**The Need for Targeted Instruction in Independent Living Skills in the Curriculum of Students with Visual Impairments**

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One of the primary purposes of education is to prepare individuals with the tools that allow them equal opportunity to successfully cope with the demands typically encountered in adulthood. In general, these demands involve living with others, managing one’s personal life, earning a living, and contributing to and participating within the community. The tools needed to meet these demands include knowledge and skills acquired through academic instruction, social competency developed through interactions with others, specific vocational preparation based on interests and aptitude, and skills of independent living.

Skills of independent living necessary for managing adult life include skills related to personal hygiene, eating, dressing, clothing selection and care, food preparation, money management, time management, use of the telephone, cleaning, home maintenance, and community functioning (Burnett & Sanford, 2008; Hazekamp & Huebner, 1989). Within each of these broad areas are additional sub-skills that must be mastered in order to function as interdependent individuals within society.

Acquisition of these skills and sub-skills occurs gradually for most children beginning in infancy, primarily through watching adults and older members of society accomplish tasks in which they are used. Children whose interest has been piqued through vision watch carefully, ask questions, practice observed skills in their play, and are physically and verbally guided in their attempts to reproduce the task by competent, older members of society. Spontaneous instruction is provided as needed within the naturally occurring context of the task and often involves demonstration and modeling by competent others, specific feedback on the child’s attempt, and encouragement to practice the task, first while helping, then independently. Because acquisition of these skills occurs primarily within home and community environments, academic programs typically do not formally address them. That school programs do not incorporate instruction in independent living skills, however, does not make them any less critical for post-school success.

As is true for other children and youth, the acquisition of independent living skills is crucial for the post-school success of students who are blind or who have low vision. Visual impairment may impede the process of the development of independent living skills in several ways, among which are:

* Children may not clearly observe others performing tasks, so may not be aware that the tasks even exist or that other children attempt them in play and real situations.
* Children may not clearly observe the whole task or the techniques that others use to perform independent living skills, so may not have a cognitive model upon which to build skills that includes an understanding of the whole task or its component parts.
* Instruction in independent living skills is complicated when learners cannot easily benefit from demonstration and modeling and when the person providing the instruction does not have a well-established understanding of appropriate strategies for addressing the impact of visual impairment on learning.
* Children with visual impairment may not be given enough opportunities to practice new skills until they become fluent.

For students with visual impairments to achieve success in adulthood, they must have well-developed independent living skills prior to transitioning from school to work. Teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) must annually assess all students’ skills in each independent living skill area and compare these skill levels to those being acquired by their same age peers, considering that peers often learn about skills long before they use them.

Little research has been conducted on the acquisition of independent living skills by students with visual impairments, but there is evidence that these students are delayed in their development of skills in this area. In 2002, Lewis and Iselin compared the interview responses of 10 parents of children with visual impairments ages 6-9 to the responses of 10 parents of same-age students with unimpaired vision to determine the students’ level of independent functioning. The 101 survey items focused on hygiene, dressing, clothing care, kitchen, home care, money, telephone, and community skills. The difference between the level of assistance provided to these students was statistically significant, with children with unimpaired vision clearly demonstrating levels of independence far above their peers with visual impairments. The students with visual impairments were performing only 44% of the tasks independently, while their sighted peers were reported to perform 84% of the skills independently. In fact, students who were blind or who had low vision were not performing 41% of the tasks, even with assistance, while their peers were unable to perform only 14.5% of the tasks independently.

In a more recent study of adaptive behavior in the areas of communication, daily living, and socialization skills of 46 Greek students with visual impairments ages 5 to 18 years old, Papadopoulos, Metsiou, and Agaliotis (2011) found that the lowest adaptive level of their participants was in the independent living domain. Using the national norms of *Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales* (1984), students with visual impairments scored between the low to moderately low categories (1.46 on a 3 point scale), although when compared to the supplementary normative group, participants were determined to be functioning between the average and above average range. The authors also noted that, while students’ abilities in the living skills domain improve with age, the rate of their delay increases. They recommended that instruction in daily living skills be emphasized in school programs to reduce performance gaps.

For students with gaps in the development of independent living skills, TVIs must advocate for the inclusion of appropriate goals related to these functional skills on Family Service Plans and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), as well as for the time and resources to teach these skills. Strong advocacy is key, since people unfamiliar with the long-term outcomes of many students with visual impairments may mistakenly believe that the acquisition of academic skills is of greater importance to post-school success. Experienced educators of students who are blind or who have low vision, however, recognize that students without well-developed independent living skills struggle to use academic knowledge within adult education, vocational, and community environments. A second role, then, of TVIs is to help administrators, parents, and other members of IEP teams to realize the critical importance of including instruction in independent living skills in the curriculum of students who need it.

Finally, TVIs must be prepared to provide carefully designed formal instruction in independent living skills to students from infancy until age 22 and to assist students’ parents as they acquire experience in introducing, teaching, and reinforcing these skills within the home and community. Instruction should meet the assessed needs of each student; incorporate appropriate alternative sensory methods; focus on safety, fluency, and efficiency; and facilitate development of students’ problem solving, organizational, sensory efficiency, and self-advocacy skills. As much as possible, instruction should occur within naturally occurring environments and contexts, but the limited availability of either or both of these conditions should not prevent instruction from occurring. As part of their responsibilities, TVIs must maintain longitudinal records of students’ acquisition of skills and assure that the development of more complex skills within any area occurs when appropriate.

Students with visual impairments deserve the opportunity to acquire and use independent living skills similar to those of their peers. Similarly, teens with visual impairments deserve to leave high school ready to function in the adult school, community, and work environments to which they transition. Through assessment, advocacy, collaboration with families, targeted formal instruction, and a commitment to positive post-school outcomes, these objectives are much more likely to be achieved.

**Position**

It is the position of DVI that children and youth with visual impairments require carefully designed instruction in independent living skills that is facilitated by qualified individuals who understand the impact of visual impairment on the acquisition of general information and learning. Development of independent living skills is vital for full integration in society. Specialized assessment and instruction must be provided. In addition, sufficient time, resources, and support must be available to teachers of students with visual impairments to allow them to address all the educational needs of their students, including those related to independent living skills. Teachers, parents, and administrators must work together in these efforts to achieve the promise of equal opportunity, the overarching goal of education.

**References**

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