

Social skills of children with visual impairment studying in serve Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) schools

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Abstract

The inability of the children to see limits their learning experience and restricts their learning activities, as compared to those of the sighted children. In the inclusive society social skill plays an important role in their life. Therefore, it can be said that the social skill is a part of life skills which includes interpersonal relationships, decision making and creative thinking. Teachers of children with visual impairment may teach the social skills to them. They may encourage the visually impaired children to participate in the different activities to acquire their social skills which are acceptable in the society.

Keywords: children with visual impairment, social skills, serve Shiksha Abhiyan

Introduction

"The World's Declaration on Education for All" recommends education to all children, regardless of their backgrounds or disabilities. All the countries in the world are accordingly urged to provide free education to all children without any restrictions or discrimination (UNESCO, 1990). The inability of the children to see limits their learning experience and restricts their learning activities, as compared to those of the sighted children. This is because the process of receiving information through visual input will be limited even if they have residual vision (low vision). Therefore, special education programs are provided to address the unique learning needs and abilities of the visually impaired children. Teaching styles, instructional materials, and educational goals are designed and modified to meet the child's specific learning needs and abilities. This will help them in their visual learning experience through other media of learning: hearing and textual. Most visual impairments need some extra help to succeed in school. This is because of the challenges that visual impairment poses to learning. Special services or "related services" must be included, therefore, in special education programs. These services are provided by professionals in a variety of educational settings (Brasher and Holbrook, 1996).

Social skill is a part of life skills which includes interpersonal relationships, decision making and creative thinking. The social skills of a child can be accessed on the basis of identification, verbalization and respond effectively to others' emotions in an empathetic manner, get along well with others, takes criticism positively, listen actively, communicate using appropriate words and intonation and body language (CBSE, CCE Manual page 48 & 49, 2010).

Having good social behavior implies that one is capable of being gregarious, and capable of adapting to unfamiliar surroundings, attracting attention from people, and engaging in social discourse and other group activities (Kail, 2007). According to Ferrell (1996), children with visual impairment remain relatively backward in terms of social development as compared with sighted children.

Review of Related Literature

According to Hatlen & Curry (1987), and Friend (2005), the

absence or lack of visual input can affect the visually impaired, especially their efforts of development, learning, social skills and behavior.

Hill and Blasch (1980) consider that visual impairment is a serious limitation, because 85% of social learning is accomplished through vision. All parties, especially the teachers with the cooperation and support of parents and school administrators, need to plan to increase the level of social skills among students with visual impairment. Those students who fail to master social skills and demonstrate a good social behavior will suffer isolation and segregation from their sighted peers (Guralnick, 1996; 1987; Sacks, Kekelis and Gaylord-Ross, 1992; Sacks and Silberman, 2000; Sacks and Wolffe, 2006).

It shows that placement of visually impaired children in regular classes along with their sighted friends does not affect their academic achievement, but their social skills. And, lack of social skills affects their interaction with the environment (MacCuspie, 1996; 2001). Inability to behave as expected may create difficulty of acceptance by peers and the society.

Studies conducted by Guralnick *et al.* (1996), Guralnick and Groom (1987), Kingsley (1999), Sacks *et al.* (1992), Sacks and Silberman (2000), and Sacks and Wolffe (2006) show that the visually impaired children often face the problem of being ignored by peers and other children. This is because they show no cooperation or skills in taking turns (turn-taking) during play and no skills in inviting friends to play together. Children with visual impairment also face the problem of maintaining friendships with their classmates, because they are not able to see and learn the skills through observation (Guralnick, 1999; Celeste, 2006). This condition affects their social development. This paper will further discuss the importance of social skills for children with visual impairment.

Zebehazy, Kim T & Smith, Thomas J. (2011)^[1] Conducted a research entitled "An examination of characteristics related to the social skills of youths with visual impairments" and took the three domains of SSRS (Social Assertion, Social Self-control, and Social Cooperation) and found that the outcome of Social Self-control of persons with visual impairments showed significantly higher scores than did persons with learning disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbances, other

health impairments, and autism as well as traumatic brain injuries. For the Social Assertion outcome measure, persons with visual impairments had significantly higher scores than did youths with autism. For the Social Cooperation persons with visual impairments had significantly higher scores than did youths with learning disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbances, other health impairments, autism, or traumatic brain injuries as well as youths with orthopedic impairments. Finally, the researcher compared the composite Social Skills scores of youths with visual impairments to the other disability categories, simple contrasts showed that these youths had significantly higher scores than did youths with learning disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbances, other health impairments, autism, or traumatic brain injuries. It was also found that the persons with visual impairments who received O&M services from the school district to their peers who did not receive such services, no significant differences were evident on any of the social skills measures. Similarly, persons with visual impairments who received assistance from a personal assistant or in-class paraeducator (provided by the school district) to their peers who did not receive such assistance, no significant differences in their Social Skills. Similarly, it was also reveal from their research that the visually impairment persons who participated in extracurricular activities had significantly higher social skills scores as compare to those who had not participated in the extracurricular activities on all four measures (Social Self-control at $p < .05$, and Social Assertion, Social Cooperation, and the Social Skills composite score at $p < .01$).

Pujari, Jayanti and Annapurna, M (2015)^[15] conducted a study entitled "A study on available support systems in inclusive setting for the students with mental retardation". The objective of the study to find out the support system available for the students with mental retardation in terms of academic support, social support, emotional support and physical support in inclusive setting in primary schools and found that the academic and social support as perceived by regular teacher was in average level whereas academic and social support perceived by the resource teachers are in the high level. The emotional support provided by peer is high level. The physical support was studied under three categories i.e. toilet and sanitation facilities, mobility and barrier free environment are under low level (Indian journal of Cerebral Palsy)

Mc Alpine and Moore (1995) examined the presence of false belief in visually impaired children. The performance of 16 visually impaired children (4-11 yrs old) on tasks designed to assess their understanding of false belief, a central aspect of social understanding, was recorded. It was concluded that the quality of social interactions of children with a visual impairment is affected both by the children's level of understanding of mind and by the limited or nonexistent visual information even when the children acquired some understanding of mind.

Workman (1986) examined the effects of teachers' input on peer interactions with visually impaired preschoolers and found that to enhance visually impaired children's interactions with their peers included descriptions of social environment, direct prompts and indirect prompts which directly affect the social skills of children with visual impairment.

Prizant (1987) found that the visual impairment affects language development in a number of ways. Visually impaired children use more echolalic speech than do their sighted peers. When

their language is related to past experience rather than to the ongoing activities of their peers, it leads to breakdowns in communication and may eventually influence their social standing among their classmates

Sack (1988) found in his study that the blind child who was liked by his classmates and teachers showed that he liked his classmates and was interested in their activities and feelings; his outgoing personality attracted the attention and involvement of others. However, even with his social skills, he required considerable assistance from teachers to demonstrate his competence in exchanges with classmates.

Sacks (1992) observed the isolation and emotional pain that many blind and visually impaired children experienced in regular public school classrooms. These students lacked the social skills to start and carry on conversations, to play games effectively, and to join and feel part of a group ... the acquisition of competent social skills in a sighted environment is an ongoing process: these skills are not easily learned and must be fine-tuned throughout one's life. As regards academics in the classroom, the teachers for students with visual impairment do not have the opportunity to emphasize on learning social skills (Hatlen, 2004). According to Hatlen, for blind children, learning social skills is as important as learning to read. Appropriate social behavior, which is taken for granted as having been learnt incidentally at a very young age, and which is not consciously thought of when one engages in social interactions, adds to the factors that affect social competency of students with visual impairment.

From an early age, children with visual impairments can be at a disadvantage for developing social skills. Since vision plays a role in the early development of social behaviors and of social cognition-an ability to perceive and understand the social behaviors of others and the thoughts and feelings that underlie what people say and do --the lack of visual cues could lead to difficulties in initiating and maintaining social interactions (Zebehazy, Kim T. Smith, Thomas J., 2011)^[1]. Without sufficient vision to observe these visual cues or adapted skills to compensate for the visual information, infants can be delayed in developing perspective-taking and joint-attention behaviors, both of which are considered early skills for social cognition (Farrenkopf & Davidson, 1992; McAlpine & Moore, 1995).

The acquisition and maintenance of socially appropriate behavior is typically mediated by vision for sighted children. The social skills are learned through imitation and modeling (Warren, 2000). Due to absence of sight the visually impaired children do not acquire these social skills and behaviours incidentally as sighted children. The acquisition of social skills cannot learn naturally, they need the support of other person or their peer group. Children with visual impairment require routines and experiences that promote opportunities for hand on experience and real life task. The family members of the visually impaired children can also help in acquiring social skills. The process of acquiring and maintain social skills behavior effectively needs persistence and physical energy. The use of other senses and cognitive ability is also required to learn social skills for children with visual impairment. It is an ongoing process to acquiring and learning social skills for children with visual impairment.

The influence of family support and nurturing is essential. Whether a child is born with vision impairment or acquires it as a young child, parents, siblings and extended family members

provide the foundation for the acquisition of social skills as the home environment provides a natural contact for socialization process. It is the first place where children learn routine, family rituals and customs, and development a sense of inner security and safety (Sack, 2006 pg-5).

The teachers at early stage may play a vital role for the acquisition of social skills among student with visual impairment. He/she can encourage visually impaired children to participate in various programmes organized by the school. The teacher may create a learning environment that may be organized and structured, yet nurtured and active learning of social skills. The socialization skills may be developed through play, creative dramatics, music and storytelling so that the visually impaired children may participate as an equal. These activities help the children with visual impairment to learn social skills from the environment and society. The stereotypes attitudes of the family restrict the visually impaired students to learn social skills. It is observed that the visually impaired children can achieve high level of social competence if they get the opportunities to participate in activities and experience that promote social inclusion with both blind and sighted mates. It is myth that the visually impaired children can learn social skills without consistent support or intervention. This type of myth or assumption affects the social skills of children with visual impairment.

Social Skills for Children with Visual Impairment

Due to absence of sight or reduced vision can face more difficulties to acquire accurate information about their social environment or the context of activities. A visually impaired child is unable to observe physical gesture or facial expression to understand social nuances.

Therefore, the experts in the field of visual impairment suggested that a visually impaired child must learn social skills in order to prepare him for his home, his friendship as well as for his career and employment.

The following are the part of social skills which has to be taught to the children with visual impairment:

1. **Nonverbal communication:** Nonverbal behavior provides a lot of information about conversation and interactions to the sighted children whereas the children with visual impairment are unable to perceive nonverbal communication because almost all social skills used by sighted children have been learned by imitation and conduct themselves in socially appropriate ways based on imitation and observation. A student with visual impairment must be taught when and how to smile, frown, nod, wink, shrug and other nonverbal communication.
2. **Mannerisms/ behavior problems:** It is suggested that parents must discourage mannerism such as eye poking, head rolling, hand flapping, rocking etc.
3. **Appropriate Behavior:** Children with visual impairment need to be told when their behavior is appropriate or when it is not. Children with visual impairment should follow the same form of discipline which are form for the other students or sighted students. All students must learn behaviors and actions that are accepted in the society.
4. The children with visual impairment should learn that he/she should develop the eye contact with the others and/or turn his/her face towards the speakers.

5. The good postures should be developed in the visually impaired children like some visually impaired children tend to keep their head down with their chin resting on their chest, keep their head thrown back, or their shoulders slumped forward. Encourage the visually impaired children to hold their head up towards the speakers.
6. An appropriate distance should be maintained during talking to any person. It is observed that the visually impaired children stand too close to the speaker in order to better see him. This need to discourage as it is not socially accepted and can cause others to be uncomfortable and avoid interaction with the visually impaired children.
7. The visually impaired children may encourage communicating with another person when upset, uncomfortable or in pain.
8. The children with visual impairment should encourage using appropriate tone of voice while talking to other persons.
9. The visually impaired children may be more fearful of physical injury and leaving familiar areas. Therefore, the visually impaired children may encourage expressing strong emotions safely.
10. Encourage the visually impaired children to use physical activities and release negative emotions and excessive energy in socially acceptable ways.
11. Visually impaired children may remind their sighted peers to express their feeling with the words as they are unable to see their smile, frown or other expression.
12. The visually impaired students should encourage to use the names of others when talking to them.

In 1998 the Scottish Office outlined the skills which underlie social competence as:

- The ability to understand another's point of view when different from your own.
- Knowledge of how to interpret other people's emotional state and behaviour.
- Skill in suppressing immediate emotional responses in favour of more carefully considered responses in social situations.
- The ability to adjust your behaviour to make it acceptable or rewarding to others

The followings activities may also consider as social skills:

- Introducing yourself
- Listening
- Asking questions
- Starting a conversation
- Asking for help
- Refusing help
- Being criticised
- Criticising
- How to deal with feelings.

Dimensions of Social Skill

Ishak (2013) specified and examined the eight dimensions of social skill *i.e.* influenceing others, conflict management, leadership, change catalyst, building bond, cooperation/collaboration, team work and communication empathy.

In order to function successful in social relationships, children and preadolescents require a variety of social skills including ability to gain entry to group, resolve interpersonal conflicts,

social initiation, asking and answer questions, greeting peers, cooperation/sharing, affective responsiveness and praise to peers (Kelly, 1982).

Caldarella and Meerrell (1997) found five behavioural dimensions related to social skills (a) peer relations such as complementing others, offering help to others, initiating and joining in conversation, (b) self-management such as using self-control, following imposed rules, compromising with others in conflict and response to teasing, (c) academic such as accomplishing assignment, following teacher directions, using free time appropriately (d) compliance such as follow instruction, response appropriately to criticisms and finishing assignments and (e) assertion such as initiating conversation, acknowledging compliments, being self-confident, expressing feelings, joining activities. Kerr and Nelson (2010) denoted that the social skill training may be incorporate through four methods i.e. direct instruction, modeling, behavior rehearsal and coaching. These methods may be used if the child has deficit in social skills. If the child has performance deficit in social skills, the following methods may be adopted:-

- Prompt and cue social skills
- Reinforce use of social skills
- Incorporate group contingencies (positive reinforcement)
- Teaching peers to initiate and maintain social interaction.
- Teach social skills in natural setting/environment
- In social skills' lesson, integrate strategies to promote generalization and maintenance of the skills being taught.

Teachers can also develop social skills module/curriculum or design their own lessons as the children may learn their social skills or improve the performance deficit of social skills, if an ideal curriculum does not exist (Gresham, Sugai and Horner, 2001)

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