

Conceptual Article

Early Educational Intervention for a Child with Visual Impairment

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ABSTRACT

The write up, "Early Childhood Education for Visually Impaired Children" attempts to give a model for systematic intervention to empower such vision-impaired kids right from their pre-school days. The article specifies the broad objectives of such interventions, particularly in a country like India that was till some years ago, steeped in superstitious beliefs. Though remnants of such superstitions exist, the modern-day social workers are also active in India to help such vision-impaired kids lead a near normal life. The write-up looks into needs for early intervention in the form of pre-schooling similar to nursery schools for other normally endowed children to not only teach them the all-important 'daily-life' skills but also the main aspects of using other sound faculties like auditory and smells to find their bearings in a fast-moving modern 21st century. The article examines two case-studies also to support its claims.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education, Visually Impaired Children, Systematic Intervention, Empowerment, Preschool Education, Daily-life Skills, Auditory and Olfactory Learning, Special Education, Case Studies, India.*

INTRODUCTION

"Catch them young, teach them well" is a mantra for making a child with visual impairment lead normal life as that of non-disabled. Rearing a blind child is an art rather than a spontaneous or careless act. Unlike animals, all human beings from womb to adolescence should be given more care by constituting psychological aspects, physiological growth, nutrition, conducive environment, etc. Scientific approach is to be adopted to help the child overcome any deficiency. A child needs help, love, and care which are given with wholehearted involvement and good spirits. Everyone is handicapped in one way or the other. Why should we look into the deformity or disability? Let us consider a child as a child first, disabled next.

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The Governments and NGOs concentrate more on education and rehabilitation services. Early childhood intervention programme is still in its infancy. We have to understand the preschool children better in order to make our service 'reality-based'. It must be ensured that the general education system must not be neglected and has to be blended with the specialized activities in case of visually impaired children.

Early childhood covers a period of 2½ to 6 years which is called preschool period. This period is also known as phallic period of personality development. Early childhood is labelled by parents as the problem age- the troublesome, or the toy age; by educators as the preschool age; and by psychologists as the prelingual, the exploratory or the questioning age. Vision plays a basic role for their demands of independence, for walking and talking, their playing with toys, their exploration in environment and their questioning of things, which they hear and see. Children with visual impairment are at risk for developmental delays in using words to communicate, feelings and ideas, in cooperative and imaginative play, in daily living skills and in orientation and mobility.

Early childhood period is a crucial period for children with visual impairment to acquire many skills in order to be able to overcome the limitations of their handicap. The following are the objectives formulated for early childhood education programme.

1. To frame a structured informal learning curriculum and situation based on individual needs.
2. To set a conducive physical environment that is safe to the sightless child.
3. To train a child in daily living skills, orientation and mobility skills and sensory development skills to adjust and adapt to the environment.
4. To stimulate intellectual curiosity and the interest to explore, investigate and experiment, by giving of opportunities in the child's environment.
5. To foster in the child, a good physique and health.
6. To develop desirable social attitudes, manners, group participation, independence, confidence and creativity by providing all possible opportunities and experiences.
7. To impart parent education for handling the child in proper manner.
8. To build a 'CBR' approach to reach out to the rural children.
9. To modulate 'inclusive schooling' for children to have access in education along with sighted children in nearby schools.

Vision loss limits the opportunities for a child to develop classification, seriation, conservation and other cognitive skills naturally. A child with visual defect needs opportunities to develop concepts through auditory perception, tactual exploration, discrimination and comparison. He needs to develop an understanding of whole or part relationships, sound localization and memory. The child needs to use non-visual sensory information to develop a greater understanding of his environment and of himself. This preschooler often has difficulty in social interactions with other children because he has little or no access to facial expression and body language, and has limited cooperative play skills. His ability to communicate with others and to comprehend what others communicate to him is still at a low level. He is not adept in the common daily living skills. He needs assistance from others to move in his environment.

India has not looked into the necessity of educational facilities for the children with blindness up to the age of six years. Only voluntary agencies in some parts of the country are providing some services, which have not been recognized by the Government. When we analyze the need of preparatory schools for sightless, they are the privileged group to be trained in such schools to adjust and adapt to normal living conditions. Early education is less pedagogic and more psychological or social. A child with visual defect needs hands-on experience, social integration, help and assistance, stimulation and motivation, and care and affection, which are the ultimate goals of early childhood education.

Parents of the child with visual impairment should have an optimistic approach, rational and constructive thinking, the vision and foresight to meet the needs and wants of their child to lead a normal life. Parents should understand the limitations of their child due to his/her vision loss. Mother alone is not caretaker of the child, the father and the other members of the family also have the equal responsibility. The parents should understand that the child is mentally like other children; the parents should give hands-on experiences to the child for his physical, mental and social developments. The parents should not give over-protection which spoils the self-development.

Preparatory Education

The children with special needs should be brought to the campus for training in sensor skills, daily living skills, orientation and mobility skills and social skills. A well-designed preschool provides warming up activities to enter formal schooling. The group of personnel such, Ophthalmologists and trained staff in the field of visual impairment, has to plan on 'Treatment Behaviour Change and Skills Development' for the child. Since the individual needs are different the preparatory school should work on catering to the needs of the children, considering the severity of impairment and age.

CCBR Approach on Early Education

Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) approach can work in the locality of rural families where the children with visual impairment are unserved. This programme is operated with the help of trained field workers or itinerant pre-school teachers. These staff members go to the doorsteps of the children to deliver the service in collaboration with the family and local community. This homebound programme of early education is cost effective, requires little infrastructure, and would penetrate deep into remote areas.

Inclusive Schooling

A separate programme is not needed for glvmg preschool facilities. The existing preschools can adapt the teaching strategies and environment to make them accessible to the child with vision loss, which can also be conducive to non-disabled children. The regular teachers are to be given short-term training to handle the visually impaired children along with sighted children, Ophthalmologists, Psychologists and Special Educators are referred to when the teacher has difficulty in handling the child and clarifying the doubts of the parents. This inclusive schooling makes way for real integration by providing equal opportunities and experiences as that of sighted.

The curriculum should be child-cantered where the individual needs are well attended. It should be seldom rigid, but should provide rich and varied learning experiences. The physical environment is safe as well as attractive which promotes learning and a healthy development. Due importance is to be given to the development of language skills, mathematical concepts, muscle coordination and sensory skills.

Teaching Materials and Strategies

The child's environment should be surrounded by toys and objects for his own explorations so that he/she can compare the qualities of those objects, make new combinations and exercise his/her memory. These are sound producing and cause-and-effect toys. Portable and hold able toys having more tangible shapes are explorable by the child. The child needs concreteness among objects so as to form concept. Real objects, are meaningful for acquiring new concepts. While playing with sighted children, the child with visual impairment develops vocabulary, dramatizations that imitate life experiences. Sighted preschoolers are encouraged to be the sighted guides. Learning of orientation and mobility skills enable the child to become independent in moving around with the supervision of someone. The child should be appreciated by praise, reward, whenever he does anything correctly. If he does not do things properly, guide him till he does them properly. Realistic aspiration should be focused in accordance with his capacities so that the child has a reasonable chance of making a success of whatever he undertakes, thus fostering favourable self-concept.

Early childhood intervention programme for the children with visually impairment makes education totally flexible, optimally effective, and thoroughly individualized so as to enable every child with visual defect to lead as normal life as the sighted.