



# Habilitation Services for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

What is habilitation and how is it provided?



## Why is habilitation training needed?

A child/young person who can see typically develops a range of independence skills as they grow up in their family. These skills include being able to move around without hurting themselves and being able to get where they want to be safely.

Independence skills include the practical and social skills of washing, dressing, eating, drinking, shopping, cooking and finding friends. Sighted children/young people learn these skills within their family, largely by watching other family members. Children/ young people also learn from other people.

Children/young people with vision impairment cannot watch and learn in the same way as a sighted child. As a result, many key foundation skills may be missed without additional help and support.

## What does habilitation training do for a child/young person with visual needs?

Habilitation training provides alternative ways of learning, using the child/young person's other senses: touch, hearing, taste, smell and balance. This specifically develops a child's early movement skills and is useful for children with a range of vision or none.

Habilitation in the early years helps to develop children's awareness of their own bodies. It also develops the child's awareness of the space around them when still or moving and the use of their other senses.

Developing these foundation skills is particularly important when a child's loss of vision is only part of a bigger picture of other needs e.g. dual sensory loss (deaf-blindness) or complex needs.

To be effective all habilitation skills have to be started as early as possible.

## Who is involved in habilitation training?

A child/young person's parents are their first 'habilitation trainers'.

Qualified habilitation practitioners, working to the Quality Standards for Habilitation, provide habilitation training to support children, young people and their parents. They work closely with a range of health, education and social care professionals in order to provide this service.

Habilitation training is a collaboration that has to be planned, kept consistent, and made coherent and systematic across each part of a child/ young person's life. This can be at home, in educational settings and in public places, on buses and trains, in shopping centres and leisure centres, in college or at work.

## What does habilitation training aim to achieve?

Habilitation is best begun as early as possible and changes as the child / young person grows up and matures. Habilitation training has two main aims:

- Maximising the personal independence of a child/ young person with visual needs (and other needs) ready for their life as a young adult.
- Preparing a young person for moving on to college, university, apprenticeships or work, as an independent young adult.



Habilitation training involves developing personal mobility, navigation and independent living skills. This starts at home and continues as a child progresses through all the phases of education.

Children/young people with visual needs spend much of their growing up in schools of different types. Going to school, finding their way around school and getting home are particular goals for habilitation training.

For a young person, habilitation training can include getting to college, university, an apprenticeship or work and getting home again. Habilitation also focuses on the personal, emotional and social side of life and promotes healthy living, leisure and a balanced lifestyle.

## Who provides habilitation training?

Local authorities provide most habilitation training in the area they are responsible for, and habilitation professionals can be based in education, health or social care settings. They can also be located within voluntary organisations from which they provide services directly to children and young people and their families, or are commissioned to do so by local authorities.

A small number of young people have been given a budget to cover their support needs. This budget can be used to commission habilitation training.

## What do habilitation providers need to be aware of?

Providers of habilitation training have to be aware of a number of key points before starting to provide habilitation training for a particular child/young person. These include the nature and extent of:

- A child/young person's visual needs; the history of their visual need journey; when and how their sight loss occurred and was diagnosed;
- Any other physical (e.g. movement difficulties), sensory (e.g. hearing loss) or learning needs the child/young person has;
- The past support (if any) that they and their family have received, including the details of any previous habilitation training;
- The support they currently have; who provides it; how it is funded;
- The frequency of training anticipated (daily, weekly, monthly etc.); its extent (term time only, in school holidays, daytime and evening, in school and out of school, from home to school and back, from school to college or university and back, from school to college or university and back from home to work or an apprenticeship and back);
- Where the training will occur (e.g. at home, in educational settings, in public places and the transitions between these settings);
- The liaison needed with other services and professionals in education, health and social care.



## 1. Who delivers habilitation training?

Two types of professionals are involved in providing habilitation training and support. They work with parents who are viewed as the child's first 'habilitation specialists' and who know their child best. The two types of habilitation workers are the Habilitation Specialist and the Habilitation Assistant:

- **A Habilitation Specialist (HS)** will observe, assess, plan, implement, train, review and monitor a child or young person's habilitation programme. The HS does all the teaching of practical habilitation skills and strategies (from body and spatial awareness to long cane use) and independent living skills (for example cooking, bus travel and purchasing goods).

A Habilitation Specialist may work with:

- **A Habilitation Assistant (HA)** whose work is directly supervised by the HS. Their role is to support individual children and young people to practise their habilitation skills and strategies. They do this inside and outside of school and other educational settings. They also contribute to the monitoring of habilitation progress.

Habilitation Specialists and Assistants can be based in education, health, social service or voluntary organisation settings.

N.B. it should be noted that job titles for those delivering habilitation training vary between local authorities, and include (but are not limited to), Mobility and Independence Specialist, Paediatric Mobility Instructor and Rehabilitation Worker:

## 2. How are habilitation needs assessed?

The HS in the habilitation service:

- Finds out about the child/young person's initial clinical diagnosis of visual (and other) needs;

- Gathers further information about the child/young person's needs by watching them in a variety of settings and activities (at home, around school, and outside of school).

The HS uses their observations (and some practical vision assessment activities) to assess:

- What the child/young person's available vision is (e.g. the amount they can see (their 'field of view'), how accurately they can see (their visual acuity), how well they can see the edges of objects (contrast), colours, and where things are around them (their spatial awareness));
- How the child/young person uses their available vision for everyday activities (e.g. when eating, drinking, moving and playing).

The HS carries out these observations alongside parents and a qualified teacher of the visually impaired (QTVI). Their findings may be added to by talking to other professionals such as paediatricians, physiotherapists, teachers or learning support assistants.

## 3. Who decides the goals of the habilitation training?

The HS holds discussions with the child/young person, parents and other key professionals, in order to identify:

- What skills and strategies the child/young person wants to develop;
- What skills and strategies the family want the young person to develop to maximise their independence at home, in the surrounding area and outside of school.
- What school staff and parents identify is needed for the educational setting the child/young person is currently in. This could include getting to school, moving around and being at school, and getting home from school.

- If the child is changing schools (making a 'transition') this is also discussed and planned for.

Once it is clear and agreed what the goals of habilitation training will be for a particular child/young person, the details of the actual training are planned and put into action.

## What does practical habilitation training involve?

First, the desired independence skills in the three key areas of habilitation are worked out:

**Moving around safely and purposefully (mobility).** This can include the development of early movement, motor skills, body awareness and can later involve using sighted guide help, walking safely indoors and outdoors, and using a long cane if appropriate.

**Navigating to where a child wants and needs to be (orientation).** These skills involve learning how to use clues and cues in the environment to help them find where they are, how to listen and use sound to navigate (e.g. echolocation), using the sound of road vehicles to understand their movements and speed, linking smells to particular places (e.g. the smell of bread to find a bakery), noticing pavement surfaces (e.g. the special bumped pavements around a road crossing), and using touch to identify objects around them on the pavement or goods in a shop.

**Daily living practical skills (independent living skills).** This covers a wide range of practical daily skills e.g. washing, eating, getting help from others if needed; getting money from a bank machine; shopping; finding toilets and traveling on public transport. Leisure activities such as sport clubs and social activities such as eating out in town are also included.

These identified habilitation skills are then linked to particular places where the skill training will be done. This may be at home, to and from school, at school and in public places such as the high street or shopping centre.

The HS then visits each training location and assesses their suitability for persons with visual needs (an 'environmental audit'). In the case of an educational setting, the HS will carry this out in conjunction with a QTVI and will be able to recommend any changes that might be needed to make the place more accessible.

Next the HS plans the habilitation activities, stage by stage in the place where they will be taught.

The HS carries out a risk assessment for each activity. This aims to reduce any risks to a minimum.

The habilitation training activity is then carried out with the child/young person. Out of school and at home, parents would expect to be involved with this work. This allows parents to see what is being done. They will then be able to help the child/young person practise their skills at home more effectively.

If the work is linked to school, a HA or learning support assistant may be involved along with the other nominated school staff. The aim will be to support the child/young person to practise their new habilitation skills on a daily basis around school.

The HS can provide habilitation training for school or other professionals supporting particular children or young people. This ensures consistency between home and school. It also makes sure that the child / young person receives the same advice and support from the different people they will work with.

Once a habilitation lesson has been finished, the HS gathers feedback from the child/young person and from any other adults involved in the session. This feedback will help.

the HS to plan the next session. Notes about the training session are recorded by the HS and shared with the family. Their feedback is noted and all the notes shared with other professionals as needed.

Risk assessments for the activity are re-assessed and updated as required. This risk management aims to keep the child/young person as safe as possible during habilitation activities.

The HS monitors the overall habilitation programme for the child/young person on a regular basis. The records of the habilitation work done to date feed into any statutory review or planning meetings that are needed.

## 5. What supports effective habilitation training?

The rate and pace of habilitation training and its likely effectiveness depends on a range of factors:

- The age and maturity of the child/young person;
- The nature and extent of the child/young person's visual (and other) needs;
- Whether the habilitation needs are still developing or have stabilised;
- An early start to habilitation training and advice for parents;
- The extent that children/young people are supported by their family to practise habilitation skills at home and out of school;
- The extent that they are supported to practise and use their skills at school (e.g. by a HA or learning support assistant);
- The cultural, social and religious expectations and motivation of the family and child/young person to become maximally independent;
- The consistency, regularity and enjoyment of their training by the child/young person;

- The regular and timely review of habilitation training goals and evaluation of progress by the HS, family and child/young person;
- Forward planning, particularly where transitions from one phase of schooling to another or from school to college, university, work or an apprenticeship are involved;
- Active use of feedback between the child/young person, the family and their HS (and other professionals as needed);
- The active involvement of the child/young person, parents and where needed, other professionals, in each stage of habilitation work;
- That habilitation training is delivered by qualified habilitation practitioners working to the Quality Standards for Habilitation;
- HSs and HAs are subject to the supervision and professional standards of their voluntary professional body, Habilitation VI UK  
[www.habilitationVIUK.org.uk](http://www.habilitationVIUK.org.uk)





The Guide Dogs charity supports children and young people with vision impairment and their families. Guide Dogs' children and young people's services include the full range of services previously provided by our sister organisation, Blind Children UK. We have now fully combined the two charities under the Guide Dogs name.

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