

39. BLINDNESS AND DEAFNESS IN CHILDREN

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39.2 Introduction

39.2.1 Both sight and hearing contribute to the child's ability to communicate effectively. A child with severe visual impairment or total blindness is disabled by the inability to see written words. In addition, when moving around the child is exposed to dangers which a sighted child would not encounter. Likewise, severely deaf children are handicapped, not only by the diminished ability to hear the spoken word and so acquire language, but by the diminished ability to monitor their own speech and so formulate words which are intelligible to others. They also cannot hear sounds warning of danger.

39.3 Care Needs

39.3.1 If the child is to overcome the disability by being trained to develop effective means of communication, considerable attention must be given by others to this task. In addition a child who is severely blind or severely deaf initially requires substantially more attention and supervision throughout the day than that required by a child of the same age to protect the child from danger.

39.4 Mobility Considerations

39.4.1 The Blind Child

Outdoors in unfamiliar surroundings, the great majority of children with blindness will require guidance or supervision from another person.

39.4.2 The Deaf Child

By the time a child with long-standing profound deafness has reached puberty, he may have learned how to cope with traffic and how to get from one place to another in safety. However these abilities require good communication through spoken language which some deaf children will not have at puberty. A deaf child's ability to understand spoken language may be developmentally behind adolescents who can hear.

39.5 Duration of Need

- 39.5.1** The need for attention is greatest in the earlier years, but may diminish as the child matures and acquires alternative means of communication. However some deaf children will be struggling with their attempts to learn the spoken language. By puberty, the blind child may be a competent touch reader, and may have learned how to cope with traffic and how to move around in familiar surroundings without danger. However, when outdoors in unfamiliar surroundings the very great majority of blind children will require guidance or supervision. The deaf child may have acquired some degree of effective communication with those he is likely to encounter. The deaf child may also have learned how to cope with traffic.
- 39.5.2** Emotional and behavioural problems may arise in blind and deaf children for a variety of reasons. As the child gets older and comes to appreciate the significance of his disability, he may become frustrated and have difficulty in coming to terms with the handicap. These problems may delay progress in learning to communicate, to avoid danger and to become independent. Likewise, if in addition to blindness or deafness, there is mental or other disability, progress may be very substantially delayed.
- 39.5.3** The parents may sometimes fail to appreciate fully the progress the child has made towards independence. If there continues to be an established need for continued attention or supervision by day based on evidence both from home and school, these are not likely to change during the remainder of childhood.

39.6 Further Evidence

- 39.6.1** Assessment of the teenager's needs may also be greatly assisted by reports from teachers or specialist welfare workers particularly if there are emotional or behavioural problems. A copy of the statement of the child's educational needs, which the Education Authority is now required by law to complete for each pupil, should also provide relevant information.

39.7 Combination of Blindness and Deafness

39.7.1 Care Needs

A child who has severe impairment of both vision and hearing is unable to use one sense to compensate for loss of the other, and is unlikely to achieve independence by puberty. Needs, especially for day attention and supervision will persist beyond that age, at least until the end of childhood. Requirements for night attention or watching-over are not likely to arise by reason of blindness and deafness alone.

39.7.2 Mobility Considerations

- (i)** A child aged 5 years or more may satisfy the conditions for the higher rate mobility component if he is both deaf and blind, and as a result he is unable to walk to his intended destination out of doors without the assistance of another person. The degrees of disablement resulting from loss of vision and loss of hearing must amount to 100% and 80% respectively.
- (ii)** The degrees of disability resulting from blindness and deafness can only be assessed by experts. A Medical Services doctor may be asked to arrange for sufficient evidence to be collected to determine these issues.
- (iii)** Even if the degrees of disablement resulting from losses of vision and hearing do not meet the criteria for the higher rate of the mobility component of DLA, a child with substantial impairments of vision and hearing is likely to require the guidance or supervision of another person when out of doors.