

Making Play Accessible for Children that are Visually Impaired
Building Blocks
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Children need to play. The benefits that come from playing are not a luxury for pampered children, but a necessity for all children, that cannot be fulfilled in some other way. Pediatrician, Dr. Shoshana Melman in conjunction with low-vision rehabilitation specialist, Hana Boxerman, stressed why play is so important for a child's healthy intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. "Learning by imitation – seeing and copying – are critically important for most children. For blind or visually impaired children, play encourages them to develop tactile sensitivity and awareness of how to explore their environment. For example, playing with toys can help them imagine in their minds what a block or a ball looks like," they explained. "Additionally, children with visual impairments often have delayed social skills since other children don't know how to play with them. Being able to play with the same toys can give them something in common with which to develop relationships."

Play must be encouraged as much as possible to allow every child's developing brain and limbs to fully mature. When a child plays, they not only refine their physical coordination, but are using important socialization skills that are vitally important for later interaction and connection with others. Play, is the foundation for all later academic learning, and is the focus in any daycare or preschool, no matter the location, along with socialization, and communication skills. Dr. Melman stated, "our **pediatric patients who are visually impaired** enjoy playing cards and some fun table games (such as Bananagrams and Monopoly) that come in versions with large print and Braille. And with assistance, such as a sighted guide to accompany them, our blind and visually impaired patients can participate in almost any activity, such as running a race. Social exclusion is a serious barrier for many blind and visually impaired children and being excluded from groups can pose barriers to all kinds of otherwise enjoyable activities."

On a recent conference call for Jewish mothers of visually impaired children, the mothers began by introducing themselves. One woman described her son as a curious, content child that loves to read Braille. Another described her daughter this way: bubbly, smart, and blind. Jewish mothers are known for appreciating not only the best in their children, but the barriers and hurdles that must be faced. In order for their children to experience full inclusion and participation in life, mothers of visually impaired children learn to be good advocates while using their experience to help others.

*Channie Goldschmidt is an energetic six-year-old from NJ who was born blind. “It’s surprising that we’d never taken her to play miniature golf until last summer,” her mother said. “During the pandemic our family sought more outdoor activities. I learned from another mom how to put the ringer on my phone, and set it down by the hole. Channie listens for the sound cue. I don’t know why I never thought of this before because she’s having so much fun and it’s one more thing we can do together as a family. From picking seasonal fruit to beeping T-ball; trips to the beach, and bumper bowling, we’re more active than ever.”

Making the environment accessible for children with visual impairments originated from a set of legal standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. As Dr. Silverman, the brilliant blind speaker on the conference call arranged by Insight beyond Eyesight emphasized, allowing full access is much more than a set of legal standards; it enables children who are blind or partially sighted to participate fully in all of life’s possibilities, enjoy relationships with others, and partake in a full range of activities. All of us bear a responsibility to make the environment suitable and comfortable for children that are visually impaired to enhance accessibility in our homes, schools, neighborhoods, playgrounds and parks where children who are blind or partially sighted live and play, and allow for inclusion in everyday life and activities to encourage full participation.

Although much work remains to be done to increase availability of appropriate access for children with visual impairments, advocacy groups for the blind have helped bring about increased accessibility based on better understanding of the needs and abilities of those with visual impairments. Advocacy groups include: self-advocacy, parent advocacy, political advocacy, and Jewish advocacy, such as the Jewish group for visually impaired children and their mothers, Insight beyond Eyesight. The work done by people like Mr. Kritz, who you’ll read about next, are dedicated to improving and increasing opportunities that help bring about improved accessibility and necessary changes by offering age-appropriate physical outlets and activities, socialization, and play, while recognizing the need to identify and remove barriers that exist.

30 years ago, Norman Kritz, a pharmacist and avid golfer, was introduced to the Mid Atlantic Blind Golf Association, an organization that makes golf accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. “Working with blind children became a big part of my life,” recalled Kritz, now retired, who designed 10 accessible golf courses for visually impaired children. Although he has no background in architecture or construction, Kritz and a group of like-minded people obtained grants and financing for the construction of five of the courses, found funding and resources to provide the children with adapted golf courses to play on, free equipment, free golf clinics, and lessons with professional instructors from the PGA. “The laws of golf for blind children are different than for sighted people,” Kritz, explained, “but the benefits are the same. The kids and their parents love this program. I always take their smiles home with me.”

The desire to participate in recreational sports and other physical activities cannot always overcome the absence of adaptive sports and misconceptions about their abilities that historically and at times still continue to exclude children with visual impairments. A lack of understanding on the part of physical education teachers or coaches or people in our society in general, may persist about the potential ability or safety of their visually impaired students. They may assign them to keep track of the time or the score instead of playing the sport. The disappointment and frustration of not being allowed to participate in the normal activities your classmates are engaged in causes a child to doubt their own abilities and negatively affects their feelings towards those keeping them apart.

Six years ago, three moms of visually impaired children joined forces, finding a great way to help themselves and one another. Their group, Insight beyond Eyesight (IBE), plan and host parties with Jewish holiday or seasonal themes appropriate for frum families that include fun-filled activities and plenty of delicious food. They also invite other girls who are visually impaired and boys up to the age of nine and their mothers to join the fun. Whether it's a carnival with a moon bounce and activity booths, or a Channukah party with an interactive drumming circle, while the children play and enjoy themselves, the moms have a special treat of their own: a chance to socialize. One of the three founders, Rochel Yenti, said, "the moms provide one another with, a combination of support and information. It's a way for moms to meet others going through the same thing and learn how they manage."

The group previously organized a kosher Shabbaton weekend they called, *The Shabbos of Light* that brought families with a blind family member together, included inspiration from Rabbeim that attended, and an opportunity to celebrate Shabbos and enjoy great programming for the visually impaired participants and their families. There was no shortage of opportunities to meet others and gather practical information on relevant topics for parents. The recent conference call IBE hosted for Jewish mothers of visually impaired children included paraprofessionals and Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI's) to hear Dr. Silverman, a blind activist and research specialist at the American Foundation for the Blind, share her fascinating insight about advocating for the needs of people who are visually impaired.

Some of the recreational activities people with visual impairments enjoy participating in are popular mainstream games and sports that have been adapted. Others require minimal or no changes whatsoever. Fortunately, many sports and recreation activities, like golf, have been adapted for the blind and partially sighted, and many sports are specifically designed to allow both blind and sighted students to play together. Beep baseball has specific rules and regulations, but in many ways the game is still somewhat similar to regular baseball. The pitcher and catcher do not wear blindfolds and are usually sighted, while the other players are visually impaired, or a combination of sighted and visually impaired, and wear blindfolds. The oversized softball beeps, and the bases make buzzing sounds that alert the players to what's happening on the field.

According to Dr. Melman, “overall, one fundamental step in opening up the life of my blind or visually impaired patients is connecting them with a pediatric vision therapist, who can help them access, explore and enjoy recreational activities that can fill their childhoods with fun, learning and growth.”

Once the danger posed by Covid and related restrictions are behind us, you may be able to start or resume enjoying time with a family member or friend who is visually impaired in a safe, comfortable environment. Depending on the age and interests of the child who is visually impaired, you can choose from a wide variety of activities to enjoy together. Swimming is a great activity that provides a great workout, as long as you both know how to swim. Or enjoy a walk outside, enjoying a safe stimulating calorie burn, or a slow outing in nature, where you experience fresh air, the smells and sounds in your surroundings, and the sun or wind on your faces. A walk through a supermarket, mall, neighborhood, or shopping center will provide a fun-filled activity or get a needed shopping task accomplished. Don't miss the chance to cook and eat whatever meal, smoothie, or dessert you make together. Many museums and galleries promote themselves as barrier free for the visually impaired and encourage tactile exploration. If you're staying indoors, play cards, chess, trivia games, or a popular adapted board game, like Monopoly. Many blind people enjoy knitting or you can do some other type of craft together. Play a sport or game you both like outside, or do a volunteer activity together. Concerts, listening to recorded music, drumming, singing, or playing other instruments are always favorites. Just don't forget to play!

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