

# Messy and Muddy

A guide to outdoor play for children  
with vision impairment

**R N I B**

See differently



## A guide to outdoor play for children with vision impairment

Outdoor play is important for all children and, particularly in the case of children with vision impairment, can provide real life, concrete experiences from which they learn about the world around them. Exploring outside helps children develop mobility and independence skills; it can provide tangible contexts for learning about literacy and numeracy; it helps them face challenges and take risks; importantly, it provides the perfect opportunity to have fun with friends and stay active.

This guide offers advice for encouraging a child with vision impairment to get 'messy and muddy' and how to support them, particularly during the early years, to do this in a safe, accessible way. Whilst all the activities have been suggested by parents and professionals with direct experience of working with children with vision impairment, it is important to remember that each child is an individual and, as such, some activities may need adapting to suit different needs and preferences.

If you want to seek professional advice regarding the specific needs of your child, you can contact your Local Authority to find out about access to the support of a Qualified Habilitation Specialist. For details of the support available for children with vision impairment in your area visit [www.rnib.org.uk/information-everyday-living-education-and-learning-young-childrens-education/special-educational](http://www.rnib.org.uk/information-everyday-living-education-and-learning-young-childrens-education/special-educational)



Habilitation Specialists teach mobility and independence skills to children and young people with vision impairment. This means teaching them how to move around safely and independently (with the use of a mobility aid like a long cane if necessary); route learning and also life skills such as dressing, meal preparation, self-organisation – all the things that young people need to learn to live independently when they grow up! Habilitation Specialists use outdoor learning to help children develop mobility skills by teaching them to:

- Understand space, size and distance
- Actively use listening skills to locate what is around them
- Learn balance and negotiate uneven surfaces, building confidence in their own physical abilities
- Develop environmental awareness and the confidence to travel independently.

**“Having a QHS work with my daughter’s nursery gave both them and me more confidence that she was safe and fully included in the Forest Schools sessions. Now my daughter has confidence in her outdoor skills and can show them off to me and her siblings.”**



## Messy and muddy at home and in the garden

Even the smallest of outdoor spaces can provide a child with great opportunities to stimulate their minds and bodies.

### A safe environment

1. Walk round the space, allowing your child to become familiar with the area they will occupy. First, trail the perimeter of the garden to give them an appreciation of the size. You can explore space by seeing how long it takes you to run/walk/hop/jump to the end of the garden. Talk about size or distance in relation to something that the child understands well, e.g. the garden is as long as four cars parked in a line or this flowerbed is the size of Mummy and Daddy's bed.
2. Ensure the garden is secure; check for gaps in the fencing or hedge that a child might wander through.
3. Take care with steep steps or drop-offs and cover any ponds. In the first instance, you might want to block access to steps altogether but, in time, support your child to navigate these safely and independently. You could use yellow paint or a tactile marker to show your child where the steps begin. Consider sharp, pointed objects e.g. canes. (Your local garden centre will stock cane toppers – also called eye guards – but why not encourage your child to make their own)

4. Create familiar landmarks so that your child has a point of reference for their location at any time. One idea, if your garden allows, is to create a maze on the top or side of a wall – a raised surface that your child can follow with their fingertips or a brightly painted line to track. Another option is to use visual, tactile and auditory prompts such as bunting, wind chimes, spinners or suncatchers all of which are easy to find in shops but can be made at home.

### How to make CD windspinners

You will need:

- old cds or dvds
- PVA glue
- craft gems, jewels and sequins, buttons etc.
- garden twine or string
- craft bells

Simply glue assorted, colourful craft gems and jewels to the surface of your cd or dvd.

Once dry, thread the twine through the middle of each cd/dvd and secure with a knot at each end. Add bells if you want to create a wind chime effect.

Suspend your wind spinners individually around the garden or fasten two twigs together in an 'X' shape to make a hanger for all of them.

**Tip:** decorating only one side of the cd/dvd encourages them to spin even more!



## Splash and stomp

Every season of the year presents its own challenges and opportunities for play and it's important that children understand early on how different weather can affect their ability to move around. Staying safe in the sun is important; if you're heading out in Summer make sure you have wide-rimmed hats and sunglasses (check they carry the CE Mark) as well as plenty of sun cream. The NHS recommends, when buying sunscreen, that the label should have:

- a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 to protect against UVB
- at least four-star UVA protection
- For more information about sun safety, visit [www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/sunscreen-and-sun-safety/#children-and-sun-protection](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/sunscreen-and-sun-safety/#children-and-sun-protection)

Getting children outdoors in warm weather is relatively easy but it's just as important to encourage outdoor play when the darker, shorter – and colder! – days approach. When dressing for cold weather, bear in mind the following:

For younger children, the winter provides lots of practice putting coats, gloves and hats on: try using zip extenders, labels on coats to identify the back, shoes with Velcro. Wellingtons enable a child to splash and stomp in all seasons but can make feet very cold when exploring in the snow and are sometimes harder to walk in than close fitting shoes.

- When it is cold or wet, make sure your child wears a hat that doesn't cover their ears and don't put their hood up! Hoods not only dim environmental sounds and approaching traffic but can also affect a child's peripheral vision.
- Gloves are great to keep hands warm but, if your child is a long cane user, get some fingerless gloves – otherwise the tactile feedback from their cane is significantly reduced.

For more tips and ideas on getting out and about in Winter, see [www.rnib.org.uk/insight-online/mobility-training-winter-children-vision-impairment](http://www.rnib.org.uk/insight-online/mobility-training-winter-children-vision-impairment)



"We use the fingerless gloves that have a little 'hood'. Eliza can then keep all her fingers in except the one on her cane as she hates having cold hands!"

## Playing in and around your home

### Gardening

Plant a variety of fruit and vegetables to then understand where food comes from and the growing process. Give your child their own set of garden tools and help them dig and plant. Creating your own sensory garden is a great way to encourage children to use and explore the outdoors and does not need much space – a raised bed or window box is the ideal starting point. Use gardening time as an opportunity to develop numeracy e.g. by counting or sorting seeds (which is also good for pre-Braille tactile discrimination) or exploring distance between plants. Develop vocabulary by talking about how high, tall, big, and wide.



### Sensory gardens: planting ideas to get you started

**Looking:** Help children to use any vision they have by planting for colour, shape and movement. Plants like zinnias, marigolds, red-hot pokers, butterfly plants and sunflowers add exciting colours, – as well as attracting bees and butterflies! – to the garden.

**Feeling:** lamb's ears, pussy willow, squirrel-tail grass all provide rewarding tactile feedback. Talk about how plants get their names and have fun making up new ones based on the characteristics of each.

**Listening:** Take a moment to listen to the garden: bamboo, honesty, pampas grass are good examples of plants that create satisfying and relaxing sounds.

**Smelling/Tasting:** Herbs (such as lemon balm, mint and lavender) have a distinctive aroma and can also be used in cooking.

**"I'm not a great gardener but with Eliza we planted garden peas and she has loved being able to find the ripe pods through the summer, pick them herself and eat them straight from the pod."**



### Have a picnic.

Even young children can start to learn independent living skills by helping to prepare simple picnic food – and if they've grown some of it themselves, then even better! Talk about weight, measurement and number: How many sandwiches shall we make? Have we enough plates for everybody? Which apple is bigger – how can you tell? Eating outdoors can be great fun and offers the chance to practise knife and fork skills without worrying too much about spills and mess!

### Be creative

Collect leaves, stones, twigs and other natural materials and use these in craft activities such as collage-making. You could set up a sensory path outside using plastic trays with different outdoor materials inside – sand, leaves, water, stones and soil all work well for this. Create a story to go with it, e.g. going on a bear hunt. All these activities encourage imaginative play whilst helping your child develop tactile awareness.



### Get messy with mud!

Some children may have sensitivity to different textures so introducing activities and ideas using a hand under hand method (where your hands perform the activity while your child's hands rest on top of yours) will enable them to develop their fine motor skills and have fun at their own pace!

## Mud!

Find a clear area of earth in your garden. Check carefully to ensure there are no harmful elements (animal faeces, broken glass etc.) Use a large piece of cardboard or wood for your child to sit on while they work. Together, sift through the soil to remove stones, twigs, leaves, and other items (set these aside to use later). Gradually add water and invite the child to explore the mud with their hands and fingers: How does it feel? What does it look like? Sound like? Smell like?



### Try:

**Mud finger painting** – add water until you reach finger paint consistency. Encourage your child to use hands and fingers to make marks on paper (Tip: brown paper, e.g. from grocery bags, survives this treatment better than normal art paper!)

**Mud Pies** – using thicker mud. Set out different kitchen items (metal spoons, baking tins etc. are easier to wash afterwards) within reach of your child. Fill containers with mud and decorate with stones, leaves, twigs etc.

**Mud Kitchen** – having a designated, structured area to work in helps a child with vision impairment feel in control of their space. Many retailers supply purpose-built kitchens but an old table and second-hand pots and pans will do just as well.



## Sand and water

Sandpits, water tables and paddling pools all have great play potential and provide opportunities to develop early numeracy skills if you use playtime to introduce concepts such as capacity, for example. How much can each bucket hold? How quickly can you fill that container? Why does the water spill out when you use a bigger jug? Encourage imaginative play and orientation skills by burying 'treasure' in a sandpit or hiding items around the garden (dressing up as pirates is optional!) A sand or water table can also provide a defined area which can help your child locate themselves and their toys. By learning to navigate the edges of an area, your child will be able to practise tracking and tactile search skills.



## Water play in the garden

- Fill buckets with water and encourage children to 'paint' the fence, shed, outside walls of the house using a range of clean paint brushes and sponges.
- Collect together a range of plastic toys and set up a car wash. Adding a different tactile element such as foam will make this activity even more fun.
- On warmer days, splashing in a paddling pool can be a great way to cool down. Throw in a range of toys and enjoy watching your child play and learn.

**Never leave your child unsupervised when playing around water.**

## Nature and wildlife

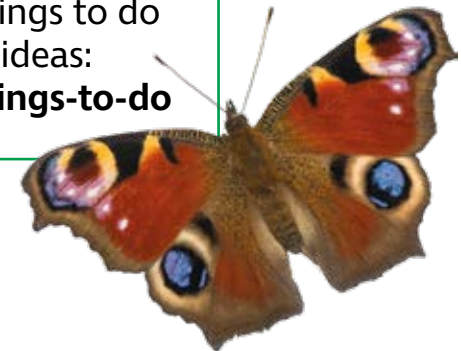
Ponds and larger water features are great for encouraging wildlife into your garden. A simple – and safe – way to attract birds and other small creatures is by filling a large saucer or tray with water, adding a few stones or pebbles for them to perch upon and placing this in a quiet but visible area of your garden. Talk to your child about how and why different animals come to the water; describe their habits and behaviours and encourage them to listen to the different sounds they make.

Bug hotels provide a safe hideaway for a range of insects but can also attract toads and hedgehogs to the garden. These can be relatively inexpensive to buy but are easy to make and most of the materials you need can be found in and around the home and garden. Organisations such as RSPB have free downloadable guides for creative ways to encourage wildlife into your garden. Visit [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk) for more details.



### Did you know...?

Many visitor attractions and leisure facilities will offer parents and carers free entry if they are accompanying a child that they are supporting. If your child develops a real interest in nature and wants to explore this further, The National Trust's 50 things to do before you're 11¾ has some great ideas: [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/50-things-to-do](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/50-things-to-do)



### Ball games and exercise.

All children enjoy throwing, catching and kicking a ball and, for children with vision impairment, these vary in size, colour, sound and texture. Choose a ball according to the age and needs of your child but do try to have a variety to offer a range of experiences. Skipping ropes are great for encouraging coordination and developing strength as well as a child's awareness of their own body and how it moves. Using a rope and carabiner is a good way to safely encourage children to run in a straight line, down the garden and back again. Trampolines are a fantastic way to burn off excess energy and really get the pulse racing.

All children fall but if parents can maintain a positive and calm attitude it makes a big difference to how the child reacts. Learning to fall safely is a skill that can be developed, for example by practising on a soft surface from a kneeling position. Make it into a game so that your child doesn't develop a fear of falling. Use a simple, fun phrase like 'bumper hands' so your child knows to put their hands in front of them, almost as though they are holding a beach ball, to make a protective arc.



## Ball games in the garden

British Blind Sport want to encourage blind and partially sighted children to get active and play sport. Here is a simple idea they recommend:

### Skittles

Explain the aim of the game and how the skittles are set up before beginning. To make the activity inclusive for children with little or no sight, stand behind the pins and clap three times as a guide.

Plastic bottles filled with bells, dried pasta or rice make good skittles with an audible quality that allows a visually impaired child to tell whether they have hit their mark.

For more activity ideas and a pack to develop basic skills, contact British Blind Sport:  
[www.britishblindsport.org.uk/firststeps](http://www.britishblindsport.org.uk/firststeps)



### Chilling out

Encouraging exercise and movement in children is important but it's also good to take some time to be still and enjoy the garden as a place to relax. Lie on a blanket and listen to the sounds of the garden. Talk about the world around the child and explore the different sensory information they receive: the heat from the sun, the wind in their hair, the feeling of grass on their toes. Think about how the time of day or different seasons alter the outside environment – for example, when the leaves are falling in Autumn, what smells are different, how has the temperature changed and so on.

## Away from home

### Parks and playgrounds

A trip to the local park or playground can be a great opportunity for children to develop their confidence, hone their social skills and gain independence outside of the home or school environment. Parks provide a rich environment where your child can experience a range of movements: swinging, sliding, climbing, rotating, balancing. Before your first visit, why not read, 'Off to the Park', a tactile book by Child's Play? [www.childs-play.com](http://www.childs-play.com)

Unlike at home or in a classroom, you cannot really adapt the physical environment of a public park or playground but here are some key things to be aware of:

- When you first arrive, spend time ensuring your child becomes familiar with the size, shape and location of any different equipment or activities there.
- If you are in a playground with swings, check your child is aware of how to maintain a safe distance from the flying feet and legs of other children. Use auditory clues such as picking out the particular sound the swing makes when it is moving.
- Look for edges, uneven surfaces, level changes and so on. Being able to notice changes in the environment and what they might mean is great for learning to travel independently, for example noting a change underfoot from paving to gravel, or the difference between an

area which feels 'open' and one that feels 'closed' (e.g. in a courtyard or under a canopy).

- Finally, ensure you consider obstacles at and above your child's head height as well as at ground level.



## Meeting new people

Playing at the park is the perfect time for children to interact with their peers but being out and about with other families presents both opportunities and challenges. Around 70% of children with vision impairment are educated in a mainstream setting so it's important that they learn to interact safely and confidently with their sighted peers. You might want to take the time to discuss how you and your family talk about your child's vision when meeting new people. Some families tell us that practising sentences they have prepared helps them when faced with questions from other children or parents. If you would like more advice on how to talk to your child about their vision impairment, RNIB have produced a guide called 'Tough Talks' which can be found at [www.rnib.org.uk/toughtalks](http://www.rnib.org.uk/toughtalks)

Young children learn social skills by playing with friends and a child who can make and sustain friendships will often find it easier to adapt to new situations. Having the opportunity to interact with sighted children at a park or in the playground means that not only will your child learn valuable lessons about play and social interaction but other children will learn to accept your child's visual impairment.



**“From quite a young age Martha’s friends understood that she couldn’t see in bright light and may need an arm to hold. Even at 13 I see her friends automatically link arms with her when they step into bright sunshine.”**

## Enjoying the park

Once they feel confident in their surroundings, encourage your child to use the park facilities. They may need support with some – and not all activities will be suitable or enjoyable – but introducing an element of risk is important to encourage confidence in all children. On the different equipment, use directional words like 'up' and 'down', 'around', 'on top of', 'behind', 'back' and 'forwards' as your child moves about – this will help them get a sense of the way their body occupies a space in relation to what's around them. Having the opportunity to regularly visit the park will enable your child to really build confidence and develop a range of skills.

Practise listening skills each time you go out – there are so many sounds on the way to the park! Can you hear any animals or insects? Even if you can't hear them, what noises do you think would they make? What noise do your feet make when you walk through the grass or across the path? Can you hear traffic nearby? Can you hear children playing?

These kinds of games help children to use their hearing actively to identify and locate what is around them – all very useful for mobility; for example, learning to keep the sound of traffic on your left as you walk a route means that if you realise the sound is behind you then you've gone off track slightly.

A park is the perfect location to help your child build their confidence in their own physical capabilities. Find an open space, check for hazards and let them run as far and as fast as they can! Climbing and jumping, playing on scooters, trikes or bikes and getting used to falling safely reduces fear when trying new things.

Find out about other activities on offer at your local park: a growing number of parks and green spaces have free-to-use gym equipment like pull-up bars, step-ups, static bikes and parallel bars. Check for age restrictions and ensure your child understands how to use the equipment safely (it's also worth giving equipment the once-over yourself to check it is in good working order before you let them use it!). Other facilities may include tandem bike hire or water activities, all of which can be adapted to suit children with vision impairment and which will give them a taste for adventure!



## Exploring further

### At the beach

A trip to the beach provides a child with vision impairment access to a range of sights, sounds, scents, and textures. Whilst this can be a rewarding experience, for some children it can bring a lot of new sensory information all at once. Child's Play produce a tactile book entitled 'Off to the Beach' which you could look at with your child to prepare them for their first experience. [www.childs-play.com](http://www.childs-play.com)

### Be prepared

- Provide footwear until your child is comfortable with the sensation of sand underfoot
- As well as choosing the correct SPF, consider the strength of fragrance in any sun creams or lotions you choose
- Sticky hands are an inevitable consequence of playing at the beach, so having a supply of wipes close by is always a good idea
- Pick a quieter, more sheltered spot to begin with, away from big crowds or noisy activities.

As for all children, safety in the sun is paramount: ensure you have appropriate sun protection, glasses or sun shades, a wide-rimmed hat and plenty of water for drinking/hand washing etc.





## Playing in the sand

You can't visit the beach without making a sandcastle, but here are a few other ideas for keeping children occupied:

- Use different toys to rake through the sand and explore the shapes and patterns they make
- Bury feet or hands and talk about how this feels; is it heavier/colder/more damp than the sand on the surface of the beach? Why do they think this is?
- Sprinkle sand on hands or toys; dig wet and dry sand exploring the differences (weight, texture, sound, build quality)
- Collect seashells, dried seaweed, other natural objects and explore their different shapes, sizes and patterns. If you've the space, take them home with you and add to a treasure basket or craft box.





## Water play

Gaining confidence around water is an important life skill for any child. Always check the safety information at individual beaches and ensure you are aware of tide times, safe swim areas and availability of lifeguards.

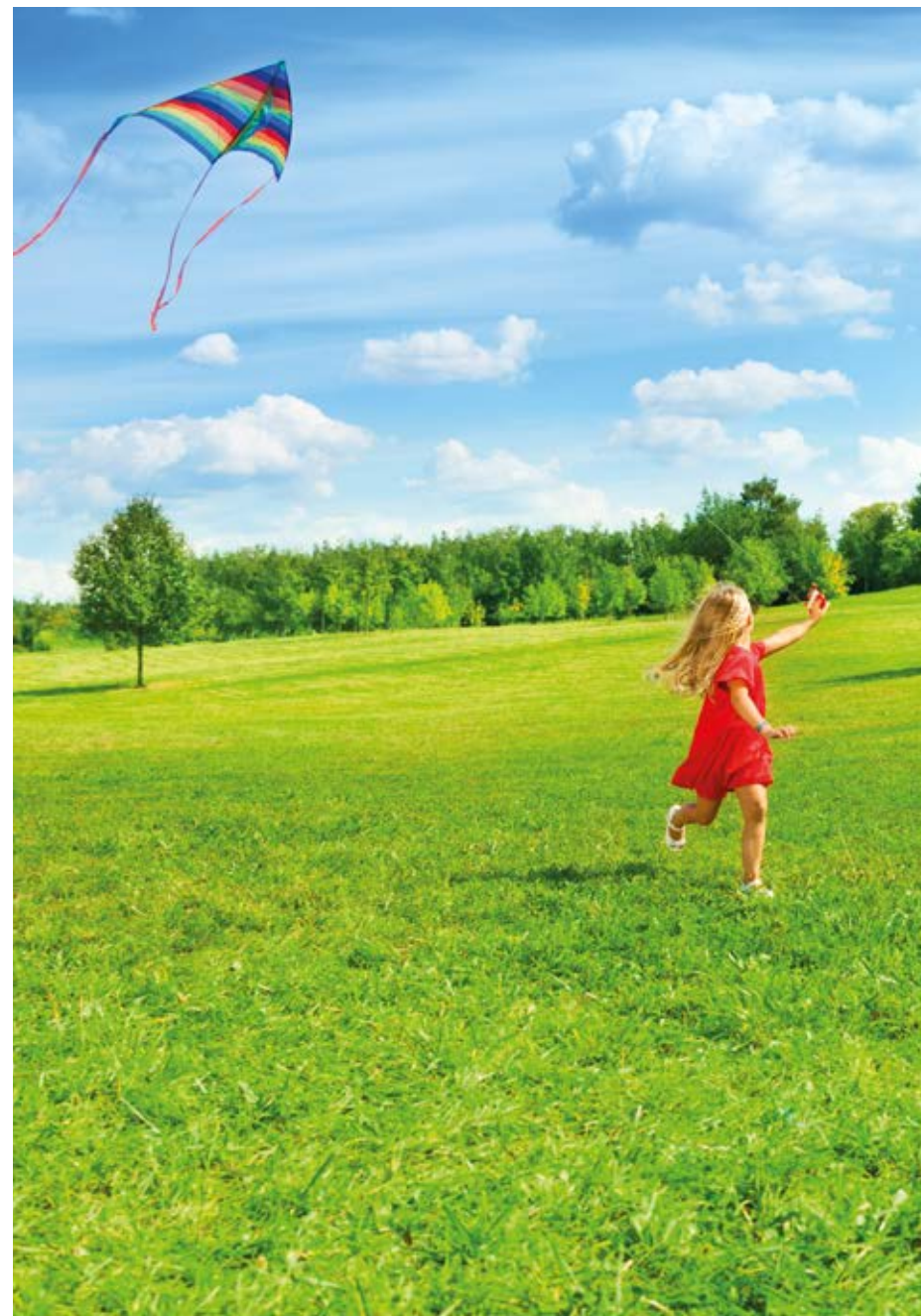
- Explore the water's edge; encourage your child to sit, stand or swim in the ocean depending on their level of confidence.
- Discuss the concept of tides; talk about the feeling of the waves, their regularity and the sounds the sea makes as it approaches the shore.
- Fill different sized buckets with water, scoop and pour this out. Carry water from the shore to dry sand: explore cause and effect by pouring water onto dry sand.
- Take an old plastic shower curtain to line the inside and edges of a hole you've dug. Fill with water to create an instant mini pool!

**Never leave your child unsupervised when playing around water.**

## Toys and games

Many beach toys, given their tendency to be brightly coloured, are suitable for children with vision impairment. Here are some ideas for what to pack for a fun trip to the beach:

- A range of different sized buckets, spades and sand toys. Take a plastic boat and fishing net to explore rock pools.
- A brightly coloured beach ball – consider your child's vision and the way they use this; choose a colour that will stand out to your child against the environment of the beach. A sound ball is also an option, although any audible qualities may be lost amongst the noise and activity of the beach environment.
- A kite, ideally brightly coloured and with lots of bows and ribbons. Following a kite will help develop tracking and fixation skills. If they can, let your child hold the string and feel the strength of the wind whilst you describe its effect on the movement of the kite.



## Activity providers

As your child grows and develops in confidence, they may want to attempt more challenging outdoor activities. Whilst you may have your doubts about this, it is important to let young people try out new things and sometimes this means allowing them to take risks. By trusting children to test their growing strength and abilities and face new challenges, you are enabling them to gain confidence and belief in their own decisions.

There are many excellent organisations able to offer structured outdoor activities for children and young people. Any reputable activity provider should ensure that their staff are fully trained and qualified and that they have the necessary checks and clearances to be able to work with children. Many larger organisations – Field Studies Council, for example – will already have experience of working with people with visual impairment but if you're not sure whether a centre will be able to cater for your child's specific needs, here are some key questions to ask:

- Has the specific centre/staff any experience of working with children with vision impairment? What training have staff and instructors had and how recently? (RNIB can support organisations that wish to undertake visual awareness training)
- Can you do a pre-visit to check out the centre/site? If you are concerned about specific issues or potential hazards, how will they make reasonable adjustments to accommodate your child's needs?



Under the terms of the Equality Act 2010 a service provider is not allowed to discriminate against someone because of his or her disability or other "protected characteristic". For disabled people, the Equality Act also says that service providers may have to make "reasonable adjustments".

For more information you can download 'An Introduction to the Equality Act 2010' from [rnib.org.uk/campaigning/campaign-resources](https://www.rnib.org.uk/campaigning/campaign-resources)

- For certain activities, it is worth asking about the ratio of instructors to children. For example, with sports like climbing or abseiling, they might need to provide one to one support for a child. Increasing ratios is one example of a standard reasonable adjustment that can enable children with additional needs to participate.
- Even an organisation with experience of supporting children with vision impairment might benefit from some simple reminders, for example the importance of introducing themselves, using people's names when speaking and avoiding vague instructions. It can be helpful to have a conversation with them about your child's specific visual impairment and how they can be best supported.
- Many activity providers are keen to work with people of all abilities and will welcome the chance to talk to you about their facilities. RNIB provides support and advice to any organisation with questions about how to safely adapt activities for children and young people with vision impairment. Our CYPF Support Officers can be contacted at [cypf@rnib.org.uk](mailto:cypf@rnib.org.uk)

By asking the right questions and obtaining the reassurances you need, you will be able to watch your young adventurer flourish and enjoy all the advantages that getting messy and muddy can bring!



For more information about the services we provide for children and young people with vision impairment and their families visit [rnib.org.uk/children](https://rnib.org.uk/children) or call our Helpline on **0303 123 9999**

Authors: Karen Hirst (RNIB Children, Young People and Families Specialist Development Officer – Early Years/Early Intervention)  
Kate Kotschy (Qualified Habilitation Specialist)

Thank you to the parents and young people who contributed to this guide.

## Follow us online:



[facebook.com/rnibuk](https://facebook.com/rnibuk)



[twitter.com/RNIB](https://twitter.com/RNIB)



[youtube.com/user/rnibuk](https://youtube.com/user/rnibuk)

## [rnib.org.uk](https://rnib.org.uk)