**Supporting the Social and Emotional Needs of Students with Low Vision to Promote Academic and Social Success**

**A Position Paper of the Division on Visual Impairments**

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Students with low vision have unique social and emotional needs that must be addressed in educational programs to ensure successful academic and social competence. Systematic instruction is required 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. With systematic instruction in these skills, students with low vision can be as competent and confident as their typically sighted and blind peers as they acquire increased independence and form meaningful relationships for social and vocational pursuits.

Questions regarding the implementation of appropriate educational services and programs for students with low vision to promote inclusion have been debated for decades. 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 (Corn & Sacks, 1994; Freeman, Goetz, Richards, & Groenvald, 1991; Hoben & Lindstrom, 1980; Sacks, 2010; Sacks & Corn, 1996; Sacks & Wolffe, 1998; Sacks, Wolffe, & Tierney, 1998; Wolffe & Sacks, 1997).

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 may result from educators' and families' lack of recognition that these students have special needs related to self-esteem, social interactions, and self-determination. As a consequence, adequate services that encourage and support students’ full participation in the educational system may not be provided.

Students with low vision may require special adaptations that they perceive are cosmetically unappealing, and they may not have had appropriate instruction in the effective use of those adaptations. On the other hand, many students with low vision may appear to be typically sighted, and may compensate for their visual impairment by “masking” or “covering” their visual status (Sacks, 2010). Because students with low vision often appear typically sighted, age-mates, family members, and teachers may not understand why many of these students appear physically awkward, overtly shy, and easily frustrated. Some students with low vision and additional disabilities may be perceived as having more severe cognitive challenges rather than decreased visual abilities.

For professionals who work with students with visual impairments and multiple disabilities, understanding how visual impairment impacts social interactions and learning is important in addressing the unique needs of these students. Students with low vision may miss or misinterpret social cues given by peers, family members, 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 typically 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 that may lead to further reduced levels of low vision or to total blindness have unique needs as they adapt to their changing visual status over time. Professionals, families, and other 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, improving self-identity, and fostering values that promote self-worth and a balanced sense of interdependence and independence.

**Key Points**

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

* 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 and continuing throughout their educational career, professionals and families must work together to assist students who have low vision to understand and to communicate their vision needs in a straight-forward manner to 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 communicate their needs related to their 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,
* activities that need modification,
* why they may have difficulty seeing in one situation, and no difficulties seeing in another situation, and
* how their vision may change over time.
* Students with low vision must receive guidance in strategies to promote effective interactions in a variety of social situations. This guidance is especially important for students with low vision who have additional disabilities.

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

* developing effective interaction skills that include social initiations, turn taking, gaining entry into a group, and using auditory cues to assist with the interpretation of body language;
* learning to use a combination of senses to 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; and
* providing opportunities for students with low vision to practice communicating their needs and concerns with family members in safe, nurturing environments.
* Students with low vision need guidance to develop strategies to promote self-advocacy skills in school, community, 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;
* engaging in role play that requires self-advocacy skills, such as asking for front row seating at a concert or requesting low vision devices at school;
* providing information regarding modifications for accessible materials, clinical low vision evaluations, opportunities to obtain a driver’s license, and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) mandates in the workplace;
* providing direction and advice in a range of real life experiences in which 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; and
* encouraging families to provide safe situations for students to advocate for themselves.
* *Students with low vision must be supported in establishing an identity that is unique to themselves, which is neither as a blind individual or as an individual who is sighted. Ongoing support is required for students with progressive vision loss who may eventually require sight substitution techniques.*

Students who have low vision must develop an identity that is their own. Identifying oneself as having low vision should not be viewed as a negative, but rather as a unique, attribute. Promoting oneself as an individual with low vision enhances social and emotional stability. The following strategies may help to support the process of establishing an identity as a person with low vision:

* engaging in activities that promote a positive self-image by having students identify their strengths;
* providing opportunities for students with low vision to enhance their physical appearance through clothing selection, use of make-up, use of attractive low vision devices, and by learning strategies to improve body stance and posture, gestures, and facial expressions (Corn, Bina, & Sacks, 2009);
* 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 with low vision to feel comfortable identifying themselves as persons with low vision and promoting their visual 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, who meet their state’s or province’s visual requirements, to drive and developing strategies for non-driving for students who will not be able to drive (or to drive with restrictions); and
* 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 ensure that they receive quality services from a teacher of students with visual impairments. Providing books and adapted materials for these students does not constitute a free and appropriate public education. Through the assessment and IEP process, teachers, families, students, and other professionals must determine the skills and needs that are unique to individual students 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 teacher of students with visual impairments and other professionals on the educational team in collaboration with students and families.

## **Position**

Families, teachers of students with visual impairments, and others who work closely with students with low vision must recognize their unique needs. Students with low vision must 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 achieve a sense of independence and interdependence in social and vocational pursuits that is attained when students feel that they are supported by their families and that they are equal to their sighted and blind peers. With appropriate instruction in advocacy and assertiveness skills, independent living skills, and independent travel, students with low vision will achieve a positive sense of self, view themselves as competent and worthy individuals, and will achieve their potential.

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