

Toys & Play for children who are Blind or partially sighted



Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) estimates that there are around 25,000 children in Britain under the age of 16 whose severe sight problems affect their education.

The term 'visual impairment' refers to children who are either blind or partially sighted.

- 'Blind' means a high degree of vision loss, seeing much less than is typical or perhaps nothing at all. Most blind children can see something (light and dark, or movement), but not very much
- 'Partial sight' is a less severe loss of vision which cannot be corrected by wearing spectacles though they might help to make vision better.

Most blind or partially sighted children have their sight problem from birth. A small number of children lose their sight through illness or accident.

A high proportion (estimated 40%) of blind and partially sighted children have additional needs, including learning, movement and communication difficulties.

Choosing the right types of toys

Using the criteria below when selecting toys will encourage children to develop their skills while having fun at the same time. Both are equally important! The criteria are intended to make best use of any residual vision, and to develop other sensory skills such as the sense of touch, which is important for children who will learn to read in braille.

Try to select a toy that:

- Has good colour and tone contrast such as yellow edging for each hole on a blue shape sorter to make the different shapes easier to locate
- Has bold and clear lettering which is easier to see such as bold black

numbers on a white background for a play clock

- Reflects light or is fluorescent such as diffractive paper with a torch to attract your child's attention or a pull along toy with flashing lights
- Encourages children to use their eyes to follow an object such as wind up toys that move slowly across a surface to develop a child's tracking skills
- Encourages development of hand-eye co-ordination such as posting boxes or sand trays with pourers and scoopers so that your child is able to look and reach more accurately
- Encourages good co-ordination of hands, using both hands together such as construction toys with blocks or bricks that fit together and pull apart to build up strength and dexterity
- Encourages development of fine finger control that your child may need if they read through touch e.g. toy pianos or plasticine with a variety of tools or a washing line and pegs
- Has an interesting texture which offers some variety to touch which is easier to discriminate such as an elephant with





LOOK OUT FOR THIS SYMBOL!

Toys with this symbol contain small parts that could be swallowed and cause a choking hazard. They should only be given to children over 3 years or of a more advanced development.

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different textured parts: corduroy feet, leather body, chain tail and a crinkly trunk so that your child can tell the difference between different textures and surfaces

- Has moving parts that encourage little fingers to explore e.g. activity cubes or an abacus
- Has discrete pieces that can be discriminated by touch e.g. a wooden puzzle board which has different shaped pieces with clear contrasting edges
- Has switches that are recognisable by touch as on or off, and click when operated so that a child knows what they have done e.g. toy cookers that have knobs that click or toy vacuum cleaners
- Encourages understanding of cause and effect e.g. rattles for hands or feet that encourage your child to move to

make a noise or a drum and beater

- Makes a sound or other cue to an action having occurred so that your child knows that they have made something happen, such as a work bench with nuts that click when you use the screwdriver

- Encourages physical play e.g. push along toys like prams or trolleys, and trundle trikes so that your child is confident to move around
- Encourages development of sense of smell such as smelly pens and crayons or scented water for water play so that your child begins to use smell as an extra cue to find things or to know where they are.



Creating a play environment for your child

Toys and play materials are an important way of enabling children to discover a variety of sensory experiences.

The following play tips will help maximise your child's development whilst making them feel safe and comfortable:

- Give your child plenty of time to explore new things. It takes much longer to understand and process how a toy works by touch than it does by looking at it
- All children need opportunities to experience challenge, risk and excitement in a way that is appropriate for them
- It is essential to watch and listen to your child's reactions (filming your child can be a useful tool for this) to work out what stimulates them and what they enjoy
- Talk to your specialist teacher for children with visual impairment* about colour, contrast, lighting and using plain backgrounds. Try to find out if your child sees better on one side, or if objects should be presented in a particular position
- Make sure that your child is in the most suitable position to use their hands and eyes to best advantage, whether seated, standing or lying
- Define and limit the play space around your child to create a "den" or secure familiar base to play
- Keep toys within easy reach so that your child's movements can create an effect. This might mean suspending toys above a child lying down, or putting objects in a table-top tray or shallow box
- If toys roll out of reach, try to take your child to the toy, rather than bringing the toy back to your child. This will develop searching and mobility skills
- Use language that is simple, short and descriptive and relates to what your child is doing
- If your child has repeated behaviours, try to develop them into a more creative activity
- Your child needs different partners, spaces, materials and objects for play. If you build on what your child is interested in, you will encourage them to try new things, feel confident to face future challenges and take with them a great attitude to learning.

*Contact RNIB Helpline on **0303 123 9999** for the contact details of your local specialist teacher. For more information visit **www.rnib.org.uk**



Growing through different types of play

Children develop through play from birth. Different types of play can help to develop a range of skills. Blind and partially sighted children may have to work harder to use their visual skills, which can be tiring. Also, they may be more reliant on their tactile and listening skills than other children as they grow and learn.

Exploratory play encourages the use of motor skills, stimulates the senses of touch, hearing and vision, and introduces cause and effect. It extends children's interest in their environment and encourages them to make sense of the world around by being curious, experimenting and making connections.

Imaginary/pretend play enables children to act out roles and situations that are familiar and unfamiliar to them. They can practise daily routines like shopping and cooking and explore fantasy ideas by dressing up. Children need experience of real things before they understand 'toy' versions.

Constructing and creating enables your child to express their thoughts,

ideas and feelings and to develop an understanding of different objects, materials and tools. This can be through arts and crafts, movement and dance, sound and music, building things and taking them apart.

Games and puzzles provide challenges and encourage problem solving. They can give children an opportunity to ask questions, understand rules set by others, and to share collaborative play with a larger group of children for longer periods.

Physical play gives children opportunities to develop body control and co-ordination of large movements, fine manipulative skills, spatial awareness and balance. Children need large and small equipment, indoors and outdoors, to be active and develop confidence in their movements.

Outdoor play in new mown grass, leaves, mud, water, snow or sand all contribute to a varied sensory experience. Play in outdoor spaces can encourage movement and mobility, and can enable more boisterous physical play.



“top tip”

Everyday items can extend a child's experience of the real world through play. Make a **Treasure Basket using a sturdy, shallow basket, containing a collection of everyday items. The items might include a bunch of keys, teddy bear, paper, ribbons, a whisk, a wooden eggcup or a lemon. These items will vary in weight, size, texture, colour, taste, temperature and sound. Objects should be washable, disposable or replaceable. Children will use all of their senses to discover what an object is, what it is like and what it can do.**

Further information

Get toy updates in Insight magazine. **Insight**, RNIB's magazine for parents and professionals, will have a regular section featuring new toys for blind and partially sighted children. Find out more from rnib.org.uk/insightmagazine

A clear print version of this leaflet is also available.

RNIB

supporting blind and partially sighted people