

National Center on Low-Incidence Disabilities

<http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/>, 1-800-395-2693, McKee Hall, Campus Box 146, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639-0248

Process Information for Assessment of Students who are Visually Impaired

Step I: Initial Conversations: *Converse with the Students, Parents, Teachers, and Others*

1. Consider circumstances that go beyond typical assessment.
2. One test's results are not conclusive evidence to support any hypothesis.
3. Ask what people want to learn from the assessment.
4. Gather information from many sources and allow comprehensive information to guide the assessment.
5. Speak with the students who are being assessed, parents, teachers, and any specialists (e.g., teacher of students with visual impairments, orientation and mobility specialist) who work with the students.
6. Siblings may have valuable insight to offer.
7. Remember that various perspectives are crucial to developing the most appropriate plan.
8. Consider speaking with professionals in the area of vision to discover personal biases and misconceptions regarding visual impairment.

Step II. Preliminary Observations

1. It is important to understand students functioning in a variety of environments.
2. Spend time observing students in different settings. (i.e., general education classroom, special education classroom, lunch time, recess, physical education, art, music, etc.).
3. Observe students during different times of the day to observe patterns of behavior, energy level, fatigue, alertness, etc. (i.e., possibly the best time of the day and the worst time of the day).
4. Be aware that while observations during testing are important, more realistic indicators will present when students are in familiar surroundings.
5. Direct observation of students' behavior will allow you to focus on specific concerns stemming from conversations and observations. Be aware of stereotypic patterns of behavior (e.g., rocking, eye poking, light gazing, etc.) that are common in students who are blind.
6. Watch for verbalism (mimicking the use of words without understanding what they really mean) as conversations with students with a visual impairment can lead to the perception of a higher degree of verbal skills than has actually been obtained.

7. Observations offer essential insight into students' strengths and interests, which are very useful when developing appropriate recommendations, accommodations, and supports.

Step III. Developing a Plan

1. Gather information from many sources and allow comprehensive information to guide the assessment.
2. Make sure to carefully review clinical and functional vision reports before planning assessment. If these are not available, arrange for them before any other assessment is considered.
3. Review the learning media assessment/ literacy modality report results if available.
4. Incorporate the information already gathered and determine how to get the most meaningful information from the tests.
5. Determine which measures will be most appropriate for students with low incidence disabilities based on recommendations. (See *Need to Know* and *General Guidelines*)
6. Standard assessment procedures may need to be altered to best evaluate students. Keep in mind that there are many disadvantages of using standardized instruments (See *Disadvantages to using Standardized Instruments* in the resource page).
7. Use *alternative assessment instruments* (See Resource Page) as needed.
8. If the initial plan for testing does not elicit accurate information, be willing to alter your plan. Always keep in mind that the purpose of an assessment is to develop an appropriate educational plan, not just special education qualification.

Test Selection

- Verbal portions of high-quality IQ tests may be better to use than "home-grown" or experimental measures with little supportive psychometric evidence.
- Include typical school tasks and concept tests in assessment process to supplement results from standardized tests.
- Important information may be elicited from a test, but with time restraints that information may be lost. Time restraints will likely penalize students who are cognitively impaired or have inhibited processing speed, not accounting for their actual strengths and abilities.
- Reading Braille and large print requires at least twice as much time and can lead to eye fatigue (for large print). For tests with objects to manipulate, it takes more time to locate and interpret objects.
- Be aware of common *Wechsler subtest results* (See Resource Page) for students who are visually impaired.

Special Materials

Ask the teacher of the visually impaired for assistance in locating the following materials:

- Large print materials should be provided at the size indicated in the functional vision report or eye report.
- APH provides a number of large print testing materials (go to <http://sun1.aph.org/cgi-bin/starfinder/4552/marcat.txt?action=-oyQB> for more information on specific materials).
- Use bold-line or raised-line paper for responses for students who are visually impaired and who use this accommodation in the classroom. This is not beneficial for all students with a visual impairment, so check to ensure that this is an appropriate accommodation for this individual.
- Don't use plastic or shiny materials, as the glare reduces visibility.
- Use yellow plastic laminate over written material before copying, or place over the test booklet directly to increase contrast and provide a sharper copy. This is useful for some students with low vision and not others. Ask the students if it makes a positive difference.
- Present manipulable objects on a tray with 2-inch sides or less to make objects easier to locate (see <http://sun1.aph.org/cgi-bin/starfinder/4552/marcat.txt> to order tray). If a tray is not available, a piece of black construction paper can be used.
- Allow Braillewriters and abacus for writing and math assessments. The abacus serves as a replacement for scratch paper and does not provide the answers to the problems.

Preliminary Preparations

- Be very familiar with testing instruments. Practice with students with vision first if the measure is unfamiliar.
- Become familiar with low-vision devices or other equipment to be used in assessment. Arrange to have special equipment and materials available.
- Make sure vision and hearing reports are up-to-date.
- Schedule adequate time for testing.
- Make every attempt not to test students during preferred activities.
- Double check with the teacher of the visually impaired and the orientation and mobility (O&M) specialist confirming accommodations that need to be made.

Step IV: Administer Appropriate Formal Assessment Measures: Consider all accommodations and recommendations specific to the students

Before Testing Preparations

- Ask the students how to handle a situation if you are not sure.
- Ask them if they need help.
- Respond to students as individuals.
- Don't rush the assessment process. Plan considerably more time for the assessment and provide ample time for rapport-building before beginning assessment.
- Ask first, and if the students desire, offer your arm and lead the way into the room, never pushing the students. If the students choose to navigate alone, observe their mode of travel to gather further information on their functional abilities.
- Use students' names first when talking to them.
- Allow them time to orient to the room by exploring and touching objects if they so desire. You may also verbally describe the room.
- Clearly explain the purpose of testing to decrease stress.
- Make sure students have necessary glasses or other vision equipment. Do not assess without the devices used by the students in the classroom.

Testing Room

- Control for glare and background noise.
- Use carpeted room with curtains or drapes (if possible).
- Keep doors and windows closed unless air flow is needed for comfort.
- Avoid rooms with noisy air conditioners and heating ducts.
- For students with low vision, maximize usable vision by:
 - Do not have the child face a window
 - Eliminate flickering light
 - Provide light sources from the side of the more efficient eye
 - Make sure that the examiner is not backlit
 - Always be aware and sensitive to glare issues with all testing materials
- Ask students for any additional needs. This will also provide information on the students' ability to self-advocate.

During Testing

- Check that students are using glasses or other visual aids they use in class.
- Position yourself and students to optimize administering the tests relative to their vision loss. Some students will prefer that you sit next to them on the side where they have the most vision; however, students with peripheral vision loss will prefer that you sit across from them.
- Describe your activities (recording responses, arranging materials, etc.) to lower the students' anxiety about testing.

- Always ask students before manipulating their hands or otherwise touching them. When moving students' hands, place your hand underneath theirs and gently guide it instead of shoving the students' hands with your own.
- Use specific rather than general directions when administering the test or having students complete tasks. If you need to expand upon the standardized instructions, include that change in the final report.
- Indicate that you are going to hand students something before doing so.
- Check students' understanding of the directions by using a moderate amount of practice items.
- Encourage questions from students.
- Praise students' efforts frequently.
- Be sensitive to fatigue and take breaks as needed.

After Testing

- Take session notes immediately after testing.
- Be very careful not to assume that observed emotional issues or performance deficits are related to the visual impairment.
- Be aware that students' performance on performance tasks may be indicative of their inexperience with similar tasks, and may not reflect their actual cognitive ability. Carefully observe and note their behavior and comments throughout.
- Be aware that students who are blind learn differently and that tactile graphs and diagrams provided by test publishers don't directly substitute for three-dimensional figures. Different cognitive processes are required, and therefore can lead to inaccurate results on standardized cognitive assessments.
- Don't assume that a large vocabulary is an indicator of giftedness.
- Consult with the teacher of the visually impaired when interpreting results.
- Don't assume that pronoun confusion and self-stimulatory behaviors are indicative of a pervasive developmental disorder.
- Don't assume that a learning disability or motivational problems exists when a discrepancy between level of intelligence and achievement is found.
- Don't assume that efficient performance in the general environment implies a similar level of performance ability in the classroom.

Step V: Connect with Interested People.

Reading past reports may be helpful at this point in the process. Prior to this, too much focus on past reports may inappropriately influence a comprehensive assessment.

1. Go over findings with specialists and teachers providing service to the students.

2. Draw upon the expertise and experience of the other professionals working with the students.
3. Work collaboratively with those who may know the students better than you do.

Step VI: Re-assess, if necessary.

Initial assessment measures may indicate more specific areas of concern.

1. Consult with a colleague or refer the students to other professionals for a more detailed evaluation if needed.
2. Keep in mind that tests do not diagnose in and of themselves. They serve as indicators and hypothesis generators. Consider many factors when *determining the existence of a learning disability* (See Resource Page)
3. Follow up on unusual findings in the assessment by referring or by administering additional measures.
4. Consideration of systemic barriers, i.e. lack of appropriate testing materials.

Step VII: Report Findings and Plan Collaboratively

1. Interpret findings and communicate them with the multi-disciplinary team and the parents.
2. Work collaboratively with team members to identify strengths and needs that will ultimately contribute to practical accommodations and supports for the students. Simply reporting scores is not helpful.
3. Include the teacher of students with visual impairments and an Orientation and Mobility specialist whenever possible at every stage of the assessment process.