



Parenting without Sight

*What Attorneys and Social Workers
Should Know about Blindness*



NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF THE BLIND

Live the life you want.



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of the National Federation of the Blind

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Kids Come First!

Nothing is more important than keeping kids safe and giving them the best possible start in life. That is why you became a child protection social worker or a lawyer in the family court system—you fight for kids. It doesn't matter if keeping them safe requires you to step on toes or to be politically incorrect. No matter what, you fight for kids.

No one ever said it was easy! You're expected to do the work of at least three people. Pressures come from everywhere—from families, the press, advocacy groups, and politicians.

Then there's the issue of social justice. You must protect children in a way that respects religious, cultural, and ethnic differences. You must not discriminate on the basis of race, disability, or sexual orientation. How can you balance the needs of children against your commitment to be respectful of differences? When is "different" broadening and enriching? When is it dangerous? With all of these pressures and dilemmas, how can you win? What's even more important, how can the kids win?

Like you, the fifty thousand members of the National Federation of the Blind are determined to protect children. Many of us are parents, grandparents, stepparents, or foster parents. We come from all ethnic backgrounds and from every state in the nation. We are teachers, lawyers, laborers, and business owners. Some of us are electricians, computer programmers, machinists, or social workers, and some of us live on public assistance. In other words, we are a cross-section of society. What brings us together is our knowledge that blind people can and do live the lives they want, safely and successfully.

We in the Federation have a particular interest in reaching out to child protection workers and other professionals who are concerned

with the wellbeing of children and families. Our experience has taught us that blind parents are scrutinized far more closely and judged to be unfit more frequently than sighted parents under similar circumstances. Interventions often occur not because of documented problems, but because caseworkers and judges fear that problems may arise in the future. Federation leaders estimate that as many as one in four households in which the parents are blind



A blind dad spins his kids on the merry-go-round at the playground.



Fun on the swings.

have been visited by workers from child protection services. Furthermore, blindness has often been argued as a ground for terminating parental rights in custody cases. We believe that these interventions and decisions stem from a lack of understanding of blindness.

We believe that anyone, blind or sighted, who harms or endangers a child should face the consequences of that behavior. But we insist with equal vigor that blindness in and of itself should not be



Eddie Bell in the park with his kids.

considered a risk factor. In other words, if you would not take any action if the parents were sighted, you should not take action simply because the parents are blind.

Busy as you are, you don't have time to conduct research on blindness and learn all of the things you think you ought to know. Fortunately it isn't necessary to know volumes about blindness in order

to assess a blind parent's capacity. It IS necessary to begin with an attitude of optimism and belief. Thousands of blind parents have raised happy, healthy children who have grown into responsible, productive adults. Given the positive track record of blind parents, it's reasonable to start with the assumption that blind people have the same capacity for parenting as sighted people do and that they are competent unless and until proven otherwise. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Keep an open mind, and you'll learn a lot from what we tell you.

Our Way

“How can you manage?” Most of us who are blind have heard this question over and over throughout our lives. Sighted people find it hard to understand how blind people go about the tasks of daily life. As a sighted person you may think that you couldn’t possibly prepare meals, cross streets, buy groceries, or hold down a job if you couldn’t see. You may have heard that blind people do all of these things and more—a blind man even climbed to the summit of Mount Everest! Nevertheless, you may find it hard to believe, deep down, that the things you’ve read and heard are true.

It’s hard enough for you to imagine how someone who is blind can hurry down a flight of stairs or light the back burner when the pilot goes out. How then, you wonder, can a blind mother keep track of a rambunctious toddler? How can a blind dad take his preschooler to the park or teach his daughter or son to ride a bicycle? How can blind parents keep their children safe in our dangerous world?

At every stage of our children’s lives, from infancy to young adulthood, blind parents use the basic methods and strategies essential to parents who can see. Clear, consistent rules and a reasonable degree of organization usually keep the home front from getting out of hand. On those unforgettable nights when the sink backs up, the cat goes missing, the computer crashes, and Megan’s science project is due the next day, we do some creative re-planning and clutch at a few shreds of humor, as all parents do when the going gets tough.

ALTERNATIVE TECHNIQUES

To accomplish some tasks, blind parents use “alternative techniques.” These techniques are variations on the methods we use to handle other aspects of our everyday lives and are based on touch and hearing rather than sight. There are no absolute right or wrong ways for blind parents to do things; each of us chooses the methods that



suit us best. We each bring our own set of skills and deficits, and what is simple and obvious to one blind parent may seem tricky to another.

Though our alternative techniques might surprise and even amaze you, try to keep in mind that to us they are generally unremarkable. If you catch yourself assuming that some problem is too daunting for us to solve, stop to give it careful thought. Try not to draw conclusions before you discuss the situation with us and listen to what we have to say. We have extensive experience living without sight, and most of us have developed excellent problem-solving skills. In addition, through support networks across the country, we can draw on the expertise of thousands of other blind parents who have gone before us. Be willing to learn from us and with us.

A number of blind mothers and fathers have contributed their



Learning through play.

time and ideas to the preparation of this booklet. In the pages that follow, they share their child-raising experiences and describe some of the alternative techniques that help them be effective parents. We know we cannot answer all of your questions here, but we hope to demonstrate the resourcefulness and enthusiasm, playfulness, warmth, and wisdom which blind women and men bring to the challenge of raising children.

On Your Mark, Get Set...

Whether we are birth parents, adoptive parents, or parents in the foster-care system, children seldom drop into our lives unannounced. We generally have nine months to prepare, and by the time a baby arrives we have the basics in order. When the due date rolls around, most blind and sighted parents have acquired a crib, a changing table, and an assortment of charming outfits for newborns. We may have had a baby shower and received a host of toys, clothing, and gadgets, both practical and impractical. In eager anticipation we set up a room to welcome the newest member of the family.

BECOMING A PARENT

For the most part, friends and relatives are delighted by the news that a baby is on the way. However, blind parents occasionally run a gauntlet of skepticism and even dismay. One blind mother reports, “When Tim and I told my mother-in-law that we were expecting, she



*Melissa Riccobono
holds her baby.*

was horrified. She turned her back on us and walked away. Until then she’d always been very friendly toward me, and I thought we had a good relationship. But she just couldn’t get her mind around me taking care of a kid when I can’t see.” Such interactions can twist what should be a joyful time into a time of stress and apprehension. For all parents-to-be, the support and encouragement of loved ones are invaluable. If our families doubt our abilities, we as blind parents turn to others who can give us the uncondi-



Allison Hilliker finds some shade while out for a stroll.

tional support we need. We have to remember that the doubts of others are in no way a reflection on our actual capabilities.

Some prospective parents, blind and sighted, have already logged years of experience taking care of babies and small children. They've babysat, cared for younger siblings, or worked in day-care facilities. Others, however, are total novices. Blind parents-to-be, like our sighted counterparts, can catch up on baby care skills in a variety of ways. We might spend a day with a friend or neighbor and practice changing her baby's diapers or feeding him a bottle. We might get a relative to show us how to dress and swaddle a life-sized baby doll. We can also enroll in parenting classes at a local hospital and ask the instructor to give us hands-on demonstrations of diapering, bathing, and other baby care tasks.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

It's important for us to establish comfortable, open communication from the beginning with the health-care professionals who work with us. We try to be clear about our needs and expectations, and to ask and answer reasonable questions. If we find that our obstetrician or midwife has unalterable negative atti-



Ronit Mazzoni visits the aquarium with her two children.

tudes about our parenting abilities, we may be wise to switch rather than fight. We want and deserve the same respect accorded to other parents in prenatal care and during the birthing experience.

“Emphasizing your blindness will often make other people focus on it,” warns Dena Wainwright of St. Paul, Minnesota. “My husband and I drew up a birth plan that did not say anything about my blindness. I had an absolutely phenomenal hospital experience. Not a single person questioned my ability to care for Elyse, and no one made any issue of my asking to be shown how to do things. Even when I sent my husband home for the night to get some good sleep, no one freaked out about ‘the sighted parent’ leaving me alone with our newborn. No one insinuated that I wouldn’t be able to breastfeed, or treated me any differently because of my blindness. The only thing they did to accommodate me was that they had each nurse introduce the nurse for the upcoming shift to me when she left for the day, so I would know that the person coming into my room was a hospital employee.”

And Baby Makes Three

Because babies are so helpless and dependent, people often assume that infant care is especially difficult for blind parents. Actually, most of us find that blindness presents very few extra challenges when we take care of babies. Like sighted parents, we become experts at interpreting our baby's cries, gurgles, and babbling. When we hold her we can read her moods through her body language. We feel her reach her arms toward some enticing object, stiffen at the sight of a stranger, or droop her sleepy head against our shoulder.

DIAPER CHANGES

Changing diapers is a way of life for parents with babies. Diapering is easy when we get the hang of it, but it doesn't come instinctively. Like any other first-time parent, the blind parent must be shown how to perform the task and given the chance to practice. We use our hands to make sure the clean diaper is positioned properly. Some blind parents buy cloth diapers with snaps in order to avoid using safety pins, but others handle pins without difficulty. Like sighted parents, many of us choose to use disposable diapers.



Nose and fingertips tell us when the baby needs a diaper change. We can easily feel the dampness and heaviness of a dirty diaper—and of course the sense of smell provides a major clue! When cleaning the baby's bottom we try

Mother changing her baby.

to be systematic, working carefully from one area to the next with cloth or baby-wipe. Diaper rash can easily be detected by touch, because it produces raised bumps and causes the skin to feel unusually warm. However, the mild redness that may precede a full-blown rash is not so discernible. In this instance, as in so many others, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Debbie Stein of Chicago, Illinois explains, "After my daughter was born a nurse in the hospital suggested that I dab on some A&D Ointment each time I changed her diaper. The ointment soothed any slight irritation and prevented diaper rash from developing."

BREASTFEEDING AND SOLID FOODS

Like sighted mothers, blind mothers who breastfeed position the baby by touch and judge by her behavior whether she has had enough. Blind parents can make up formula by using measuring cups of the necessary sizes. A funnel is helpful for pouring the formula into the bottle. Latonya Phipps of Baltimore, Maryland,

recalls, "I would use my carefully washed hands to guide the nipple of the bottle into my daughter's mouth. I'd check with my fingers now and then to make sure she had a good hold on it."

When introducing solid food, the blind parent usually guides the spoon with one hand and locates the baby's mouth with the other. Babies as young as seven or eight months sometimes lean toward the oncoming spoonful of peaches or sweet potatoes or even reach for the spoon to bring it closer. Babies can be just as proactive, however, when they're not hungry or when they take offense at the cuisine. Ample bibs for parent and child are almost a must. Some blind parents also find it helpful to spread newspaper or a plastic tablecloth on the kitchen floor at mealtimes. No matter what the precautions, spoon-feeding is bound to be hit or miss for a while, whether or not the parent can see. Sponges and towels work miracles; they are a boon to parents everywhere.



TRANSPORTATION

For blind parents, transportation is a major issue, and it begins presenting challenges as soon as the baby arrives. At home and in other familiar places we can carry the baby in our arms or sling her onto a hip as most sighted parents do. In other environments, however, we rarely have both hands free. We always need one hand to hold a dog-guide harness or a long white cane. The remaining hand has to open doors, examine merchandise, pull out a credit card or ID, and carry packages. How to carry a baby as well sounds like a crisis in logistics, but the strap-on baby carrier provides a ready solution. Baby carriers and slings enable the parent, blind or sighted, to carry an infant safely and comfortably while leaving the hands free for other chores. Many blind parents gather information about these devices through local baby-wearing groups, where they have the opportunity to get hands-on exposure to a variety of carriers on the market. These groups are resources for all parents, blind and sighted.

Our alternative techniques come into play when we turn to baby strollers. The conventional method, pushing the stroller along the sidewalk, simply doesn't work for us. A cane or dog guide can't warn us of steps and obstacles as far ahead as the stroller's front wheels. Fortunately, a few strollers on the market are designed with a reversible handle, and can be pulled as well as pushed. Some strollers with the standard handle also work well when pulled. Blind parents can try out various models in order to find one they can pull easily, and perhaps one that folds easily so it can be carried onto a bus, train, or other type of public transportation. The cane or dog guide works fine when we take the baby out for fresh air, pulling his stroller behind us.

RIDING IN CARS

Of course young children need to ride in a car seat for safety. If we are riding with a friend or sighted spouse, this is very easy. The car seat can remain in the car, and the baby can be transferred to a carrier or,



Navigating with the help of long white canes.

when old enough, placed in a cart at a store while we complete our shopping. When taking taxis or other types of transportation however, many blind parents find it helpful to use a car seat that attaches to a stroller or other frame with wheels. That way the baby can be safe, but parents will not have to carry a heavy car seat when they reach their destination. Some parents use a light-weight car seat and carry it in a bag or backpack. At other times, parents may ask to leave a car seat at the service counter of a store and pick it up when shopping is done.

Just as any parent does, we find the way that works best for us. And as all parents do, we cheer when children graduate to booster seats, which are lighter and easier to carry, and then finally do not need a car seat at all!

The Jingle of Little Feet



Enjoying the merry-go-round.

Nothing is more delightful than sharing in a small child's discovery of the world. Every new toy, each leaf and stone, every bird or butterfly is a fresh surprise. To a toddler, furniture seems made for climbing and bouncing. Drawers and cupboards are meant to be opened. Every object cries out to be touched, prodded, tasted and, given the time and opportunity, taken apart. The possibilities are truly wondrous.

TODDLER SAFETY

From a parent's point of view, however, the possibilities include poisons, precipices, and a host of other perils. A thousand worst-case scenarios lie in wait. Blind or sighted, the parent of an inquisitive small child must constantly be vigilant.

How, you may ask, can the words "blind" and "vigilant" go together in the same sentence? The very idea of a blind person in charge of a toddler's safety may make your heart plummet. Here again, good organizational skills, alternative techniques, and common sense enable blind parents to watch over their children, even through that exhilarating, exhausting, into-everything phase.

JINGLING BELLS

As soon as a baby begins to crawl, most blind parents attach small bells to her shoes or clothing. The merry jingling of little bells lets us know where the child is as she runs and plays. “Just before my daughter was able to walk, I started figuring out how to place bells on her shoes,” says Jeff Altman, a blind dad from Lincoln, Nebraska. “The final design consisted of two of the mid-sized jingle bells on a small key ring. With a key ring at the bottom of the laces of each shoe, she could not get the bells off. Whenever I didn’t hear the bells, I knew she was into something.” Some parents put bells on plastic fish line and thread it through the eyelets on the shoes along with the laces. Others prefer to pin bells to sleeves or pants cuffs. Squeaky shoes, popular with

toddlers and preschoolers, also give excellent sound cues. A sighted parent can be vigilant from a distance. For blind parents, keeping tabs on a small child is up close and personal. In many situations we may be much more “hands on” than parents who can see. We physically follow or stay with the child. When visiting a friend’s home or yard, we explore and ask questions to learn about possible hazards. “I had to feel very comfortable with the layout of the area before letting my little ones loose,” explains Judy Jones of Vancouver, Washington. “Even then, I kept my ears alert. Blind parents can’t afford to sit on their backsides and ‘watch’ their kids.” Most of us find that this contact is a major plus for us and our children. We spend lots of time together, playing, talking, laughing, and enjoying one another’s company.

Safety First

CHILDPROOFING

Most parents, including those who are blind, try to avoid accidents by childproofing their homes. Outlet covers, cupboard locks, and stair gates are a tremendous help and comfort. Sometimes extra creativity is needed to solve a particular safety problem. Jeff Altman explains, "In our living room we have a stairway to the basement with an open spindle railing. We could not find a gate that would securely block the top of the stairway, and there was the problem of the open spindles, so I made a gate and a barrier for the railing out of foam core-board from the local hobby store. I used Velcro to hold the pieces in place, and it worked great."

Being well organized is a help to all parents, and certainly to blind parents. If we're careful about shutting gates, locking up household cleansers, and keeping small, indigestible objects off the carpet, we go a long way toward creating a safe environment.

OUT AND ABOUT

Once the child outgrows the stroller and backpack, we work out new ways for traveling together. On the street or in the shopping mall most of us maintain physical contact with a small child at all times. A simple hand-holding device, consisting of a light wrist strap, can help keep the child within easy reach.

If a child is taught from the beginning to hold a parent's hand, the habit can last for years. "I made a rule that any adult, blind or sighted, had to hold my kids by the hand when they went out somewhere," says Deborah Kendrick of Cincinnati, Ohio, the blind mother of three. "I didn't want my kids to get used to running wild when they were out with a babysitter or relative, and then think it was boring to hold hands when they went places with me."



A father and his son have fun on the slide

Taking small children to a park or playground presents some special challenges. Since we can't observe our toddlers from a distance, we stay close by to monitor their activities. Often we climb on playground equipment with our toddlers and preschoolers. In this way we know what they are doing and can keep them safe. In addition, we can teach them climbing and other skills.

LOCATION COMMUNICATION

When children are old enough to venture farther afield, we establish rules that help us know where they are at all times. Sarah Merrick of Michigan explains how she handles outings with her four-year-old twins. "I waited until my children were old enough to respond when I called them," she says. "I'm careful to choose parks that are safe—I only go to parks that are fenced. I try to arrange trips with friends who have older children. You can hear all the giggling and shouting, and it's easy to identify your child that way. I also institute the rule that they respond or come when I call them. If they don't, we go home for the day."

Melissa Riccobono of Baltimore, Maryland, says her kids don't have to stop their play when she calls them, but they must answer so they can converse. She and her husband, who also is blind, have a rule that the kids must tell them when they switch locations, as when they move from the swings to the rock wall across the playground. "If they don't follow the



An outing to the park is fun for the Riccobonos.

rules, we go home,” she says. “End of fun trip.” These methods work well at zoos, museums, or any other public places.

Melissa Riccobono recalls an incident that occurred when she and her husband took their five-year-old son, Austin, to the beach at Ocean City, Maryland. “There was a big wooden castle that Austin wanted to climb on,” she explains. “He was getting old enough that we didn’t want to be the parents who hover needlessly. We told Austin he could go and climb if he came back to us when we called him or answered us if he was close enough to answer. After about ten minutes, fireworks were about to start, so I went close to the structure and called Austin’s name loudly. A lady asked me who I was looking for, and I said I was calling my son, who was five. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I don’t see any five-year-

old who seems to hear you.’ Just then along came Austin, right to me. The lady was extremely surprised, and I was a very proud mom.”

WATER SAFETY

Like sighted parents, blind parents are extra careful around water. Naturally, we follow the array of precautions that sighted parents take—making sure that lifeguards are present, having kids wear appropriate life jackets, and drumming in rules about staying at the shallow end until you can really swim. Again, close contact is the bottom line. We tend to play a lot of games with our kids when we go to the lake or the pool. We keep our children within reach until we know they are good swimmers. Even then we are careful to maintain voice contact.



Jim Jackson walks with his son along the side of the pool.

Sick Days

Even with the best safety measures, all kids have accidents now and then, and occasional childhood illnesses are inevitable. As blind parents, we learn to recognize signs and symptoms, bandage cuts, and administer medicine. Most rashes are discernible by touch. With our fingers we can detect heat, roughness, or swelling of the skin in affected areas. “Our pediatrician explained to me how eczema would ‘feel’, so I would know what to watch for. Sure enough, his description was accurate enough for me to identify it and administer the prescription lotion in the right place.”

STRATEGIES FOR GIVING MEDICATION

With the help of an inexpensive talking thermometer, a blind parent can take a child’s temperature independently. The plastic cups that come with many bottles of medicine have raised markings on the inside, and these are a great help when we have to measure doses. Also, a syringe can be marked for the proper dose by scratching a tactile line on the plunger with a knife, scissors, or key. To give medicine we fill the syringe completely, and then push the plunger down until we feel the notch. In this way we know we have the right amount of medicine. In some cases we may arrange for a sighted person to fill several medicine droppers to the desired dose. These can be stored and used as needed.

DEALING WITH INJURIES

Bottles of medicine can easily be labeled in Braille. Instructions can be copied in Braille or recorded on a phone or other device. A number of pharmacies offer talking prescription labels on containers of medication. The system gives a blind user access to all of the printed information that appears on the container.



A mother checks her child's temperature using a talking thermometer.

Like all parents, a blind parent knows his child better than anyone else does. We quickly learn to distinguish an ordinary demanding or uncomfortable cry from the cry that means real injury. By touch we can examine the child for cuts and scrapes and apply the needed ointments or bandages. However, children sometimes don't want to be touched in the region that hurts. "One thing that helps is to give a child who is old enough a cold compress and have him place it on the affected area," one blind mom suggests. "It numbs the area a little, and you can remove it in a minute and examine the injury." We can generally make a rapid assessment about the seriousness of the problem and determine when it's time to get a doctor's help.

Learning Starts at Home

READING TOGETHER

Sharing storybooks is one of the great delights of parenting. Blind parents can enjoy reading with our children by using print/Braille books, which have Braille on clear plastic pages inserted between the pages of print. The blind parent can read aloud from the Braille page while the sighted child sees the printed words and looks at the pictures. Many print/Braille books include picture descriptions to help us talk about the pictures with our children. Commercially available recorded books, often accompanied by a printed book for the child to read, are another satisfying way for blind parents and children to enjoy stories together.

By the time they start school, most children have learned their colors, letters, and numbers. The more parents can help at home, the better.



Print/Braille books make it possible for blind parents and children to read together.



Ronit Mazzoni and her children play with Playdough.

Many commercially available toys have raised letters and numbers, making it easy for blind parents to use them. These toys include wooden and plastic blocks and sets of magnetized letters and numbers. Many electronic games speak the letters and numbers aloud, permitting us to play with our sighted children and help them learn.

ART SKILLS

For blind parents, teaching colors calls for thought and attention. We make it our business to find out what color our children's clothes are. We may mark them with Braille labels so we can refer to "your red shirt" or "your green socks." Crayons and paints can also be labeled. Judy Jones was especially creative: "I got scraps of cloth of all the popular colors from a fabric store, labeled each with Braille on clear laminate, and sewed them together on the machine to create a color book we could take anywhere. I chose fabric, because there are so many different textures, plus it would be washable and would crunch up in my purse or diaper bag. Any time we had moments to kill while waiting for a bus, waiting for church to start, etc., I'd pull out the color book."

Going to School



Life with school-age kids presents a fresh set of challenges, some of which are unique for blind parents. Many parents, both blind and sighted, dread homework almost as much as our children do. Not only do we have to search our memory banks for the long division we haven't used in decades, but as blind parents we must get access to the reams of printed worksheets stuffed into our kids' backpacks. Life gets easier once our kids master reading and can explain what it says on all those crumpled pages, but during kindergarten and first grade we need to find other resources. Sometimes the school can arrange for an older student

Misty Bradley and her daughter share a proud moment at school.

to help with homework during or after school; a lot of kids in the upper grades are required to perform a community service, and providing this assistance may fill the assignment. The parents of classmates can be another resource; they may be willing to share information about worksheets or other written material.

TEACHER COMMUNICATION

Email is a tremendous help. Teachers use email to share notes and class assignments, which we can read using a speech output program on the computer or a device that gives output in Braille. Scanning devices or apps such as the KNFB Reader can be very helpful. Using the built-in camera on a cell phone, these devices read aloud the words on a printed page.

Developing a good working relationship with teachers and school personnel is crucial. Sharon Howerton of Chicago, Illinois, remembers, “Every year I sent a note to my sons’ teachers explaining that I am blind and cannot read handwriting, so please call if there were any problems. I also religiously attended Back to School Night and parent conferences.”

VOLUNTEERING

By volunteering in our children’s school or classroom, we can become a valued member of the school community. One year Judy Jones ran the school store. “The school’s volunteer coordinator

showed me how to run the simple cash register and marked a couple of the buttons for me with clear tape for reference points. School store was twenty minutes before school started, three days a week in the back of the lunch room.” “I’ve done a lot of volunteering in my son’s classrooms,” says Jennifer Wenzel, a blind mom from Minnesota. “Last year I went in every week and listened to kids read. I really think teachers want to do as much as they can for kids, and caring, dedicated parents make it easier for them. Roland’s teacher would send me thank-you notes for volunteering or going on a field trip, and I sent her notes thanking her for being such a great teacher.”

Sometimes a classroom visit to talk about Braille and other blindness skills can help break the ice. Debbie Stein recalls, “When my daughter was in first grade she told me her classmates were constantly asking her questions about how I did things. She asked me to talk about blindness to her class. I found that the teacher was just as interested as the kids were and really wanted me to write her name for her in Braille.”

Keeping Up Appearances



Jo Pinto helps her daughter get dressed.

OUTFITS

As blind people we learn early in life that it's important to wear clothes that match and adhere reasonably well to current fashion. When dealing with our children's clothing we use the same methods that help us build and maintain our own wardrobes. We may shop with a friend or relative, or we may develop enough confidence in our personal taste and fashion sense that we brave the racks alone. Usually we develop a system for keeping track of which top goes well with which

pair of pants or which shirts are interchangeable in forming a three-piece outfit. We may arrange the closet so that complete outfits hang together. If we have the time and energy, we may sew small aluminum "color tags" into our child's clothing. A device called a color identifier is also handy; when presented with any object, including a piece of clothing, it speaks the name of the appropriate color aloud in a computerized voice.

LAUNDRY

Stains can be a bit of a challenge. Naturally, when we know that something has spilled on our child's clothing, we deal with it as quickly as we can. Some stains are easy to detect because they make the fabric feel stiff or sticky. Some, however, are invisible to the touch. If we

don't know that something has spilled or smudged, we need to get information from a sighted person. One blind dad says, "I've sort of trained my girls (ages four and five and a half) to tell me when they spill something, no matter whether it's on their clothing or on the floor, furniture, or whatever. They know that repercussions do not come from me when they spill something. With clothing I have them change shirts if it's bad enough, say, from a catsup spill, and then immediately spray on Shout or whatever. Letting the garment soak in a stain remover is not a bad idea." Some blind parents routinely wash in cold water and add a bit of Oxi Clean or some other stain fighter, just to be on the safe side.



It's never too early to learn to do laundry.

The stain fighter will help deal with any spots we might otherwise have missed.

Fun and Games



Jo and Sarah playing together.

One of the best parts of family life is having fun together. Playing games, reading aloud, sharing hobbies, and going on family vacations all build joyous memories to last a lifetime. Blind parents love having a good time as much as anyone else does. When our kids are small we push them on the swings or splash with them down the water slide. We take

them on the rides at the theme park and build sand castles on the beach. A bell hung in a back-yard basketball hoop lets a blind dad or mom shoot baskets with the kids. Print/Braille versions of board games such as Scrabble and Monopoly are available for purchase so that blind and sighted family members can play together. Other games, such as Candyland, can easily be adapted by adding Braille markers on clear plastic tape.

LEARNING TO RIDE A BIKE

Sometimes teaching a child a skill without sight can be a challenge. One blind dad explained that he worried about how he would teach his son to ride a bicycle. Like most children, his son started out using a bike with training wheels. "I walked alongside and gave him a lot of encouragement," the dad recalls. "When the training wheels finally came off I did the same thing, lightly resting my hand on the bike to help him



Ronit Mazzoni and her children explore the replica of a plane.

balance. I could tell by feel how he was doing, and pretty soon he was on his own.”

OUT FOR ADVENTURES

When both parents are blind, driving is not an option. If the family lives in a city or urban area, public transportation provides access to museums, theme parks, sports arenas, and other places for family outings. Blind parents who don’t have access to trains or buses may use taxis or hire drivers. Volunteers from church groups or community organizations such as Lions Clubs may be able to help. Some blind parents find creative solutions. For example, we may barter for rides in exchange for babysitting, cooking a special meal, or providing homework help. “It’s a win/win,” one blind mother explained. “We get a ride to the county fair, and we also get to offer something of value to another family. It’s great for forming connections.”

The Long View

Okay, you may be thinking, blind parents can handle the logistics of taking care of children. But some issues are more complex than changing diapers or teaching the alphabet. All kids want to fit in with their peers. Do the children of blind parents feel left out because their parents can't drive? How do the children of blind parents cope when people stare on the street? Especially as they reach their teens, don't they feel embarrassed because their parents are visibly different?

PEER PRESSURE

"I never feel left out," says nine-year-old Gabriella Smith of New Mexico. "My mom and I do all kinds of fun things together. We walk almost everywhere, and my mom likes to kick the soccer ball during practice." "I wish a second driver was available in our family," says twelve-year-old Julia Chang of Chicago, Illinois. "I've just learned to walk, bike, or take public transportation everywhere." "Not one person can truthfully say their parents never embarrassed them," admits Joanne Gabias, a college student from Kellowna, British Columbia. "However, the fact that my parents are blind is not one of the reasons for me. It is annoying when people stare at us, but you learn to stare right back at them. They are insecure because they can't imagine being blind. My parents have done so many incredible things in their lifetimes. I am so proud of my parents. I love being able to say I am their daughter."

People often assume that our children are given a lot of extra responsibilities or that they're expected to grow up fast and help take care of us. Under those circumstances, being the child of blind parents would surely be a burden. "It's only a burden if we start depending on our kids to do more than their fair share," says Deborah Kendrick. "If you treat your kids like servants and expect them to wait on you hand and foot, then sure, they'll resent it. I never wanted mine to feel like 'seeing eye kids.' If we went somewhere I made sure I knew how to get there

so I didn't have to count on the kids to read signs and look for landmarks."



*Tracy Boyd and her son
enjoy a furry friend.*

LET KIDS BE KIDS

Joanne Gabias sums up her feelings about growing up with blind parents. "Contrary to popular belief, I do not act as a caregiver for my mom and dad. Everyone has responsibilities to their families. I may have some different ones, but no more than anyone else my age. My brothers and I all have to do chores around the house, like any other well-raised children. Since I can drive now, I provide rides and run errands when I am available in exchange for the use of the car. I would never say my family was a burden to me. Family is the most important thing in my life. Having blind parents does not weigh me down at all. On the contrary, blindness opens my eyes every day to a new way of viewing the world."

A Few Words about Adoption

Some blind women and men decide to become adoptive parents for the same reasons that lead fully sighted persons to make this choice. If you are a social worker or family law attorney with little experience with blind parents, you may be troubled by the thought of placing a child in such a home. Yet blindness should not be a determining factor when you consider prospective adoptive parents.

“When my wife and I went through the adoption process,” says Steve Jacobson of Edina, Minnesota, “I wondered how closely our true parenting abilities were being evaluated.” While it makes sense to learn whether an applicant has the basic skills of blindness, it may be tempting to let blindness-related issues take center stage. In the worst-case scenario, focusing solely on blindness could allow other problems to slip by unnoticed. More likely is the tendency for concerns about blindness to overshadow the strengths of a very good potential parent. Blindness is only one aspect of who we are, and in general it is not a defining one. Many blind parents have successfully adopted and raised children. Those of us who have adopted children are generally happy to share our experiences in order to help others who wish to adopt.

HOME STUDY

The adoption process usually begins with an extensive home study. The home study gives the social worker a chance to gather some important information by observing firsthand how the blind applicant handles daily household chores. For us as prospective parents it is an opportunity to encourage questions that might remain sources of doubt if they go unasked. However, the home study should encompass a host of issues beyond blindness. Steve Jacobson recalls, “I almost felt that if I could prove my capabilities as a blind person, my other characteristics were irrelevant.”



A portrait of the Sprecher family of Chicago.

THE ADOPTION PROCESS

Generally, the adoption process involves a lot of forms and a good deal of writing. As blind persons living in a print-reading world, we are used to dealing with forms and responding to requests for information. Most of us use computers. It is very helpful when we can get necessary forms in an electronic format. Also, if it doesn't inconvenience the

agency, permitting us to answer questions on a separate sheet can be a help. We appreciate your efforts to work out such details, but concern over logistics should not become a distraction from the larger issues. We are eager to co-operate; we know that our best chance to display our parenting abilities is to provide the requested information.

TRAVEL FOR ADOPTION

It is often necessary for prospective parents to do some traveling in order to complete an adoption. This is particularly true in the case of international adoptions. Blind people travel regularly, and requiring us to do so is perfectly reasonable. When it is not an absolute requirement, some of us may choose not to travel for financial or scheduling reasons, but blindness should not be an obstacle. In some instances, we may opt to bring an additional person with us, particularly when traveling to another country. Such a person may assist us with reading tasks and paperwork requirements. Each of us makes these decisions depending upon our circumstances. In short, some of us may request a few minor modifications to the adoption process. However, it is our responsibility to conform to the existing procedures as fully as any other applicant does.

What kinds of children should be adopted by blind parents? For

a number of reasons, many of us have adopted blind children. Familiar as we are with blindness, we may be less likely than some other parents to think of it as a major problem. However, you should not assume that we cannot raise a sighted child and that we should be matched only with a child who is blind. Most biological children of blind parents have normal vision. The fact that we are blind does not automatically ensure that we are the best parents for a blind child. Some people, blind and sighted, have a natural desire and ability to parent children with special needs. Some, blind and sighted, simply do not. The needs of the child and the applicant family's particular strengths and weaknesses should be weighed carefully as you make a placement decision. If social workers and blind applicants approach the process with common sense and open minds, a positive outcome can be achieved. The bottom line is to find loving homes for children who need them.

Parting Thoughts:

A Father's Wisdom

Gary Wunder of Columbia, Missouri, is the father of a grown daughter. A young blind man, looking forward to fatherhood in a few months, asked him for his advice. Gary's thoughtful response contains wisdom for all blind parents and for the people who seek to understand and learn from us.

"My advice is first to enjoy your children at every stage. They'll pass from one stage to the next, and, as much as you'll love watching them grow, you'll still miss the child of a month ago. My daughter Missy is twenty-five and working in a highly responsible job after getting her college degree. I love this Missy, and at the same time I miss the Missy who sat with me in the rocking chair, the one who rode in front of me in a baby carrier as I walked her to sleep, the child who listened to me as if I were an oracle when I was saying something important to her. I miss the kid who, learning to think on her own, realized I wasn't all-wise and didn't know nearly as much as she once thought I did; and I miss the child who later, as the pendulum swung, again came to realize I knew a bit more than she thought I knew, and flattered me by once again coming for advice. I miss the day we went to buy her a car and she thought I was the smartest bargainer in the world; and then the drive in which she asked me, 'How am I doing, Dad?' and I said, 'I can't really supervise you on this one,' and she said, 'Yeah, I know, but it feels like you can.'

So where does blindness come in? Maybe in that your child gives you an opportunity to live what you say and will quickly tell you when there is a contradiction. Your new child won't assume you can't and that he can. Don't let your child use her vision so much for you that she becomes Daddy's indispensable little helper, but don't shy away from assigning chores for which your child will use

vision. Do everything you can to provide a stable, loving home where your child looks to you for what he needs. Don't be surprised when, soon after he starts school, he comes home with the idea that he has to help you across the street and warn you of steps. He may start telling you things you can't do, even as you are doing them. I'm not certain what the school experience is, but something out there pushes our children to believe we need them, not lovingly in the way that is natural and appropriate, but physically in ways we do not. It's up to us to remind them, gently and lovingly, who we are and what role we play in the family.

Give yourself a break when things don't go the way you want them to go. There is a



Ronit Mazzoni takes her children to a street fair.

difference between a perfect family and a wonderful family.

Have fun shaping a soul, and have even more fun when you realize how much shape that soul will find on her own. If ever there was an argument to convince me that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, the development of a child does it. Enjoy your new arrival!"

IN CLOSING

Thank you for taking the time to read our perspective and insights on blind parents and blind parenting. Our goal is to help everyone understand what it means to be a blind parent and how we accomplish all aspects of parenting, big and small. Please contact us with any questions you may have as we are here to help.

National Federation of the Blind
200 E. Wells St. *at Jernigan Place*
Baltimore, MD 21230
(410) 659-9314
www.nfb.org

The National Federation of the Blind is a community of members and friends who believe in the hopes and dreams of the nation's blind. Every day we work together to help blind people live the lives they want.

As the original and largest organization of blind people in the United States, with over seventy-five years of experience and expertise, the NFB is able to speak with authority and legitimacy about what it means to be blind. We strive to transform blindness from a source of mystery and dread to a mere physical nuisance that can be handled easily with the proper training, techniques, and tools.

By connecting blind parents and supporters with resources in Braille education, mobility training, new technology, and more, the National Federation of the Blind helps make independent living a reality for thousands of blind men, women, and children. We show the blind and the sighted alike that blindness need not be a barrier to living the productive, successful life anyone desires.

Resources

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND PARENTS WEBSITE

This site offers a variety of resources for and about blind parents. It includes basic information as well as articles and videos. From this page parents can sign up for the Parent Mentoring Project, which pairs new or prospective parents with the blind parents of older children.

www.blindparents.org

INDEPENDENCE MARKET

The National Federation of the Blind Independence Market offers blindness-related literature, resources, and products as a service to individuals who are blind or experiencing vision loss, to their friends and families, and to the general public.

www.nfb.org/independence-market

Phone: (410) 659-9314, extension 2216

Email: IndependenceMarket@nfb.org

BLIND PARENTS LISTSERV

This email listserv is open to any blind parent or anyone else interested in issues of blind parenting. Users are free to post questions and comments on any parenting issue. Archives of the list can be searched by topic.

www.nfbnet.org

HADLEY INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED, COURSES ON PARENTING

The Hadley Institute is a distance learning institution that provides courses in Braille, large print, audio, and electronic formats. Hadley offers three courses on parenting that provide specific tips for blind parents.

700 Elm St.
Winnetka, IL 60093
(847) 446-8111
www.hadley.edu

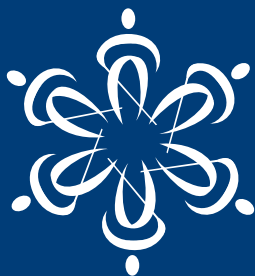
PRINT/BRAILLE BOOK CLUB

National Braille Press offers a new print/Braille book selection each month. Braille appears on clear plastic pages between the pages of the print book so that a sighted child can see the printed words and look at the pictures while a blind parent reads aloud.

National Braille Press
88 St. Stephen St
Boston, MA 02115
(800) 548-7323
www.nbp.org

SEEDLINGS BRAILLE BOOKS PRINT/BRAILLE BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

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www.seedlings.org



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