A Shared Vision
Partners in Pediatric Blindness and Visual Impairment

How to Travel Without Ever Leaving the Home

Other than going to other family members' houses or appointments, you probably spend a lot of time at home with your child who is blind or visually impaired. That is the best place for early learning to occur. Your typical day moves from one routine to another – bathing, dressing, mealtime, playtime, napping, and bedtime. As your child becomes more mobile, their movement becomes more purposeful as they go from one activity to the next. The better understanding your child has of location and travel concepts, the better equipped they will be to navigate your home with confidence.

This activity introduces the concept of **Orientation and Mobility** (O&M) through a traveling activity inside your home – without ever packing a suitcase or walking out the front door. **Orientation** refers to the ability to figure out where you are in space. **Mobility** refers to the ability to get from one place to the next both safely and efficiently. These are critical skills that your child will begin developing at birth, skills that you can help nurture in their earliest years.



Whether a babe in arms, a toddler, or a child who travels using a stroller or wheelchair, you and your child will form a traveling team to explore your house and discover important landmarks along the way.

Duration

This activity may range from 15 to 45 minutes or more depending on your child.

Materials Required

The materials you'll need for this activity depend on how mobile your child is.

- If your child is still an infant, you can carry them in a Snuggly so your arms don't get tired. A babe in arms is great for traveling together because your child can learn important concepts about where they are in space and how to get from one place to the next before they are moving on their own.

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- An older child who is not independently mobile can travel through the home in a stroller or an adapted chair on wheels.
- Children who are independently mobile can use their pre-cane or a regular cane.
- Wooden spoon

Definitions

Before we get started there are a few important O&M concepts to explore: travel route, landmarks, clues, and edges.



In addition to travel tools, you will need to develop a consistent "**travel rout**e" in your home. Think about what places you and your child visit during your daily routines. Do you eat in the kitchen, play in the living room, and get dressed in the bedroom? How does your child move from one routine to the other? Oftentimes, your child might be carried or pushed in an adapted chair as you move from one routine to the next. This type of travel may make it more difficult for your child to identify landmarks and clues along the way.

"Landmarks" and "**clues"** are things which help your child recognize where they are in space. **Landmarks** are permanent, fixed, and easily recognizable to your child. An example of a landmark could be the shag carpet located in your family room or the refrigerator that hums in your kitchen. A **clue**, on the other hand, is not a permanent fixture in your home but is very helpful when available. An example of a clue is the delicious smell coming from your kitchen when you cook dinner or bake cookies. The smell of cooking can help guide your child towards the kitchen but may only offer a clue during mealtimes.

Take note of the **clues** and **landmarks** that can give your child important information about their whereabouts. These can be sounds, smells, objects your child can touch, and things they can see (e.g., the sound and smell of a coffee maker in the kitchen, grandma's picture on the hallway, the refrigerator handle in the kitchen).

Another great strategy for helping your child identify where they are in space is to encourage them to identify the **"edges"** of each room by searching for landmarks and clues such as windows, pictures on the wall, or appliances. Children who are blind or visually impaired experience places best if they travel the perimeter first, and then feel more comfortable with the less structured, emptier spaces in the middle. By traveling the perimeter of a room in a thoughtful manner, you are helping your child learn to build a map of your home inside their

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head. This is a wonderful and important skill that they will use throughout their life to help identify where they are in space and to travel safely from one place to the next.

Plan a Route



With your Early Intervention Teacher of the Visually Impaired (EI-TVI), **plan a route** that your child travels frequently. Consider the edges of that route or room. It should be a round trip. Think of it as a clear beginning, middle, and end in a story book.

An easy place to begin is at your front door, or where you enter your home the most. Then, you might stop at the coat rack, walk along the entry wall, enter the doorway into the kitchen, stop at the kitchen counter or around the island, walk by the refrigerator, and return to the front door.

Activity Steps

1. **Create a cue** for starting your route so that your child will associate the cue with this activity. This could be your child's cane or a pre-cane, or for a child who isn't using a cane yet, a wooden spoon to tap surfaces with.

2. **Place your child in their stroller** or carry them in a **snuggly** or in your arms. Your child should be able to use their hands or feet to touch different surfaces.

3. Start your trip by saying, **"Where are we?"**

4. Tap an object that is always present at the start of your route; this is what is referred to as a **"landmark."** Then, you answer, "I am next to the doorbell." Pause for 10 seconds to allow your child to process and perhaps respond. Although it might be hard for you as a parent to slow down, this strategy of **"Wait Time"** is just as critical for learning routes as the direct sensory exploration.

5. **Label sounds** as you find landmarks. You could say, "The refrigerator 'hums.'" Feel how the vents blow air. "The doors go 'clack clack'."

6. **Encourage your child to touch and hold the cane**, but you can be the holder/user of the cane if they are not yet ready. You do not have to tap the cane during the whole route. You can tap it for exploration occasionally to model how it works. For the most part you'll be using your hands as an exploration tool to create sounds on different surfaces.

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7. **Introduce tactile opportunities** that are at your child's level. Invite your child to touch the landmarks along the route. Use feet only or hand-under-hand to start. Allow your child to touch independently if they would like to, but don't force it.

8. Next, you ask, **"Where are we going?** To the kitchen!" This is usually a room you would enter first after walking in your home.

9. Then, you say, **"How do we get there?"** First, you might find the coat rack on the wall. Walk to the coat rack. Position your child near the landmark and allow the child to touch the landmark with her hands or feet.

10. Talk about what you find along the way. Narrate **what happens as you travel your route but use minimal words** to allow for more listening of environmental cues and cognitive processing.

11. As you travel, **use directional words in relation to your body and/ or your child's body. "**The window is on my right. The ceiling fan is above your head. The entry mat is below my feet."

12. **Repeat the O&M process** at each landmark as you travel a predictable route.

    - **Where are we?**

    - **Where do I want to go next?** "To the kitchen."

    - **How will I get there?** Narrate where you and your child will go. "Next, I will touch the entry wall on my right and follow it to the doorway into the kitchen."

    - **Where am I? Tap, tap scratch**. "I am standing at the kitchen counter. Let's look. Mommy's purse is on top of the counter. It's heavy. I hear Mommy's car keys jingling."

    - **Where do I want to go next?** "To the kitchen sink. I'm thirsty." And so on.

13. **End the activity with a consistent "all-done-with-travel-time" cue**. You could say, "We're all done with travel time. We walked from the front door to the kitchen and back to where we started." If you used a cane or pre-cane, return it to its original location, often in a corner by the front door or on a 3M hook by the front door.

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Travel Considerations

- **Explore your child's emotions** to discover how they are feeling during travel together. Acknowledge those feelings by saying, for example, "Benny is smiling; he loves ringing the doorbell." Or "Benny is frowning. Our trip is almost over!"

- **Keep landmarks simple and predictable** so they're not too overwhelming for your child. Gradually introduce new objects to name as your child becomes accustomed to your travel route.

- Consider areas in the environment that you **don't want your child to travel or touch** (fireplaces, stairs, electrical outlets). As your pediatrician will recommend, fireplaces and electrical outlets should be protected from young, active explorers because they are a safety hazard. Many people ask, "Is there a way to teach my child about the stairs safely?" Yes, in fact most children with visual impairments enjoy and benefit from the predictable spaces and edges of stairs. Discuss this with your EI-TVI and together you can plan a travel route on the stairs from bottom to top and top to bottom that supports exploration but keeps children safe.

- As you practice the route over time, you can **add more talking**. Notice how the doorbell is outside your home. What happens when you push the doorbell outside the home? What do you hear inside your home? If you or your child is thirsty, where do you need to go? Use narration to explain what you would expect to encounter on the route to the water faucet or the refrigerator.

- **Reversing the route** solidifies the entire path in the mind of a child.

Additional Sensory Opportunities

- **Introduce the game "Tap Tap Scratch."** This game lets your child know how we gather useful information from an object/ landmark. We are demonstrating the practical use of sound and texture. We tap an object, scratch the object, and say out loud, "What is it?" Pause for five seconds. Use "Wait Time" and count to ten silently on your fingers. Then you answer, "It's the coat rack!" Or the kitchen counter, the washing machine, or a couch. You can use hand under hand to guide your child if they are afraid to touch the landmark.

- **Introduce the visual looking game "Let's Look!"** Model getting close to the coat rack on the wall as if you have low vision. Next, allow your child to get close to the coat rack on the wall and discuss what they might see. "The coat is red. Mommy's jacket is puffy."

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Introducing New Routes

- Introduce a new route when you are visiting other family members' or friends' homes. You will be helping other sighted adults by modeling traveling as a team with your young child. You will also help your child identify landmarks outside your home directly since your child can't learn them indirectly. Often, children will show more travel skill development in unfamiliar places rather than in familiar locations.

- Traveling in public places with a child who is blind or visually impaired is often where parents experience strong feelings. As you practice familiarizing your child with new environments and landmarks, notice how you feel as a parent. Are you somewhat proud, scared, embarrassed and/or happy to share how you travel with your child in the bigger world? It is common to feel all these at once and those feelings will definitely change over time, especially as you and your child become more confident.

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Extension Activities

- Read some books together about travel. Some favorites include Wherever You Go by Pat Zietlow Miller and I See Without My Eyes by Mark Brauner.

- Make an experience book about landmarks in your house and read about a trip you took together. (“My house has a doorbell. It makes a sound. My house has a couch. We like to sit on it because it feels soft.”)

- Sing a song about traveling such as “I walk and I walk and I walk and I stop!” by Ella Jenkins. And this song about riding an elevator, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sOlpdcEjsQ

- Click **HERE** for some other O&M games you can play at home.

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