

Vision Difficulties or Behaviour?

Many students with visual impairments may develop behaviour patterns that reflect difficulty to manage behaviours and may resemble behaviours seen in children on the Autism Spectrum. In fact, this may actually be your student's attempt to stimulate some vision response in his/her brain.

For those individuals working with students with a visual impairment, the following behaviours may be related to the student's visual difficulties.

Eye Pressing: a child may press his/her eyes to stimulate some visual information to the brain. It is important that this mode of stimulation (eye pressing) be redirected to avoid damage to the eye, eyeball or eye socket.

A bright, shiny reflective light presented close to the eye might help reduce the student's desire to press their eye.

Flapping: sometimes a student is trying to activate visual processing to the brain and the movement of flapping his/her hands will give the brain some feedback.

Using a moving object (e.g. lighted strings, slinky, scarf, windmill, etc.) close to the eye, generally in the peripheral field, may help reduce 'flapping' tendencies.

Spinning/Twirling: spinning and twirling movement patterns can activate visual information to the brain.

Including a vestibular activity into the student's day (e.g. time on the trampoline, swing, or sitting on a disc'n sit will provide this input where tolerated) may help reduce this behaviour.

Rocking: rocking can be very calming to students who cannot predict their environment. For students with visual impairments, rocking is both calming and may also help activate the visual cortex of the brain.

Try to arrange for organized times in the day where the student may engage in rocking behaviours (e.g. swing, rocking chair, use of disc'n sit, etc.).

Fear of Movement: it is often difficult for individuals with visual impairments to trust movement. They are often unable to gauge the floor and they may not know what is actually moving (is it them or the car? wheelchair? ground? etc.) Many students with visual impairments may become 'frozen' or 'fearful' of sudden movement (either their own, others, or objects around them) and may appear 'rigid' or unresponsive when moving from one area to another, or when people or things around them are moving.

Talk to your student and advise him/her that they are going to move, or that there is something/body around them that will be moving. Provide security when engaging in movement activities. When the student is expected to move, start with simple movement patterns such as moving a hand or fingers and gradually move more of the body. When objects or people about the

student are moving use your voice and tell them what is happening or involve them in the movement, etc.

Sensory Defensiveness: many students with visual impairments are resistive to unfamiliar tactile information whether through their hand, body or mouth. They may not have had an 'experience' of the tactile sensation or prefer familiar tactile information. After all, your student may not have a visual reference to understand the tactile information being offered to him/her.

When presenting new tactile information, tell the student what to expect; have the student use other senses to explore the information first (e.g. smell, hearing, then touch the outside of the hand before the palm of the hand). Finally leave the object close to the student's hand and gently touch the hand and encourage the student to explore the object.

Excessive Noise (Calling Out): there could be several reasons for a child with visual impairments making excessive, inappropriate noise.

- Sometimes a student will use noise **to locate** others or objects around him/her. *Your student may require assistance with orientation to his/her environment. When others are in the room it would be beneficial if they let your student know that they are in the room and where they are (e.g. telling him/her where they are).*

- Noise can also provide **sensory input** to a student who otherwise has limited sensory input.

Provide noisy items for the student to interact with. If noise is not appropriate, redirect to other sensory items (e.g. items with smell or tactile input).

- Noise or calling out, may also be a reflection of the student's **insecurity** in any given situation.

Provide reinforcement to the student, let them know that they are not alone (e.g. perhaps providing the student's favorite object or activity will help the student calm and feel more comfortable about their environment).

Repetitive Behaviours: often a student with a visual impairment will complete tasks in an almost obsessive way, whether it is the routine within the day or within an activity. If the known routine or pattern is changed they can become very agitated. Repetitive behaviours, set schedules and structure allow the student with the visual impairment to predict what is happening to them and their 'place' within the routine. These structures often take 'place' of vision and allow predictability to the day.

Tell the student what is happening and what to expect. Tell them their role in the activity. Help with transition and participation. In addition, reliable schedules, tactile schedules or tactile cues allow the student to understand what is expected and their part in it.

Resistance to Change: unless prepared, any change for a student with a visual impairment can be difficult and may result in lack of willingness to change to a new activity. They may not see or understand what the new activity may look like and hence

may resist any change either to an activity, change of clothing, change in person supporting them, movement, etc.

Help the student prepare for change. Talk about it. Prepare for it (counting down to the time for change). Using schedules and tactile cues (if appropriate) may also help. Sometimes providing 'grounding' strategies (e.g. trunk support, hands pressing down on shoulders, etc.) can help reduce anxiety that results in resistance to change.

For more information or suggestions, or if you have additional questions regarding the behaviour of your visually impaired student, talk to your Teacher of the Visually Impaired. For sensory strategies, talk to your local Occupational Therapist.