
Education of the Blind Four-Year-Old

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NFB
National Federation
of the Blind

National Organization of
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Editor's Note: Four years ago Robin Reynolds wrote one little letter which forever changed the direction of her daughter's education. Emily, Mrs. Reynold's daughter, was seven-months-old when she was diagnosed as blind. In the months that followed, Mrs. Reynolds dug up every bit of information she could find about blindness. Somewhere in her search she came across the name and address of the National Federation of the Blind. Emily was ten-months-old when Mom read her first issue of *Future Reflections*.

Today, Emily is working on wearing out her second cane (she got her first one when she was two), and is eager to learn to read Braille (she enters a local Headstart program this fall). Mrs. Reynolds is active in her local chapter of the National Federation of the Blind, as well as her NFB state division for parents of blind children. She attended her first National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind this past July in New Orleans, and was almost overwhelmed with everything that she learned.

One of the many people she met at convention was Doris Willoughby, co-author of *Handbook for Itinerant and Resource Teachers of Visually Impaired Students*. The following letter from Mrs. Willoughby to Mrs. Reynolds is a consequence of that meeting.

August 16, 1991

Dear Mrs. Reynolds:

I am pleased to offer, as you requested, suggestions about appropriate special services for a young blind student. As you know, I am a certified teacher of visually impaired children and presently work in an itinerant position here in central Iowa.

You asked me about recommendations for a child who is four years old and will attend kindergarten in 1992-93 and whose vision is low enough that it would be unwise to make inkprint the main mode of reading. Overall ability is within the normal or superior range.

Tactile discrimination work (Braille reading readiness) is important and appropriate even before age four. Examples include tasks such as:

- Comparing textures
- Following along a line of Braille symbols
- Finding two or more symbols that are alike
- Telling whether two symbols are alike or different

This kind of work should continue in conjunction with more advanced lessons.

In this last year before kinder-



garten the child should also be learning to read and write the Braille alphabet, the Braille numerals, and a few Braille words. The *Patterns* Braille series from the American Printing House for the Blind is one good curriculum. The “Readiness” level of this series teaches the alphabet and 23 easy words. Along with such work there should be a great deal of the varied practice that is important for all children at this level. For example:

- Matching letter cards with objects according to beginning sounds.
- Sorting letters: all the *b*'s into the *b* box, etc.
- Matching a capital letter with the same letter in lower case.
- Composing an “experience story” and rereading it aloud with the teacher.
- Matching a number with the appropriate quantity of objects.
- Reading a number and performing an action (such as clapping) the given number of times.
- Reading a few words and short simple sentences.

Some of this kind of practice can be in conjunction with the regular lessons for the whole class. For example, suppose that the class will discuss the letter *f*, look at some words that start with *f*, and select pictures which demonstrate *f*. Then they will print several *f*'s.



The blind child could be given cards with the letter and with words that start with the particular letter; she could hear the names of the pictures and touch at least one actual object such as a feather. She could then write several Braille *f*'s (probably on the Perkins Braillewriter).

From an early age, the child should be integrated for many activities in a group where most of the students do not have disabilities.

At the same time, she should also have individual work to meet her special needs. A certified teacher of blind children should teach new skills, take the main responsibility for specialized instruction, and show other adults how to conduct additional practice. Braille skills should be worked on every day. I would expect that the time devoted by the specialized teacher of blind children would increase at this stage (or at least remain the same, if time was already generous the previous year).

A child of this age should also be using a long white cane. As with Braille, cane skills should be used everyday. A teacher with a background in cane travel should take the main responsibility, but others should also guide the child in continual use of the cane in school and daily life.

For a child with some sight it is important that “sleepshades” be worn to cover the eyes during lessons in Braille and cane travel.

Please let me know if I can be of further help.

Sincerely,
Doris Willoughby



For more information about blindness, please contact the Jacobus tenBroek Library of the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute at (410) 659-9314, or send an email to JtBLibrary@nfb.org.