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Strategies - Promoting mobility and independence

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Introduction

Generalising learning

Young people with visual impairment and autism have difficulty generalising what they learn. This means that an individual may

- acquire and use a new skill with one practitioner, but not use it with any other person
- acquire and use a new skill in one location, but not use it anywhere else
- acquire and use a new skill with one set of materials, but not use it with any other items
- even acquire and use a new skill one day of the week, but not use it on any other day.

Practitioners should begin to work towards the generalisation of all learning from an early stage.

The difficulties associated with providing additional support

The young people featured in the case studies in this guidance material all have additional support. However, this is not always in their best long-term interests: it can be a serious barrier to the young person acquiring independence in mobility, dressing, toileting, etc.

Practitioners should therefore put in place measures to gradually reduce the amount of support.

Given Ali's age (he is only 4), the complexity of his difficulties and his sociability, he is regarded as needing the stability and security afforded by having additional support, from a designated teaching assistant (TA) for most of the school day. The school is aware that as Ali settles and matures, it will be important to decrease the involvement of his designated TA and to increase the number of other staff members who work with him. This should ensure he does not become emotionally over-reliant on one member of staff and will also support

- the generalisation of his learning across staff members
- the generalisation of his independence skills across staff members
- the promotion of his social relationships with peers.

Balancing the promotion of mobility and independence with other demands on time

Because of all the other demands on time, practitioners supporting young people with visual impairment and autism may find it difficult to do enough to promote mobility and independence. For example, teaching assistants can feel under pressure to ensure that a young person arrives at lessons right at the start; yet ensuring that the individual does so may mean hurrying him / her on the way, opening doors for the young person and guiding him / her. It may be of greater long-term benefit to the individual if the time is taken to promote his / her mobility and independence, even if that means arriving late for lessons.

To minimise time lost when the young person visits the toilet, teaching assistants may feel it is better to carry out tasks for the young person rather than promote independence by allowing enough time for the young person to be more independent.

Time spent on promoting mobility and independence in the early stages is likely to pay dividends later. It may be very difficult to promote mobility and independence as an "add-on" towards the end of a young person's education, as the individual is likely by then to rely very heavily on the support of others.

Mobility and independence in different settings

There is a distinction in this section between mobility around the school and supporting independence in the classroom. As noted above, young people with visual impairment and autism have difficulties generalising their learning. It may, therefore, be necessary to work on the same skills both in the general school setting and in the classroom.

It is recognised that mobility and independence in the community is a very important issue for some young people with visual impairment and autism. However, this section includes no strategies which specifically address mobility and independence in the community. If it is appropriate for a young person to acquire mobility and independence skills in the community, it may be necessary to ensure that the learner generalises skills already well-established in familiar settings to community settings.

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Transitions and mobility

In the context of young people with visual impairment and autism, the term "transition" has one basic meaning: "change". However, it has several uses. Perhaps the most frequent use refers to a change of location, i.e. to moving ("transitioning") around the physical environment. Such a transition of location might be from

- one classroom to another
- the classroom to the toilet
- the playground to the classroom
- the young person's work-station to the group table
- the school to the young person's home.

However, "transition" can be used to refer to a change in any aspect of daily life, such as a transition from one activity to another or a transition from one member of staff to another.

A more detailed explanation of transitions together with guidance is provided in the discussion of supporting the young person to cope with transitions in the section on Underlying principles. Users concerned with mobility and independence are urged to read that section.

Transitions can be very unpleasant, even overwhelming, for sighted autistic young people; they can increase anxiety and stress and raise arousal levels. Having little or no sight is likely to make transitions of location even more difficult for young people with visual impairment and autism.

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Mobility training

Good mobility skills in school, at home and in the community are important for all visually impaired young people, including those who also have autism. Young people who have good mobility skills are able to achieve higher levels of independence, although much will also depend on whether the individual has additional needs such as learning difficulties or physical disabilities.

The involvement of a mobility or habilitation officer or teacher is recommended. Many of the skills required for mobility will be the same whether or not the young person has autism in addition to visual impairment. However, some features, for example consistency of routes, may assume greater significance for an individual who also has autism. Staff helping to support a young person in mobility will have to be aware of his / her individual needs in terms of:

- the nature of the visual impairment
- the nature of the autism
- the interplay between these.

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Using a long cane for mobility

Of the fourteen young people described in the case studies

- four use a long cane
- one uses a symbol cane
- eight use sighted guiding but do not use a cane of any type
- one uses echo location as a supplementary technique to using a long cane.

The techniques for using canes are highly specialised and need to be specially taught by a mobility or habilitation officer or teacher. Many factors need to be considered when deciding whether a young person should use a cane, and if so, whether it should be a symbol cane or long cane. The decision should always be taken in conjunction with a mobility or habilitation officer or teacher.

A symbol cane enables the user to be identified as having visual impairment.

A long cane also identifies the user as having visual impairment. In addition, a long cane enables the user to identify and detect:

- the nature of the ground
- his / her location in relation to points of reference such as kerbs and walls
- obstacles to mobility.

Archie uses his long cane well in school. He enjoys the sensory information he obtains from its use. As well as helping his mobility, it helps him to manage his anxieties and can therefore be seen as having a calming effect. In addition, his cane can be seen as part of the task structure, a component of the TEACCH approach; thus his cane may also help him to stay on task.

Tyler also uses a long cane and is learning to do so in the community as well as in school. However, if he starts to talk to the mobility officer during his mobility lessons he finds it very difficult to use his cane appropriately or to think about where he is going. This is because he is single-channelled. In fact, his cane can be seen as part of the task structure, a component of the TEACCH approach; thus his cane may also help him to stay on task.

Sebastian is learning to use a long cane. He is also being taught some techniques of echo location to support his independent navigation around school. As Sebastian is also very musical it is tempting to speculate that his interest in sounds and music will support the use of echo location. However, it is not known whether this was, in fact, a factor that influenced the decision to help him to use this technique.

Sarah is being taught by a mobility officer to use a long cane and also to trail with her hand.

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Minimising clutter

Minimising clutter is a feature of managing the environment which contributes not only to promoting mobility and independence, but is also important in

- promoting learning
- supporting receptive communication.

It is important to minimise clutter in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. A key reason is to support the young person during transitions around the school and when navigating around the classroom.

Clutter can be defined as anything that occurs in the environment that is not necessary for the core functions of a given space at a given time. It can be visual, auditory, tactile or olfactory. Tactile clutter includes items that obstruct routes.

Encountering clutter on a route around school or whilst navigating around the classroom can have several adverse effects for young people with visual impairment and autism. Clutter can

- be a tripping hazard
- distract the young person from where he / she is going
- cause over-stimulation, possibly leading to confusion / disorientation / distraction / anxiety / stress
- change location from day to day, so that an item which a young person uses as a landmark on day one may be missing or obscured on day two.

Corridors and other spaces around the school can quickly become cluttered as a result of staff and young people leaving items in them. It is useful to give a member of staff responsibility for ensuring that these spaces are kept free of clutter.

Classrooms can easily become cluttered, especially if they are used by different young people (and teachers) at different times for different functions. If this is the case, it may be important for a designated member of staff to check for clutter at the beginning of a lesson and remove items that will impede navigation around the room.

For some young people, it is important to consider other people as clutter, and therefore to ensure the young person avoids crowded situations.

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Ensuring the young person avoids crowded situations

Transitions are a cause of considerable stress / anxiety / arousal for some young people with visual impairment and autism. Some individuals find them particularly difficult when they encounter crowded places. As discussed in the previous section, it is important to minimise clutter in order to promote mobility.

For some young people, people constitute clutter: they can be very distracting, because of their movement, actions, sounds and unpredictability. For many young people with visual impairment and autism, peers are particularly distracting; for some, they are the cause of considerable anxiety. An additional difficulty with crowded situations for some individuals is that of coming into physical contact with other people. This physical contact can be very confusing and aversive.

Ensuring the young person avoids crowded situations can make a major contribution to mobility and independence skills.

In order to promote Ali's independence skills, staff avoid the "clutter" of other young people in the cloakroom. Because his peers are very active and rather noisy, and the cloakroom is small, Ali would be exposed to an unacceptable level of sensory clutter if he were to use the cloakroom at the same time as his peers. He would be unable to focus on the tasks of putting on / taking off his coat and managing the zip. In addition, it is very likely that some peers, and possibly practitioners, would come into physical contact with him in this situation; at best Ali would find this confusing and distracting; at worst, he would find it aversive. Therefore, at break time, staff delay taking Ali to the cloakroom until his peers have finished.

Bob is uunable to tolerate crowded rooms and cannot cope if the school's entrance hall is bustling when he arrives: the noise, movement and unpredictability are simply overwhelming for him. In addition, having someone bump into him is very distressing. A low arousal approach was introduced for Bob:

- he is no longer required to attend lessons in classrooms,
- his arrival at school was retimed to be earlier than his peers; this means the entrance hall is free of peers when he arrives and it gives him sufficient time to relax after the journey to school and to greet key members of staff before his formal timetabled activities start; Bob also leaves school just before the rest of the young people.

Ensuring Bob avoids crowded situations as he arrives and leaves school and as he transitions around school at these times has made a significant contribution to his positive behaviour, emotional wellbeing and learning.

In the past, the transition to the dining room at lunch time was particularly difficult for Amanda. At this time, all the young people in the school walk to the dining room together. It became clear that Amanda found this crowded situation stressful, so she now transitions to the dining room five minutes before the majority of her peers. She goes with a teaching assistant and another student in her class.

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Mobility around the school

In order to promote mobility around the school, it is essential for practitioners to minimise clutter. It is also helpful to

- provide consistent routes
- provide trails and landmarks
- provide a rule that everyone walks on the same side of the corridor.

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Providing consistent routes for transitioning around school

For a young person with visual impairment and autism, following a consistent route around school can be very helpful. Regularly encountering familiar and relevant landmarks can help the individual to know his / her location in the school and which way he / she is facing. The familiarity of consistent routes and landmarks can reduce the young person's anxiety, thus fostering learning of routes around the school. Reducing anxiety will also support the young person's engagement in the lesson or other activity once he / she has completed the transition.

Providing consistent routes is also important for minimising anxiety, stress and arousal levels during transitions; see supporting the young person to cope with transitions.

Cecily has a mobility book that describes in braille the consistent routes that she uses when transitioning around school independently.

To support Jasper's independence when transitioning around school, consistent routes are used; plans have been drawn and distributed to key staff to ensure that everyone adheres to these routes when accompanying Jasper. Other strategies are also used to support Jasper's transitions around school

- trails and landmarks are provided
- clutter is minimised
- objects of reference are provided.

Consistent routes can be developed as trails, provided with landmarks.

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Providing trails and landmarks

Archie's mobility teacher has established trails along the school's corridors. These use a dado rail. She has also identified certain permanent features that are accessible to Archie as key landmarks. For example

- a dome-head screw fixed on the dado rail informs Archie he is approaching a door or corner
- the well for the doormat informs Archie that he is close to the main entrance to the school
- a bench fixed to a corridor wall as a distance marker, informs Archie how much further he has to go to get back to his classroom
- the corners of a display board in one of the school corridors informs Archie of his location in the school
- the junction of a grassed and a paved area outside informs Archie of his location on his route into the school building; he locates this junction using his long cane.

In Archie's school, wall edge protectors are fixed to the edges of ninety degree corners in corridors; they are in contrasting colours and tones. Archie is not able to see these, so they do not act as landmarks for him. However, they provide young people who have more functional vision with a clear visual fixed point of reference. In addition, they protect the corners from scuffs and knocks.

Archie’s trails and landmarks have supported his learning of the routes he uses within the school and around the grounds. They have also contributed to minimising his anxiety and have helped to enhance Archie’s engagement once he has completed the transition.

Trailing can be used in conjunction with long cane use. Sarah is being taught the techniques of both.

Jasper trails with his left hand along walls. Staff ensure that all walls along his trails are kept clear of displays, notices and other items. In effect, this means that clutter is minimised so he can focus on where he is going. It is also important that Jasper's trails are not interrupted by open doors to rooms and cupboards; in fact, not only does an open door break his trail, it may distract him if it raises the level of noise in the corridor. Jasper's transitions around school are also supported with:

- consistent routes
- objects of reference.

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Providing a rule that everyone walks on the same side of the corridor

It can be useful to establish a school rule stipulating that everyone should walk on the same side of corridors and other spaces. If everyone walks on the same side, there is less risk of young people bumping into each other. Some young people with visual impairment and autism find this kind of physical contact very aversive. When considering introducing such a rule it is important to take account of the needs of individuals, including all those in the school with visual impairment. Advice should be obtained from the mobility officer / teacher / habilitation officer.

To support Stacey's mobility around school, there is a rule stipulating that everyone walks on the left: all young people and staff are required to walk on the left when transitioning around the school. Reminder notices are displayed at key points. In addition to walking on the left, rooms are labelled to support young people in identifying them and the activity that takes place there.

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Communicating effectively during transitions and mobility work

Communicating effectively during transitions and mobility work can be particularly important with regard to minimising anxiety, stress and arousal levels. The most important strategies are

- augmenting spoken language; the use of objects of reference is described in supporting receptive communciation
- reducing the amount of spoken language (which includes avoiding banter)
- simplifying spoken language
- giving explicit instructions
- providing sufficient processing time / using the "wait for eight" rule
- repeating language it in exactly the same form as the original
- avoiding verbal commentaries
- avoiding verbal prompts.

The following strategies concerned with communicating effectively during transitions and mobility work are described below:

- supporting transitions around school with objects of reference
- labelling rooms
- providing a mobility book.

Labelling items in the classroom and cloakroom contributes to communicating effectively to support independence in those locations.

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Supporting transitions around school with objects of reference

For some young people with visual impairment and autism, communicating effectively during transitions and mobility work requires the use of objects of reference.

This is the case for Jasper, who has a schedule using objects of reference; there is one for each activity he participates in. Before a transition to another part of the school, Jasper checks his schedule. As he removes the object of reference from his schedule, the member of staff says the name of the activity and its location, using single words. Jasper takes the object of reference with him during the transition. This supports him by reminding him of where he is going, and helping him to focus on the transition rather than on potentially distracting features of the school building.

When Jasper transitions to another part of the school, he returns to his classroom when the activity has finished. He also requires the support of an object of reference for this return transition. Therefore, it is essential that the member of staff supporting Jasper takes the object of reference for his classroom before leaving starting the transition to the activity.

When Jasper is ready to transition back to class, the member of staff hands to him the object representing his classroom, and says "Jasper, classroom." Having this object available is essential, as Jasper does not transition back to class without it.

Jasper's transitions are also supported by

- minimising clutter
- providing consistent routes
- providing trails.

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Labelling rooms

For some young people with visual impairment and autism, labelling rooms supports the process of communicating effectively during transitions and mobility work.

Labelling rooms can be important for all visually impaired young people, and has particular significance for some of those who also have autism. This is because it can help to reduce uncertainty about location and thus minimise anxiety and stress.

All labels should be situated in the same position in relation to the door. Labels can indicate either the function of the room or the name of the key member of staff who usually works in it. For some individuals, it may be appropriate to provide both pieces of information, but care needs to be taken, given the need to minimise clutter.

Most means of communication used in augmenting spoken language can be used for labelling rooms. These include

- objects of reference; these can be attached in some way to the door, or near to it, or placed in a suitable container; it is crucial, of course that young people are able to feel any objects used for this purpose
- TOBIs; as these have a tactile element, it is crucial that young people are able to feel any TOBIs used for this purpose; as explained in the discussion of photographs, it is probably best to avoid the use of photographs with young people who have visual impairment and autism; therefore, if TOBIs are used, they should not be based on photographs
- life-like pictures; however, these would only be useful for a young person with sufficient functional vision, as it is very difficult to make adequate tactile versions of life-like pictures
- pictorial / tactile symbols
- abstract / tactile symbols
- large print / tactile alternative, i.e. Moon or braille
- simple voice output communication aids (VOCAs) .

If a simple VOCA is used, it should carry only a very brief message. Some young people with visual impairment and autism might become deeply interested in VOCAs, and may return to them repeatedly to hear the messages over and over again. At one time, the staff in Bob's school used simple VOCAs to label some rooms. Bob became fascinated with the devices and discovered that he could record his own messages, thus deleting the labels recorded by the staff. Use of the VOCA was therefore abandoned.

To support Stacey's mobility around school each room is labelled to indicate the activity that takes place there; Moon is used for labelling alongside a tactile symbol. In addition to labelling rooms, staff support Stacey's transitions around school with the rule that everyone walks on the same side of the corridor.

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Providing a mobility book

Cecily has a mobility book that describes in braille the consistent routes that she uses when she transitions around the school independently. The descriptions in the book

- break down each route into simple numbered stages
- highlight the directions that she has to take and the key landmarks that she will pass on the way
- cover separately the routes to and from her classroom and key areas of the school.

In order to facilitate her learning, staff send Cecily on independent tasks out of the classroom. When undertaking such an errand, Cecily takes with her the relevant pages from her mobility book and follows the route specified. If she gets "stuck" she can refer to her instructions for the relevant stage of the transition. This reduces her anxiety and has enabled her to achieve independence in finding her way around the school. However, a word of caution is relevant. Staff have observed that if Cecily meets another person whilst using her mobility book on an independent errand, she often asks that person to act as her sighted guide. In this way she avoids having to perform the task independently although she does not admit this when returning to her classroom. This serves as a reminder that it is always worth monitoring activities that are designed to be carried out independently.

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Supporting independence in the classroom

In order to support independence in the classroom, it is essential for practitioners to minimise clutter. It is also helpful to

- use zoning to support navigation around the classroomuse zoning to support navigation around the classroom
- provide a classroom layout that remains constant and provide a designated seat
- label items in the classroom and cloakroom.

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Using zoning to support navigation around the classroom

Zoning is an aspect of physical structure, a component of the TEACCH approach. Zoning can be valuable for young people with visual impairment and autism by

- supporting independent navigation around the classroom
- informing the young person of what is happening and where it is taking place; this can help to minimise anxiety.

Zoning will indicate, for example that

- independent work takes place in the young person's work station
- snack time takes place at the group table, with place mats set out
- relaxing between educational activities takes place in the quiet corner.

Zones should be clearly defined so that the young person understands the boundaries between them. This may require items with good colour contrast (if the young person has some functional vision) and / or tactile markers; different floor surfaces may be useful.

Some zoning is used in Sebastian's class. For example, the soft chair corner is always used when the teacher addresses the whole class and the pupils always undertake formal educational activities at the tables placed in the centre of the room.

Tyler's classroom is divided more clearly into several zones

- individual work areas for each young person
- a large table for group activities
- a relaxation area where young people can spend time between structured educational activities.

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Providing a classroom layout that remains constant and providing a designated seat

Providing a classroom layout that remains constant and providing a designated seat can be viewed as aspects of physical structure, a component of the TEACCH approach.

Providing a classroom layout that remains constant is easier to achieve in some situations than in others. It can be particularly difficult to achieve in a large school where rooms are used for different purposes by different young people at different times. It can be easier to achieve where a young person has most, or all, lessons in the same classroom. It is a useful strategy for young people with visual impairment and autism as it can aid independence and help to minimise anxiety.

Providing a classroom layout that remains constant can be particularly important with regard to minimising anxiety, stress and arousal levels; so too can providing a designated seat.

Cecily attends a mainstream school. A class rule has been established for her peers: when they leave the table, they place their chairs underneath. This ensures that there are no unexpected obstacles for Cecily and helps to provide a constant classroom layout. The reason for this rule has been explained to Cecily's peers. They have become so used to placing their chairs out of the way, that on the odd occasion when a pupil forgets, another one will remind that pupil. Cecily is also provided with a designated chair that is always in the same location, so she can find it independently.

To promote his independence, Jasper is provided with a constant classroom layout. This means he knows where items are, so he can locate them independently. It also makes it easier for him to navigate around the classroom.

Sebastian is also provided with a classroom layout that remains constant. Sebastian also has a designated seat at one of the tables placed in the centre of the room, so he can find it independently. If any change has to be made in the classroom layout or the position of his designated chair, it is explained and demonstrated to Sebastian.

It is important that Tyler is provided with a classroom layout that remains constant for extended periods. He becomes anxious when any change affects his belongings or learning space, so staff minimise change.

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Labelling items in the classroom and cloakroom

Labelling items in the classroom can make a useful contribution to promoting a young person's independence. However, care must be taken not to over-do labelling, bearing in mind the need to minimise clutter.

Most means of augmentative communication can be used for labelling items in the classroom and cloakroom. These include

- TOBIs; as these have a tactile element, it is crucial that young people are able to feel any TOBIs used for this purpose; as explained in the discussion of photographs, it is probably best to avoid the use of photographs with young people who have visual impairment and autism; therefore, if TOBIs are used, they should not be based on photographs
- life-like pictures; however, these would only be useful for a young person with sufficient functional vision, as it is very difficult to make adequate tactile versions of life-like pictures
- pictorial / tactile symbols
- abstract / tactile symbols
- large print / tactile alternative, i.e. Moon or braille
- simple voice output communication aids (VOCAs) .

If a simple VOCA is used, it should carry only a very brief message. Some young people with visual impairment and autism might become deeply interested in VOCAs, and may return to them repeatedly to hear the messages over and over again. At one time, the staff in Bob's school used simple VOCAs to label some rooms. Bob became fascinated with the devices and discovered that he could record his own messages, thus deleting the labels recorded by the staff. Use of the VOCA was therefore abandoned.

To promote Stacey's independence, the following items are labelled

- in her classroom, the drawer used for her work
- her peers' drawers
- in the cloakroom, her coat peg.

These items are labelled in Moon. Stacey finds it very reassuring that her belongings are always kept in the same place and that they are labelled with her name. This helps to maintain her anxiety at a level she can manage.

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Waiting and providing time

Young people with visual impairment and autism are likely to require extra time in order to complete tasks. In a busy school there may be some pressure on practitioners to carry out an action for a young person, or to intervene to help them to accomplish something quickly. However, although having some short-term gain, this may impede the individual's acquisition of independence skills that will be of life-long significance.

Ali is physically mobile; he moves around by feeling with his hands and feet, and appears to use hearing and smell. He sometimes relies on a sighted guide., particularly in unfamiliar settings. As yet he does not receive formal support from a mobility teacher. However, staff are conscious of the need to promote his independence when he is navigating around familiar environments. Thus they wait and provide time for Ali to do things independently; for example, they let him negotiate steps independently and give him the time to open doors for himself. As a result, Ali is gaining skills and confidence.

Ali's physical safety in the outside play area, as well as his independence, is further supported with heading-off and gentle guiding to ensure physical safety.

As he works very slowly, Tyler is allowed extra time to complete tasks and to make transitions of location from one part of the school building to another.

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Promoting independence in daily living skills

Little material was obtained on strategies for supporting independence in daily living skills in respect of the young people who feature in the case studies in this guidance material. It is likely that there are a number of reasons for this

- several of the young people are very young so there is not yet a major focus on promoting independence; however, the staff supporting Ali who is 4 years old are already waiting and providing time to promote his independence
- five of the young people attend mainstream schools, where skills associated with daily living are less likely to feature in the curriculum; however, it may be a focus for the work of mobility or habilitation officers within the home
- some of the young people attend residential schools; when identifying strategies for inclusion in this guidance material, the focus was on those used in the school setting, rather than on those used in the residential setting where there is a greater emphasis on daily living skills
- some of the skills may be considered to fit more readily into a further education curriculum, but all of the young people featured in the case studies are still at school.

The lack of material here about supporting independence in daily living skills does not reflect its importance. Promoting independence in daily living skills can, and should, begin at an early age; for example, as noted above, the staff working with Ali wait and provide time to promote his independence.

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Promoting the use of the toilet

On returning to school at the start of the current academic year, Amanda initially appeared to cope well. However, she gradually presented with some difficulties as she settled back into the school routine. In particular, she experienced urinary incontinence, sometimes several times a day. Medical reasons for this were ruled out by the school nurse and a programme was used to promote the effective use of the toilet.

She also began to pull the hair of other students and staff. A programme is in place to promote positive behaviour: see praising the young person for positive behaviour.

Promoting Amanda's use of the toilet employs a positive reinforcement approach. When Amanda uses the toilet she is able to select a reward from a choice of two. She is also rewarded with a favourite food at the end of the day if she has not been incontinent. At first, this approach had inconsistent effects. It was then decided that Amanda should be reminded frequently of her rewards for using the toilet and lasting the day without being incontinent. These reminders use simple spoken language. Over time Amanda’s urinary incontinence has became less frequent. However, she is still incontinent at times, particularly when she is menstruating. She receives support at these times.

An important element of promoting the effective use of the toilet is ensuring that Amanda receives minimal attention when she is incontinent.

Promoting the use of the toilet can be difficult. For further information, advice and products, see the Resources section.

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Promoting independent toileting skills

Acquiring independence in toileting can be a challenge for young people with visual impairment and autism, particularly for those who also have learning difficulties. Key factors include

- visually impaired young people do not learn incidentally by observing what other people do
- autistic young people have difficulties with incidental learning and with generalising skills from one situation to another
- a variety of sensory issues.

Toileting involves several of the senses. For example, it may involve a range of smells, including

- urine
- faeces
- cleaning / bleaching products
- soap
- deodorants
- air fresheners.

Some young people with visual impairment and autism may find some of these smells particularly aversive, and may avoid them; others may find them very interesting or pleasant and seek them out.

There is also a range of sounds, including that of the toilet flushing. Some young people have a fascination with this sound, and may enjoy repeatedly flushing toilets. This may arise because the individual finds the cause-effect aspect interesting, or because the predictability is comforting. A young person who has been frightened by the sound of a hand-drier in a public toilet may subsequently be very reluctant to use any toilet.

Other senses may be involved. Some young people may actually enjoy the weight / pressure of a fully soiled nappy. Some individuals find smearing faeces very motivating. Temperature may also be a factor for some young people: the toilet / bathroom may be colder than other rooms; the individual may feel cold when clothes are removed. Young people who have difficulties with the touch of clothing may find aspects of dressing / undressing very difficult. Some autistic young people appear to have difficulty interpreting the sensory signals indicating that they need to urinate or defecate. Because of the tendency for autistic young people to be single-channelled, some may not attend to these signals when they are focussed on another sensory channel.

It may be important to seek advice from an occupational therapist if sensory issues appear to be a barrier to progress with toileting.

Difficulties with toileting may also be connected with an inadequate diet or inadequate in-take of fluids, and it may therefore be important to seek medical advice. Promoting healthy eating may be helpful.

If a young person with visual impairment and autism is not making progress at school with toileting, it is important to discuss the issue with the individual's family. Some young people with visual impairment and autism acquire skills in one setting and fail to generalise them to other settings. It is possible that a young person who is failing to progress at school is using more advanced skills at home. The reverse is also possible. It may be helpful for the family and school staff to adopt the same strategies.

Promoting independent toileting skills, then, can be a complex matter. For further information, advice and products, see the Resources section.

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Promoting independent eating and drinking skills

Acquiring independence in eating and drinking can be a challenge for young people with visual impairment and autism, particularly for those who also have learning difficulties. Key factors include

- visually impaired young people do not learn incidentally by observing what other people do
- autistic young people have difficulties with incidental learning and with generalising skills from one situation to another
- a variety of sensory issues.

Eating and drinking involves several of the senses. For example, it involves

- smell
- taste
- sound: of cutlery and crockery; and, because, for most people, meal-times are social occasions, of people talking; the sounds in a busy dining hall may be aversive to some young people with visual impairment and autism
- (for those with some functional vision) sight: the food on the plate; the movements of other people; lights; the visual environment in a busy dining hall may be aversive to some young people with visual impairment and autism.

Some young people with visual impairment and autism may have difficulty coping with all this sensory stimulation. It is also worth remembering that some individuals visit the toilet before having their dinner in school. Toileting also involves a range of sensory experiences (see promoting independent toileting skills), so young people may start dinner in a state of over-arousal, unless time is provided between toileting and dinner to enable them to relax and become calm.

It may be important to seek advice from an occupational therapist if sensory issues appear to be a barrier to progress with independent eating and drinking skills.

Independence in eating and drinking involves several fine-motor skills, which can be grouped as follows

- handling cups when drinking
- finger feeding
- handling spoons
- handling forks
- handling knives
- handling knives and forks together
- eating from bowls
- eating from plates.

Occupational therapists have expertise with regard to these fine-motor skills and can also offer advice regarding specialist cutlery, plates, dishes and cups that can support young people in acquiring independence in eating and drinking.

An individual who is not making progress with independent eating and drinking may be experiencing difficulties with the skills involved in

- taking fluids from the cup
- taking solids from the spoon / fork
- maintaining lip closure to prevent food / fluid loss from the mouth
- chewing
- swallowing.

If there is any concern about the young person in respect of these skills, it is important to consult a speech and language therapist. Working on the skills required for independent eating and drinking may need to be put on hold while these difficulties are being addressed.

If a young person with visual impairment and autism is not making progress at school with independent eating and drinking, it is important to discuss the issue with the individual's family. Some young people with visual impairment and autism acquire skills in one setting and fail to generalise them to other settings. It is possible that a young person who is failing to progress at school is using more advanced skills at home. The reverse is also possible. It may be helpful for the family and school staff to adopt the same strategies.

Acquiring independence in eating and drinking is also likely to be more difficult for those young people who eat a restricted range of foods. This issue is discussed in promoting healthy eating.

When promoting independent eating skills in a young person with visual impairment and autism who has some functional vision, it may be important to consider colour contrast. If this is not properly managed, the young person may have serious difficulties discriminating the food from the plate / dish or discriminating between the different food items.

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Promoting independent dressing / undressing skills

Acquiring independence in dressing / undressing can be a challenge for young people with visual impairment and autism, particularly for those who also have learning difficulties. Key factors include

- visually impaired young people do not learn incidentally by observing what other people do
- autistic young people have difficulties with incidental learning and with generalising skills from one situation to another
- a variety of sensory issues.

Independence in dressing / undressing involves several skills, which can be grouped as follows

- locating items of clothing prior to putting them on
- discriminating between items of clothing
- orientating items of clothing prior to putting them on
- sequencing: certain items of clothing need to be put on before others
- pulling items over the head
- pushing arms / legs through sleeves / trouser legs
- fastening / unfastening buttons / press studs / Velcro® / zips etc
- tying / untying laces
- folding / hanging clothes and storing them.

Dressing and undressing clearly involves the sense of touch. For all young people, this involves touching clothes, and feeling them rub the body as they are put on / taken off. Young people who require assistance with dressing / undressing may come into physical contact with the person assisting them. This may present difficulties for some young people with visual impairment and autism, especially for those who also require a lot of personal space.

Some young people with visual impairment and autism have difficulties coping with clothing. For example, Jivan removes his jumper as soon as he arrives at school; he does not wear shoes indoors; and the only shirts he tolerates are those with short sleeves. In addition, Jivan cannot tolerate clothes with bulky seams, or labels in clothes; all labels are removed from his clothes.

It may be important to seek advice from an occupational therapist if sensory issues with clothing appear to be a barrier to progress with independent dressing / undressing skills.

During the school day, removing and putting on outdoor clothes in cramped, noisy cloakrooms will present difficulties to some young people with visual impairment and autism. Changing rooms used for PE and swimming are also likely to present difficulties.

Changing rooms and cloakrooms are usually crowded and noisy and changes of temperature may also be involved. Some changing rooms are colder than other rooms in the school; some are very warm. Returning to a hot changing room after an outdoor games lesson in winter may be difficult for some young people. Temperature changes are inevitable in relation to changing for swimming, and getting dressed afterwards. A young person undressing for swimming may also have difficulty with the cold walk to the shower and then the pool, and with the cold of the pool itself. Following swimming, the young person may again have difficulty coping with the cold.

Changing at school is also likely to involve the sense of smell. This is almost certain to be the case in relation to swimming because of the chlorine in the water. But smell is likely to be involved also when changing for PE. Body odours are likely to be stronger when changing after the lesson. However, a young person with visual impairment and autism and a very sensitive olfactory system may be very aware of body odours during changing prior to the lesson. If showers are taken, there will also be the smells of shampoos / shower gels. Some individuals may also use deodorants. Most changing rooms have integral toilets which are also sources of smells.

It should also be borne in mind that dressing after swimming, when the body is still damp, can be particularly difficult.

If a young person with visual impairment and autism is not making progress at school with independent dressing / undressing, it is important to discuss the issue with the individual's family. Some young people with visual impairment and autism acquire skills in one setting and fail to generalise them to other settings. It is possible that a young person who is failing to progress at school is using more advanced skills at home. The reverse is also possible. It may be helpful for the family and school staff to adopt the same strategies.

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Promoting independence in other daily living skills

There is a wide range of additional daily living skills that may be addressed with older learners at school or college. This is particularly likely to be the case for those who are in residential settings. Depending on the young person's overall needs, abilities and gender, the following areas may need to be addressed

- grooming and self-care, including:
    - hair-care
    - the use of make-up
    - shaving
    - female personal care
- food and drink preparation
- laying the table
- washing up / using the dishwasher
- shopping
- managing money
- domestic cleaning and tidying
- bed making
- laundry
- using the postal services
- using phones, including texting
- emailing
- using public transport.

Acquiring the necessary skills is likely to be very difficult for young people with visual impairment and autism. In particular, the following issues will be major factors

- sensory difficulties
- communication difficulties
- difficulties with learning incidentally by observing what other people do
- generalising skills from one situation to another.

Individual differences and the wide variation in specific contexts in which learning will have to take place means it is not feasible to provide guidance here.

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