

# Visual Impairments

## ◇ Definition ◇

The terms partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, and totally blind are used in the educational context to describe students with visual impairments. These terms are defined as follows:

- “Partially sighted” indicates some type of visual problem has resulted in a need for special education;
- “Low vision” generally refers to a severe visual impairment, not necessarily limited to distance vision. Low vision applies to all individuals with sight who are unable to read the newspaper at a normal viewing distance, even with the aid of eyeglasses or contact lenses. They use a combination of vision and other senses to learn, although they may require adaptations in lighting, the size of print, and, sometimes, braille;
- “Legally blind” indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye or a very limited field of vision (20 degrees at its widest point); and

- Totally blind students, who learn via braille or other non-visual media.

Visual impairment is the consequence of a functional loss of vision, rather than the eye disorder itself. Eye disorders which can lead to visual impairments can include retinal degeneration, albinism, cataracts, glaucoma, muscular problems that result in visual disturbances, corneal disorders, diabetic retinopathy, congenital disorders, and infection.

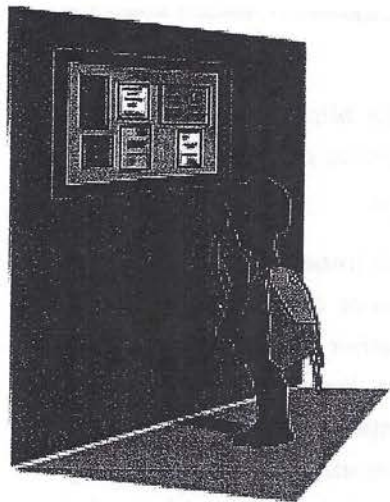


*NICHCY is the  
National Dissemination Center  
for Children with Disabilities.*

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## ✧ Incidence ✧

The rate at which visual impairments occur in individuals under the age of 18 is 12.2 per 1,000. Severe visual impairments (legally or totally blind) occur at a rate of .06 per 1,000.



## ✧ Characteristics ✧

The effect of visual problems on a child's development depends on the severity, type of loss, age at which the condition appears, and overall functioning level of the child. Many children who have multiple disabilities may also have visual impairments resulting in motor, cognitive, and/or social developmental delays.

A young child with visual impairments has little reason to explore interesting objects in the environment and, thus, may miss opportunities to have experiences and to learn. This lack of exploration may continue until learning becomes motivating or until intervention begins.

Because the child cannot see parents or peers, he or she may be unable to imitate social behavior or understand nonverbal cues. Visual disabilities can create obstacles to a growing child's independence.

### Don't Be Shy!

All of our publications and resource lists are online—help yourself! Visit us at:

[www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)

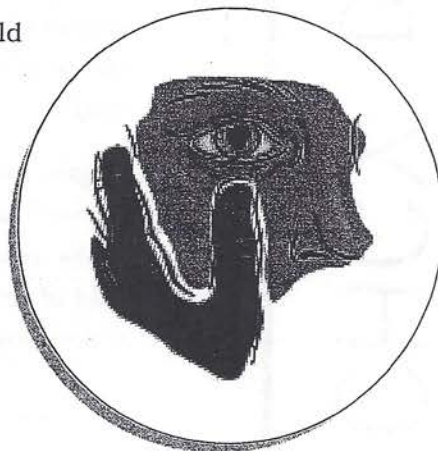
If you'd like personalized assistance, email or call us:

[nichcy@aed.org](mailto:nichcy@aed.org)

1.800.695.0285  
(V/TTY)

## ✧ Educational Implications ✧

Children with visual impairments should be assessed early to benefit from early intervention programs, when applicable. Technology in the form of computers and low-vision optical and video aids enable many partially sighted, low vision, and blind children to participate in regular class activities. Large print materials, books on tape, and braille books are available.



Students with visual impairments may need additional help with special equipment and modifications in the regular curriculum to emphasize listening skills, communication, orientation and mobility, vocation/career options, and daily living skills. Students with low vision or those who are legally blind may need help in using their residual vision more efficiently and in working with special aids and materials. Students who have visual impairments combined with other types of disabilities have a greater need for an interdisciplinary approach and may require greater emphasis on self care and daily living skills.

### ✧ Resources ✧

American Foundation for the Blind. Search AFB's *Service Center* on the Internet to identify services for blind and visually impaired persons in the United States and Canada. Available: [www.afb.org/services.asp](http://www.afb.org/services.asp)

Holbrook, M.C. (Ed.). (1996). *Children with visual impairments: A parents' guide*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine. (Phone: 800.843.7323. Web: [www.woodbinehouse.com](http://www.woodbinehouse.com))

Lewis, S., & Allman, C.B. (2000). *Seeing eye to eye: An administrator's guide to students with low vision*. New York: American Foundation for the Blind. (Phone: 800.232.3044. Web: [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org))

National Eye Institute. (2003, December). *Eye health organizations list*. (Available online at: [www.nei.nih.gov/health/organizations.htm](http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/organizations.htm))

## Other Helpful Things to Know

These NICHCY publications talk about topics important to parents of a child with a disability.

*Parenting a Child with Special Needs*

*Your Child's Evaluation*

*Parent to Parent Support*

*Questions Often Asked by Parents About Special Education Services*

*Developing Your Child's IEP*

All are available in English and in Spanish—on our Web site or by contacting us.

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## ✧ Organizations ✧

American Council of the Blind  
1155 15th St. N.W., Suite 1004  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
202.467.5081; 800.424.8666  
info@acb.org  
www.acb.org

American Foundation for the Blind  
11 Penn Plaza, Suite 300  
New York, NY 10001  
800.232.5463 (Hotline)  
For publications call: 800.232.3044  
afbinfo@afb.net  
www.afb.org

Blind Children's Center  
4120 Marathon Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90029-0159  
323.664.2153; 800.222.3566  
info@blindchildrenscenter.org  
www.blindchildrenscenter.org

National Association for Parents of  
the Visually Impaired, Inc.  
P.O. Box 317  
Watertown, MA 02472-0317  
617.972.7441; 800.562.6265  
napvi@perkins.org  
www.napvi.org

National Association for Visually  
Handicapped  
22 West 21st Street, 6th Floor  
New York, NY 10010  
212.889.3141  
staff@navh.org  
www.navh.org

National Braille Association, Inc. (NBA)  
3 Townline Circle  
Rochester, NY 14623-2513  
585.427.8260  
nbaoffice@nationalbraille.org  
www.nationalbraille.org/

National Braille Press  
88 St. Stephen Street  
Boston, MA 02115  
617.266.6160; 888.965.8965  
orders@nbp.org  
www.nbp.org

National Eye Institute  
31 Center Drive  
MSC 2510  
Bethesda, MD 20892-2510  
301.496.5248  
2020@nei.nih.gov  
www.nei.nih.gov

National Federation of the Blind,  
Parents Division  
1800 Johnson Street  
Baltimore, MD 21230  
410.659.9314, ext. 360  
nfb@nfb.org  
www.nfb.org/nopbc.htm

National Library Service for the Blind  
and Physically Handicapped,  
Library of Congress  
1291 Taylor Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20011  
202.707.5100; 202.707.0744 (TTY);  
800.424.8567  
nls@loc.gov  
www.loc.gov/nls

Prevent Blindness America  
500 E. Remington Road  
Schaumburg, IL 60173  
847.843.2020; 800.331.2020  
info@preventblindness.org  
www.preventblindness.org

The Foundation Fighting Blindness  
(formerly the National Retinitis  
Pigmentosa Foundation)  
11435 Cronhill Drive  
Owings Mills, MD 21117-2220  
410.568.0150; 410.363.7139 (TTY)  
888.394.3937; 800.683.5551 (TTY)  
info@blindness.org  
www.blindness.org

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