

Services for children who are blind or have low vision

Ontario's Blind - Low Vision Early Intervention Program is designed to give children who are born blind or with low vision the best possible start in life. Specialized family-centred services are funded by the province and are available for children from birth to Grade 1.

The program provides education and support for parents so they can encourage the healthy development of their children. Parents learn to help their children develop the skills they need for daily activities at home and in early learning and care settings.

Without special support from an early age, a child who is blind or has low vision may have trouble learning to talk, explore and make friends when he or she begins school. A child who is blind or has low vision is at a significant risk for difficulties in all areas of development, including:

- communication and language
- fine and gross motor skills
- understanding and thought processes
- social skills
- emotional development
- self help

With the right intervention from skilled professionals, parents can learn how to encourage the healthy development of their children, and help them learn the skills they will need to succeed in school.

Programs and services

When children are diagnosed with blindness or low vision, a referral can be made to the local Blind - Low Vision Program by a physician, ophthalmologist, optometrist, parent or caregiver. Check the back of this brochure to find the program closest to you.

The Blind - Low Vision program offers three types of services:

1. Family support
2. Intervention services
3. Consultation services

1. Family support

The program provides support to parents when their child has been diagnosed with blindness or low vision. These services are provided by family support workers who are graduate-level social workers specially trained in the impact of a visual impairment on child development. The family support worker will help the family understand and cope with the implications of the diagnosis and help them make informed decisions about support services.

2. Intervention services

For a child with visual impairment, touch, hearing and the use of remaining or residual vision are critically important for learning and development. Support by trained and knowledgeable professionals in the area of visual impairment is essential to help the child develop these senses to the best of his or her ability. Intervention services are provided by specially trained early childhood blind/low vision consultants in the

family's home. The consultant teaches parents how to support their child's development in the following areas

- intentional movement (orientation and mobility)
- development of motor skills (e.g., rolling, reaching, crawling, walking, and use of hands to manipulate and explore objects)
- daily living skills (e.g., eating, dressing, toileting)
- concept development (e.g., object identification, function, and characteristics)
- social and emotional development
- language and communication development
- how to make the most of residual vision
- how to use all the senses to promote development

3. Consultation services

When your child enters a child care or early learning centre, Blind - Low Vision Program staff will help the early childhood educators at that centre learn how to best work with and teach your child.

These developmental milestones show some of the milestones that mark early vision development and the progress of young children as they grow. Watch for any signs that your baby is not meeting these milestones and talk to your physician right away if you have any concerns.

If you have concerns about your child's vision, don't wait. The sooner a problem is identified the sooner your child can have the help he or she needs for the best opportunity for healthy development.

Developmental milestones

By 6 weeks

- stares at surroundings when awake
- briefly looks at bright lights/objects
- blinks in response to light
- eyes and head move together

By 3 months

- eyes glance from one object to another
- eyes follow a moving object/person
- stares at caregiver's face
- begins to look at hands, food and bottle

By 6 months

- eyes move to inspect surroundings
- eyes move to look for source of sounds
- swipes at or reaches for objects
- looks at more distant objects
- smiles and laughs when he or she sees you smile and laugh

By 12 months

- eyes turn inward as objects move close to the nose
- watches activities in surroundings for longer time periods
- looks for a dropped toy
- visually inspects objects and people
- creeps toward favourite toy

By 2 years

- guides reaching and grasping for objects with the vision
- looks at simple pictures in a book
- points to objects or people
- looks for and points to pictures in books
- looks where he or she is going when walking and climbing

As their vision develops, babies enjoy:

By 6 weeks

- looking at you while you hold them close
- looking at toys with bright colours
- looking at objects with reflective qualities (such as mirrors)
- watching mobiles with simple black and white shapes
- watching things that move

By 3 months

- studying your face
- watching toys move from the side to the front of them
- looking at and reaching for objects hanging across their cribs
- toys with bright colours and interesting patterns
- using a night light in their rooms

By 6 months

- looking at their reflection in a mirror
- looking back and forth between two favourite objects
- seeing the world from different positions (e.g., high chair, floor, other furniture)
- toys that have complex patterns and toys that move (e.g., "jack in the box")
- playing "peek-a-boo" games

By 12 months

- putting toys in and out of containers (and also in their mouths)
- playing with similar objects of different sizes (e.g., stacking rings, nesting cups, blocks)
- looking at board books with thick cardboard pages and simple coloured pictures
- pushing buttons or twisting knobs to make toys start

- watching outside activities through a window

By 2 years

- reading books with pictures of simple scenes and objects
- looking at photographs of family members and pets
- playing with simple board puzzles
- using blocks to play with and to build towers
- making trips outside to the store, the park, the library to watch people and activities

You should continue to monitor your child's development

It is important to monitor your child's visual development, since early identification of a problem can sometimes eliminate or decrease the risk of long-term complications. If you notice that your child has any of the following symptoms, talk to your doctor immediately:

- swollen or encrusted eyelids
- bumps, sores or styes on or around the eyelids
- drooping eyelids
- does not make eye contact with you by three months of age
- does not watch or follow an object with the eyes by three months
- haziness or whitish appearance inside the pupil
- frequent "wiggling," "drifting," or "jerky" eye movements misalignment between the eyes (eye turns or crossing of eyes)
- lack of coordinated eye movements
- drifting of one eye when looking at objects
- turning or tilting of the head when looking at objects
- squinting, closing or covering of one eye when looking at objects
- excessive tearing when not crying
- excessive blinking or squinting
- excessive rubbing or touching of the eyes
- avoidance of or sensitivity to bright lights

Regional Blind - Low Vision Early Intervention Programs

Dufferin, Halton, Peel, Waterloo and Wellington
ErinoakKids
Central West Blind-Low Vision Program
905-855-3557
or 1-877-374-6625
TTY 905-855-4925
<http://www.erinoakkids.ca/>

Hamilton, Niagara, Brant and Haldimand-Norfolk
905-385-7927 ext. 221
or 1-866-826-4327 ext. 221
<http://www.earlywords.ca/>

Kenora Rainy River
"North Words"
1-877-553-7122
<http://www.northwords.com/>

Kingston and counties of Frontenac, Lennox & Addington, Leeds, Grenville, Lanark, Hastings and Prince Edward
613-549-1232 ext. 1145
or 1-800-267-7875 ext. 1145
TTY 613-549-7692
or 1-866-299-1136
<http://www.kflapublichealth.ca/>

Manitoulin-Sudbury, Algoma, Cochrane, and Nipissing-Timiskaming
"Wordplay / Jeux de Mots"
1-877-522-6655

Middlesex, London, Oxford, Elgin- St. Thomas, Sarnia-Lambton, Huron- Perth and Grey Bruce Owen Sound
Southwest Infant Hearing Program
519-663-0273
or 1-877-818-8255

Ottawa, Renfrew County and Eastern counties of Prescott-Russell & Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry (Eastern Ontario Blind Low Vision Program)
(613) 688-3979
or 1-866-432-7447
TTY (613) 820-7427
<http://www.pqchc.com/>

Simcoe County and Muskoka-Parry Sound
Children's Development Services
705-739-5696
or 1-800-675-1979

Thunder Bay
Thunder Bay District Health Unit
807-625-5922
1-888-294-6630 ext. 5922
<http://www.tbdhu.com/>

City of Toronto
Toronto Preschool Speech and Language Services
416-338-8255
TTY 416-338-0025
<http://www.tppls.on.ca/>

Windsor-Essex and Chatham-Kent
"Talk 2 Me"
519-252-0636
<http://www.smflc.ca/>

York Region, Durham, Haliburton, Kawartha and Pine-Ridge
Child Development Programs

1-888-703-5437
TTY 905-773-7282
<http://www.beyond-words.org/>

For more information, contact:

ServiceOntario
1-866-821-7770
TTY 1-800-387-5559
<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/>

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