Quarterly Newsletter

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Supporting Friendships for Students with Visual Impairments

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One of the questions I hear most often from families is some version of, “Does my child have friends”? It's a fair question to sit with. For students who experience low vision/blindness, friendship doesn't always develop the way it does for their sighted peers. Not because these students are less social, but because so much of how children learn to connect with each other (a glance across the room, a smile, body language) is picked up visually, without anyone ever teaching it directly. When that pathway isn't fully available, friendship-related skills need the same kind of thoughtful, direct instruction we'd give to any other important life skill.

The good news is that this is a teachable skill. A 2023 review looked at 32 studies on teaching social skills to children and adolescents who are blind or have low vision, and found that most of them, especially those focused on peer relationships specifically, reported real improvement after the direct instruction (Caron et al., 2023).

What Helps?

Direct Instruction: Social interaction is one of the nine areas of the *Expanded Core Curriculum* for exactly this reason; sighted students pick it up incidentally, by watching others, and that pathway isn't fully available to a student who is blind or low vision (Hatlen, 1996; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010).

Involve Peers: In several classroom studies, students with low vision/blindness made clearer, longer-lasting gains in things like eye contact, initiating conversation, and reading a peer's response when feedback from sighted classmates was built directly into the teaching (Jindal-Snape, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Friendship-building works better as a two-way effort, not something done for or to the student.

Start Young (if possible): Studies show that preschoolers showed real gains in initiating and sustaining play with peers through simple, structured approaches like guided play and script practice (D'Allura, 2002; Gronna et al., 1999).

What Do Students Want? In a descriptive study of teenagers' closest friendships, adolescents with visual impairments described the same things any teenager would want: someone to talk to, someone who understood them, shared time, and shared interests (Rosenblum, 1998). Worth keeping at the forefront when designing "friendship opportunities" rather than just assuming what a student needs.

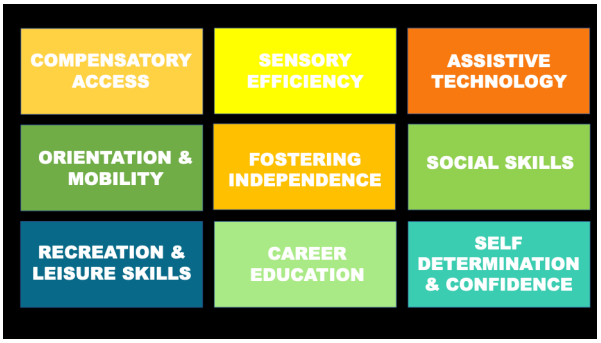
Common Barriers and What Helps

Barrier	Why It Happens	What Helps
Missed Social Cues	A lot of peer communication for example, a look, a smile, who's walking toward whom is visual, so a student can miss the invitation to join in (Hatlen, 1996).	Direct, sequential teaching of social interaction skills as part of ECC instruction, rather than assuming they'll develop on their own (Sapp & Hatlen, 2010).
Peers Unsure How to Interact	Classmates aren't avoiding a student on purpose they are often just unsure how to start a conversation, or how to include someone who can't see them wave across the playground, or the lunchroom.	Build sighted peers into the teaching itself, modeling from adults and practice on both sides is shown to strengthen and generalize social gains.
Fewer Casual, Unplanned Moments (at least at the beginning)	So much of friendships start with small incidental moments; those are harder to experience without typical vision.	Structured, playful, repeated opportunities like simple guided play or script practice help build the same skills more intentionally (D'Allura, 2002; Gronna et al., 1999).
Assumptions About What a Student Needs	It's easy to design social opportunities around "helping" a student, rather than around building genuine friendship.	Center what students themselves say they want in a friendship, i.e., shared time, shared interests, someone who understands or “gets” them (Rosenblum, 1998).

A Small Reminder

Friendship(s) for a student who experiences low vision/blindness isn't an extra; it's a real, learnable part of their education, just like reading or mobility. With a little direct teaching, some peer involvement, and some patience, these relationships can and do grow!

Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC)



For More Specific Skills, Please See These Additional Resources:
https://www.teachingvisuallyimpaired.com/social-interactions.html
https://www.perkins.org/resource/social-skills-children-and-youth-visual-impairments/
https://www.teachingvisuallyimpaired.com/interactions--relationships.html
https://www.teachingvisuallyimpaired.com/peer-interaction-tips.html

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Jindal-Snape, D. (2005b). Use of feedback from sighted peers in promoting social interaction skills. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 99*(7), 403–412.

Rosenblum, L. P. (1998). Best friendships of adolescents with visual impairments: A descriptive study. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 92*(9), 593–608. https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X9809200903

Sapp, W., & Hatlen, P. (2010). The expanded core curriculum: Where we have been, where we are going, and how we can get there. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 104*(6), 338–348.