# Physical Education for Children with Visual Impairments

**A Position Paper of the Division on Visual Impairments and Deafblindness**

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**Purpose**

This position paper informs relevant stakeholders about legal requirements for physical education related children with visual impairments and deafblindness and provides recommendations for providing access to appropriate and meaningful physical education services.

**Background**

Physical education services are guaranteed to children with disabilities, including those with visual impairments, deafblindness, and multiple disabilities, by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) pillar of IDEA further specifies that all educational services provided to children with disabilities, including physical education, should be “designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living" (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1400). The Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) defines physical education as an academic subject that employs planned, sequential curricula to build the knowledge, motor skills, and behaviors children need to become physically literate individuals who appreciate and engage in health-enhancing physical activity across the lifespan (SHAPE America, 2015). Therefore, FAPE in physical education for children with visual impairments should develop the cognitive, motor, and affective skills needed to prepare them for a lifetime of meaningful physical activity engagement.

## Problem

Unfortunately, reports concerning engagement in physical activity have indicated that both youth and adults with visual impairments tend not to meet the recommended levels of physical activity for health-enhancement (Haegele et al., 2019; Haegele & Porretta, 2015; Starkoff et al., 2017). School-based physical education is the only subject area that youth with visual impairments engage in throughout the day that is specifically designed to develop motor skills and health-enhancing behaviors, and promote physical activity (Haegele & Lieberman, 2019). However, negative or unsatisfactory physical education experiences may impact the perceived importance and feelings of competence individuals with visual impairments have about engaging in physical activity during childhood and into adulthood (de Schipper et al., 2017; Haegele & Zhu, 2017; Yessick & Haegele, 2019). While research has revealed some affirming physical education experiences, many individuals with visual impairments have described the lasting impact of marginalization in the physical education classroom (Yessick & Haegele, 2019). For example, because of instances of bullying by peers and removal from activities by physical education teachers, individuals with visual impairments often report not feeling a sense of belonging and esteem in physical education settings (Haegele & Kirk, 2018; Lieberman et al., 2006). These negative feelings appear to carry over into physical activity contexts in adulthood, often limiting engagement in physical activity (Kirk & Haegele, 2019; Yessick & Haegele, 2019).

## Recommendations

Per IDEA, all children with visual impairments and deafblindness should be provided with appropriate and meaningful physical education experiences as a part of FAPE.

* Qualified physical educators should design appropriate, individualized physical education curricula with the goal of developing the physical literacy of children with visual impairments and deafblindness using Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) delivered in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for each child.
* Meaningful curricula incorporate unique skills and activities that are relevant to the interests and physical activity needs of the child with a visual impairment or deafblindness across the lifespan. While these features may overlap with the general physical education curriculum, individualized curricula should include sports and activities designed for visual impairment populations (e.g., goalball, beep ball) as well as those that may be modified for their successful participation (e.g., tandem cycling, guided running, adapted aquatics).
* To be impactful, each child with a visual impairment or deafblindness should receive physical education in the best setting for them, such that they can participate fully in the physical education classroom itself, and can continue to build the skills needed for lifelong physical activity (Lieberman et al., 2013).
* In instances in which the general physical education classroom is deemed the least restrictive environment, physical educators must design their lessons and content such that they are either inherently accessible to the child with a visual impairment or deafblindness or have been modified to the extent that the child views the activities as being fully accessible. Further, it is the responsibility of the physical educator to support the social needs of children with visual impairments in their classrooms by highlighting their value as individuals, rather than highlighting their differences to their sighted peers.
* In all settings, including general physical education, physical educators must take care to ensure that their content delivery is accessible to each child with a visual impairment or deafblindness. Instructions for physical education tasks should be relayed in adequate verbal detail and interpreted using ASL or tactile sign as needed.
* Finally, it is recommended that the scholarly field of adapted physical activity engage in rigorous empirical study to examine and refine curricular approaches, learning environments, and instructional strategies to best support the physical literacy of children with visual impairments and deafblindness.

## Position

It is the position of the CEC-DVIDB that children with visual impairments and deafblindness must receive equitable, meaningful quality physical education services in keeping with the IDEA mandate. This includes access to curricula that are developed to support the physical literacy of each individual child with a visual impairment or deafblindness delivered by qualified physical educators in the environment that is most suitable for each child's learning needs. Further, empirical research is needed to move toward evidence-based practices in physical education for children with visual impairments, especially those with deafblindness, and multiple disabilities.

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