**POSITION PAPER ON LOW VISION: PART 2**

**SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH LOW VISION TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SUCCESS**

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Position

Students with low vision have unique social and emotional needs that must be addressed in educational programs to ensure successful academic and social competence. These students must receive special support for unique identity issues that may be associated with their visual impairment. They require systematic instruction in social skills, self-advocacy, and communication skills so that they achieve both academic and social success as they move from school to adult life. A sense of independence and interdependence in social and vocational pursuits can only happen when students with low vision feel that they are as competent and confident as their sighted and blind age-mates.

Introduction

Questions regarding the implementation of appropriate educational services and programs for students with low vision to promote inclusion have been debated for decades. Research clearly documents that students with low vision are at greater risk for social isolation than their blind or sighted peers, have less self-esteem and self-determination, and more potential for depression (Bateman, 1965; Corn & Sacks, 1994; Hoben & Lindstrom, 1980; Jan, Scott, Freeman, & Goetz, Richards, & Groenvald, 1991; Sacks, 1996; Sacks & Corn, 1996; Sacks & Wolffe, 1998; Wolffe & Sacks, 1997; and Sacks, Wolffe, & Tierney, 1998).

While great strides have been made toward providing students with adequate academically-oriented interventions, there remain huge gaps in services that address the psychosocial needs of this group of students. This discrepancy is grounded in the way educators and families perceive students with low vision since they may not recognize that these students have special needs related to self-esteem, social interaction, and self-determination. As a consequence, adequate services that encourage and support students’ full participation in the educational system are not provided.

Students with low vision may require special adaptations that they do not feel to be cosmetically appealing, and they may not have had appropriate instructions in the effective use of those adaptations. On the other hand, many students with low vision may appear fully sighted, and compensate for their visual impairment by “masking” or “covering” their visual status (Sacks, 1996). Because students with low vision often appear sighted, age-mates, family members, and teachers may not understand why many of these students appear physically awkward, overtly shy, and easily frustrated. Some children with low vision and additional disabilities may be perceived as having more severe cognitive challenges rather than decreased visual abilities. Students with low vision may miss or misinterpret social cues given by peers, family, or teachers because they are unable to accurately see them. These students do not have an identity as a blind person, nor are they considered fully sighted (Sacks, 1996). They require the support of knowledgeable teachers and family members who can help them to understand that they have a unique identity that is valued and supported by others (Sacks, 1996). Furthermore, students who have a progressive visual condition have unique needs as they adapt to their changing visual status over time. Professionals, families, and others specialists must work closely with students who have low vision to encourage academic and social success through the implementation of specialized curricula that focus on enhancing a positive self-concept, improved self-identity, and values that promote self-worth and a balanced sense of interdependence and independence. For students with visual impairments and multiple disabilities, it is critical to understand how their visual impairment impacts social interactions and learning.

Key Points

In order for students with low vision to achieve high levels of academic and social success, the following recommendations must be incorporated into the educational program for these students. Families, teachers, and students need to recognize the unique skills that students who have low vision must be taught and maintained throughout their formal education.

1. Students with low vision must be given opportunities by teachers and family members to understand and communicate their visual impairment and their visual needs to others.

Beginning in the preschool years on, it is incumbent that professionals and families work together to assist students who have low vision to understand and to communicate their vision needs in a straight-forward manner to their teachers, peers, and members of the community. Initially students should be able to identify the name of their visual impairment. As students mature and gain more social competence, they must be able to explain their visual impairment to others. Students should also be able to communicate their needs resulting from visual impairment in a succinct and straight-forward manner, given their age and developmental levels. They should be able to explain:

· the cause of their visual impairment

· how they see in a variety of situations

· what activities need modification

· why they may have difficulty seeing in one situation, and no difficulties seeing in another situation

· how their vision may be changing over time

2. Students with low vision must receive guidance in strategies to promote effective interactions in a variety of social situations. This is especially important for students with low vision who have additional disabilities.

Strategies and curricula must be provided to help students with low vision to become more socially competent in the following areas:

· developing effective interaction skills that include social initiations, turn taking, gaining entry into a group, using auditory cues to assist with the interpretation of body language.

· learning to use a combination of senses to help support and interpret social encounters with peers, family members, and co-workers,

· asking for assistance when needed in social situations.

· learning effective communication techniques to promote confidence in a range of situations

· providing opportunities for the student with low vision to practice communicating their needs and concerns with family members in a safe, nurturing environment.

3. Students with low vision need guidance to develop strategies to promote self-advocacy skills in schools, communities, and vocational settings.

Students with low vision, including those with multiple disabilities, need to be able to ask for assistance, and make their needs known in a clear and socially-acceptable manner. Teachers, families, and other professionals can support students in this area by providing the following opportunities:

· meeting and interacting with role models who have similar visual impairments.

· engaging in consumer-related activities through organizations such as the American Council of the Blind, the National Federation of the Blind, and the National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH).

· engaging in role play situations in which the need to use self-advocacy skills, such as asking for front row seating at a concert, or the opportunities to use a low vision devices in a school situations.

· providing information regarding modifications for accessible materials, clinical low vision evaluations, opportunities to obtain a driver’s license, and ADA mandates in the workplace.

· providing direction and advice in a range of real life experiences where students can learn to cope with a variety of independent activities.

· providing effective strategies to ask for assistance from others.

· learning strategies to promote positive social relationships in dating and work situations.

· encouraging families to provide safe situations in which students must advocate for themselves.

4. Students with low vision must be supported in establishing an identity that is unique to themselves that is neither as a blind individual or an individual who is sighted. Ongoing support is required for students whose vision loss is progressive and who may eventually require sight substitution techniques.

It is essential that students who are low vision have an identity that is their own. Identifying oneself as low vision should not be viewed as a negative, but rather as a unique part of the student as an individual entity. Promoting oneself as an individual with low vision enhances social and emotional stability. The following strategies may help to support the importance of establishing a strong identity as a person with low vision:

· engaging in activities that promote a positive self-image by having students identify their strong attributes.

· providing opportunities for the students with low vision to enhance their physical appearance through the selection of clothing, use of make-up, use of attractive low vision devices, and by learning strategies to improve body stance and posture, gestures, and facial expressions.

· providing experiences that allow students with low vision to discuss their visual impairment with peers and trusted adults in a safe and nurturing environment.

· providing experiences that allow students with low vision to excel and to demonstrate specialized skills or strengths.

· allowing students who are low vision to feel comfortable with identifying themselves as a person with low vision, and promoting their status as an attribute.

· providing opportunities for students with low vision to discuss strategies for disclosing their visual impairment to others.

· providing experiences for students with low vision to drive, and to develop strategies for non-driving.

· encouraging families to provide opportunities in the home environment for students to take responsibility for chores, homework assignments or projects, and personal belongings.

Recommended Practices

For students with low vision to achieve social and emotional success throughout their school years, families, teachers, and other professionals must work together to insure that these students receive quality services from a teacher of students with visual impairments. It is not enough for educators to provide books and adapted materials for these students, and think that their job is done. Through the assessment and IEP process, teachers, families, students, and other professionals must determine those needs and skills that are unique to the student with low vision. Specific low vision goals that enhance the psychosocial well-being of students with low vision, must then be incorporated into the student’s IEP, and implemented by the TVI and other professionals on the educational team.

Conclusion

It is incumbent upon families, teachers for students with visual impairments, and others who work closely with students who have low vision to recognize the unique identity issues related to students with low vision. It is also critical to ensure that students with low vision receive instruction in social skills, self-advocacy, and communication skills so that they achieve both academic and social success as they move from pre-school to school to adult life. Not only must instruction focus on achieving academic success, but students must work to achieve a sense of independence and interdependence in social and vocational pursuits. This can only happen when students with low vision feel that they are supported by their families and understood and equal to their sighted and blind age-mates. Further, when teachers for students with visual impairments adopt specialized curricula that promote advocacy and assertiveness skills, independent living and survival skills, and skills for traveling without driving, then students will achieve a positive sense of self, and view themselves as competent and worthy individuals.

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