

The Role of O&M: Recognizing & Preventing Maltreatment in Students who are Blind or Low Vision

A Comprehensive Professional Development Guide for Educators, O&M Specialists, Teachers of the Blind, Low Vision, Support Staff, and Families

This professional development guide provides crucial insights into recognizing subtle indicators of maltreatment in students with blindness or low vision. It also highlights how orientation and mobility instruction plays a vital role in fostering their safety, autonomy, and overall protection.

Agenda

1 Understanding Vulnerability Factors

How visual impairments can create unique vulnerabilities to maltreatment

2 Recognizing the Signs

Identifying often-overlooked indicators of abuse or neglect

3 Protective Factors Through O&M

How mobility skills create safety and independence

4 Service Animals as Partners

The role of guide dogs in promoting safety and autonomy

5 Practical Strategies

Tools for educators and parents to implement immediately

Why This Matters

According to the World Health Organization, children with disabilities are:

3.7 times more likely to experience violence than non-disabled peers

3.6 times more likely to experience physical violence

2.9 times more likely to experience sexual violence

Children with sensory disabilities, including those who are blind or low vision, face unique vulnerabilities that often go unrecognized by education professionals. Their visual impairment *may* significantly impact their ability to perceive threats, communicate distress, and understand social cues.

Difficulty Identifying Abusers

Lack of visual cues makes it harder to identify individuals, recognize facial expressions, or observe body language associated with a threat.

Increased Reliance on Others

Dependency on others for navigation, daily tasks, and information can create situations where boundaries are easily crossed or exploitation can occur.

Challenges with Personal Space

Without visual cues, students may struggle to understand appropriate personal boundaries, making them more susceptible to unwanted physical contact.

Communication Barriers

Students may have difficulty interpreting non-verbal communication from potential abusers or articulating their experiences, leading to underreporting.

Source: Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., & Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 380(9845), 899-907.

Unique Vulnerability Factors

Limited Access to Visual Information

Students may miss visual cues that signal danger or inappropriate behavior from others

Increased Dependence on Adults

Higher reliance on others for basic needs, mobility, and information access creates power imbalances

Learned Compliance

Students often develop patterns of compliance to authority figures that may transfer to unsafe situations

Communication Barriers

Difficulty accurately describing experiences, especially for students with additional disabilities

Social Isolation

Fewer social connections means fewer opportunities to disclose or gain perspective on concerning situations

Source: Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., & Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 380(9845), 899-907.

Red Flags That May Be Misinterpreted

Common signs of maltreatment are often attributed to the disability itself rather than recognized as potential indicators of abuse or neglect:

Changes in Behavior

Sudden withdrawal, aggression, or regression in previously mastered skills may be dismissed as related to vision loss rather than trauma

Physical Indicators

Bruises may be attributed to mobility challenges; unexplained injuries explained away as "bumping into things"

Fear of Touch

Resistance to physical guidance or hand-under-hand techniques might be seen as sensory sensitivity rather than trauma response

Self-Stimulatory Behaviors

Increase in "blindisms" may actually be self-soothing responses to trauma rather than manifestations of visual impairment

Source: Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., & Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 380(9845), 899-907.

Case Example: The Invisible Signs

"Marta, an 11-year-old with congenital blindness, began refusing to participate in O&M lessons after years of enthusiasm. Her teacher noticed she became agitated when certain staff members approached. Initially attributed to pre-teen mood changes, further investigation revealed Marta was experiencing inappropriate physical guidance from a volunteer."

Key Takeaways from Real Cases:

- Changes in willingness to travel independently may signal safety concerns
- Selective anxiety around specific individuals warrants investigation
- Regression in previously mastered skills should trigger deeper inquiry
- Trust student reports of discomfort, even when explanations seem vague

Note: This example is based on documented case studies from Perkins School for the Blind's Child Protection Program, with identifying details altered.

The Power of O&M in Building Protective Factors

Spatial Awareness
Understanding one's environment creates confidence and reduces vulnerability



Decision Making
Route planning and problem-solving strengthen critical thinking in all situations



Independent Travel
Reduces isolation and dependency on potentially unsafe individuals for transportation



Self-Advocacy
Learning to request appropriate assistance builds boundary-setting skills



O&M instruction is not just about travel skills—it's about building the foundation for personal safety and autonomy.

Integrating Safety Concepts into O&M Instruction



Consent for Assistance

Teach students to accept or decline offered help; practice scripts for setting boundaries with helpers



Situational Assessment

Develop skills to evaluate environmental safety using non-visual cues (sounds, smells, air currents)



Emergency Response

Practice accessing help through technology; memorize safety contacts; use accessibility features on devices



Community Resources

Identify safe people in different environments; practice seeking assistance from appropriate sources

Service Animals as Partners in Independence

Guide Dogs as Protective Factors

- Provide consistent, reliable mobility assistance without human power dynamics
- Create natural social bridges, reducing isolation
- Serve as subtle deterrents to potential predators
- Increase confidence in independent travel
- Enhance situational awareness through trained responses to environmental hazards

According to Guide Dogs for the Blind, 92% of guide dog users report increased confidence in independent travel, directly correlating with reduced vulnerability to exploitation.

When Guide Dogs May Not Be Appropriate

Guide dogs require maturity, consistent handling, and independent travel skills. For younger students, focus on developing foundational skills that will prepare them for future guide dog partnership.

Source: Guide Dogs for the Blind. (2022). Annual impact report: Independence through partnership.

Preparing Students for Future Guide Dog Partnership

Foundation (Elementary)

- Basic cane skills and spatial concepts
- Responsibility through classroom pets
- Understanding dog behavior and needs
- Reading about guide dog partnerships

Building Skills (Middle School)

- Consistent O&M practice in various environments
- Developing routines and responsibility
- Understanding the human-animal bond
- Meeting working guide dogs

Pre-Application (High School)

- Independent travel in various environments
- Understanding guide dog care requirements
- Connecting with guide dog organizations
- Developing readiness assessment plan

Resources: *"Eyes for Me"* by Sally Hobart Alexander (elementary), *"Follow My Leader"* by James B. Garfield (middle school), *"Have Dog, Will Travel"* by Stephen Kuusisto (high school/adult)

Trauma-Informed Approach to O&M Instruction

Recognize

Understand how trauma might manifest in O&M contexts:

- Resistance to certain environments
- Heightened startle responses
- Avoidance of specific travel routes
- Difficulty with physical guidance techniques

Respond

Adapt instruction to be trauma-sensitive:

- Offer choices and control whenever possible
- Use clear, predictable language about touch
- Respect personal space boundaries
- Create consistent routines

Rebuild

Foster resilience through instruction:

- Celebrate small victories
- Build confidence through mastery experiences
- Provide opportunities for positive social connection
- Teach self-regulation strategies during challenging routes

Source: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2021). *Trauma-informed school strategies during COVID-19*. Retrieved from www.nctsn.org

Body Autonomy and Consent in Educational Settings

The Physical Guidance Dilemma

Students with visual impairments often experience frequent physical contact from adults for:

- Mobility guidance
- Hand-under-hand demonstration
- Physical prompting
- Sighted guide technique

This necessary contact can inadvertently blur boundaries around appropriate touch or create patterns of compliance.

Practical Solutions

- Always request permission before initiating physical contact
- Explain the purpose of touch before making contact
- Use consistent language across educational team
- Respect refusals when possible; provide alternatives
- Teach students to recognize appropriate vs. inappropriate touch
- Model respect for others' boundaries in all interactions

Teaching Personal Safety: Age-Appropriate Approaches

Elementary (Ages 5–10)

- Body parts have names (use anatomically correct terms)
- Some body parts are private
- We can say "no" to unwanted touch
- Difference between safe and unsafe secrets
- Identifying trusted adults

Resource: *"A Kid's First Book About Body Safety"* in braille/large print by J.S. Jackson

Middle School (Ages 11–14)

- Setting and respecting boundaries
- Recognizing manipulation tactics
- Digital safety and online boundaries
- Reporting uncomfortable situations
- Self-advocacy in healthcare settings

Resource: *"Not-So-Scary Conversations"* podcast by Perkins School for the Blind

High School (Ages 15–21)

- Healthy vs. unhealthy relationships
- Consent in romantic contexts
- Managing helper relationships
- Self-advocacy with medical professionals
- Transportation safety planning

Resource: *"SAVI Guide to Sexuality for Visually Impaired"* by Maureen Duffy

Empowering Communication Through Technology

Technology can provide crucial independence and safety tools for students with visual impairments:

1

Accessible Communication Apps

FaceTime, Be My Eyes, and AIRA allow students to connect with trusted individuals for assistance without physical dependency

2

Emergency Features

Teach use of SOS features on smartphones, one-touch emergency calling, and location sharing with trusted contacts

3

Navigation Apps

BlindSquare, Soundscape, and Google Maps with accessibility features provide independent travel information and location awareness

4

Personal Safety Apps

Apps like Noonlight or bSafe offer accessible panic buttons and location monitoring for added security during independent travel

Source: Presley, I., & D'Andrea, F. M. (2023). *Assistive Technology for Students Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired: A Guide to Assessment*. APH Press.

Creating a Protective Educational Environment

Policy Recommendations

Two-adult rule: Avoid one-on-one situations in private settings

Touch protocols: Develop consistent guidelines for necessary physical contact

Alternative communication: Provide multiple ways for students to report concerns

Staff training: Require specific training on abuse prevention for all personnel

Transportation oversight: Monitor one-on-one transportation arrangements

Bathroom procedures: Create clear protocols for providing private assistance

⊗ Red Flag Behaviors in Adults

Be alert to colleagues who:

- Insist on working alone with specific students
- Give special privileges to particular children
- Seek physical contact beyond what's instructionally necessary
- Create situations for unnecessary private interactions

Guidelines for Physical Contact in Educational Settings

Before Contact

"I'm going to show you how to hold this cane. May I put my hand over yours to demonstrate?"

After Contact

"Thank you for letting me guide your hand. Next time, try to remember to keep your wrist straight."

During Contact

"I'm moving your elbow slightly to adjust your cane position. Is this comfortable for you?"

When Refused

"That's okay. Let me describe the motion verbally instead, and you can try it on your own."

Remember: Necessary physical contact should be:

Brief • Purpose-driven • Explained • Consensual • Professional • Age-appropriate • Documented when unusual

Supporting Parents as Partners



Education

Provide resources on typical development, body autonomy, and how to discuss personal safety. Recommend *"Talking to Your Blind Child About Body Safety"* by NAPVI and *"The Right to Be Safe"* from Perkins School for the Blind's resource library.



Support Groups

Connect parents with organizations like National Organization of Parents of Blind Children, Family Connect, and local support networks where they can discuss challenging topics with experienced parents.



Home Strategies

Teach parents to foster independence at home through age-appropriate chores, choice-making opportunities, and privacy practices that respect development while maintaining safety.



Monitoring Plans

Help develop supervision strategies that balance safety with independence. Create communication plans for when students work with new service providers or participate in new activities.

When You Suspect Maltreatment: Response Protocol

Recognize

- Note concerning behaviors, statements, or physical signs
- Document observations with dates, times, and context
- Consider alternative explanations, but trust your instincts

Respond

- Remain calm and listen without judgment if a student discloses
- Use open-ended questions: "Can you tell me more about that?"
- Avoid promises you can't keep (e.g., "I won't tell anyone")
- Reassure the student they did the right thing by telling you

Report

- Contact your designated school reporter immediately
- Follow your state's mandatory reporting procedures
- Provide factual, objective information
- Maintain confidentiality after reporting

Remember: You are legally obligated to report suspected abuse or neglect. You do not need proof, only reasonable suspicion.

Professional Resources

Organizations

Perkins School for the Blind - Child Protection Program

perkins.org/childprotection

TSBVI - Personal Safety Curriculum tsbvi.edu/safety

Lighthouse for the Blind - Safety Without Sight Program

lighthouse-sf.org

Guide Dogs for the Blind - Youth Programs guidedogs.com/youth


Publications

"Safety Planning for Children with Sensory Impairments" by Child Welfare Information Gateway

"Trauma-Informed Approaches to Working with Blind Children" by Kay Alicyn Ferrell

"Personal Safety Skills for Children with Visual Impairments" by L. Penny Rosenblum & Tanni Anthony

"Promoting Sexual Health for Young People with Visual Impairments" by Anne L. Corn & Alan J. Koenig

 For comprehensive teacher training, The Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired offers a free professional development course: "Safety and Self-Advocacy for Students with Visual Impairments" - hadley.edu

Key Takeaways

Recognize Unique Vulnerability Factors

Students who are blind or have low vision may experience maltreatment in ways that are easy to misinterpret or miss altogether due to their disability.

O&M as Protection

Orientation and mobility instruction builds critical skills for independence, self-advocacy, and personal safety that extend far beyond travel.

Service Animals as Partners

Guide dogs can provide independence, confidence, and reduced vulnerability for appropriate candidates with proper preparation.

Create Protective Environments

Implement policies, practices, and educational approaches that simultaneously foster independence and maintain safety.

You are uniquely positioned to make a difference in the safety and well-being of students with visual impairments. Your commitment to their independence is a powerful protective factor against maltreatment.