

Parties and Playdates

Including a child with vision impairment in social activities.

R N I B

See differently



Parties and Playdates

Do you have a child with vision impairment (VI) and need some new ideas? Does your child have a friend with vision impairment that they want to invite to play?

Playing and socialising is an important part of the development of every child. Making and sustaining friendships is central to this and enables a child to shape lasting and important attitudes to life and learning from an early age.

By playing with friends children learn empathy, negotiation and listening skills. Being involved in group activities can help a child learn how to be kind, confident and respectful of others, working collaboratively, sharing ideas and resolving conflict. Other important skills – such as learning how to communicate thoughts and feelings effectively – are also developed when children are given the opportunity to play together.

"This year for my son's birthday I asked his friends to email me a message to make into a birthday book at the party. I printed them off on a braille embosser then, when they arrived, all of his friends and family gave him a page with their messages on it."

Watching your child negotiate their way through friendships can be one of the most rewarding – and toughest! – aspects of parenthood. We all want our children to be able to make and keep friends and one way to support them in doing this is by creating opportunities for them to socialise outside of school.

Whether you are preparing to host a party for your own child or looking for advice about including a child with vision impairment in a social activity such as a birthday party or playdate, we hope that this guide will give you the inspiration you need to help all your guests enjoy a fun-filled day!

"I remember the parties my Mum organised for me. My favourite one was at the local swimming pool. Mum invited a few of my friends and we had a great time splashing around together."



Parties and playdates at home

If you're inviting a group of children to play in your home, you'll need a plan! Here are some ideas for games and activities to keep everyone entertained.

Crafts

Children learn through play but they learn best through the kind of play that allows them to explore and experiment. Messy play allows children to discover what different objects and materials feel, smell and look like. It also takes the emphasis away from being 'good' at something. There's no right or wrong with messy art and crafts; it's just about having a go and letting the imagination run wild.

These are some points to consider when including a child with vision impairment in messy play activities:

- Choose the **colours** of your materials carefully and try to introduce **contrast** so that a child with vision impairment can pick out individual items. For example, choose bright coloured buttons and place them against a black background and avoid pastel shades on light coloured backgrounds when picking paints and other arts materials.
- Introduce elements that appeal to different **senses**, such as bells, rice or pasta for sound or materials with a tactile quality. If a child is unable to distinguish colour, adding different textures to objects will help them identify and sort them. Scented materials also add an extra dimension for a child to explore.

- Using materials that are **edible** not only adds a further sensory element to play but also makes activities safe for children who can't resist putting things into their mouth. Use dried pasta or cereal instead of buttons and beads in collages and food colouring, chocolate spread or jam for painting activities – yes, it'll be messy but that just makes it more fun!
- Remember that messy doesn't have to mean wet. Some children may be in the process of becoming comfortable with wet or sticky materials and may enjoy dry textures first.
- If you're planning an activity that will involve direct contact with different materials, don't forget to check for allergies.



Messy fun

Most craft activities can be easily adapted to suit children with vision impairment and specialist resources are not always necessary. With a little imagination, there are simple, accessible alternatives anywhere. Here are a couple of ideas to get you started:

Spaghetti string activity

With younger children, the fun of playing with rainbow spaghetti can be entertainment enough. For an added challenge, you might want to encourage them to make pictures or collages and introduce a variety of pasta shapes into the mix.

- Cook several packets of spaghetti according to the instructions and place into a large bowl.
- Add a few drops of cooking oil (just enough to coat the spaghetti). This will prevent it from sticking together in clumps.
- Divide the spaghetti into separate containers and add a few drops of different food colouring to each one. Mix well.
- Let the spaghetti dry (an hour or so should do it).
- Lay out a large white sheet or plastic tablecloth and let the fun begin!

Jewellery making and collaging

Not just for girls! Matching and sorting beads is a great activity which encourages numeracy skills in all children as well as helping with the development of fine motor skills. Threading brightly coloured beads onto string fosters creativity and is an easy, fun activity that most children enjoy.

If making necklaces doesn't appeal, why not try collages instead? Small canvas panels are a great base from which to create a permanent piece of art work. They are relatively inexpensive and the distinct edges give a child with vision impairment a clearly defined area to work within.



Dough modelling

Home-made dough is a simple, cheap alternative to using branded materials. Either prepare the dough in advance or make it together as part of the activity.

Lorraine Muldoon, Specialist Enabler (Inclusion) at Eureka! The National Children's Museum, recommends this recipe:

No cook play dough

First, combine these dry ingredients:

- 2 cups plain flour
- ½ cup salt
- 1 tablespoon cream of tartar

Then add:

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- Food colouring
- Few drops glycerine (optional but gives a lovely shine and stretch)

Slowly add 1 – 1½ cups of boiling water until the dough comes together (how much depends on how 'wet' the other ingredients were i.e. food colouring and glycerine)

Make your playdough 'sensory' by adding scent or texture:

- substitute the vegetable oil for baby oil or coconut oil
- add kitchen herbs or spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg or allspice
- add natural extracts such as almond, vanilla or peppermint
- substitute a tablespoon of flour for custard or cocoa powder
- use essential oils if there's a fragrance you like (these can be very strong so add just a little)
- add oats, rice, rock salt and lentils for texture
- use textured rolling pins alongside your usual cutters and rollers.



Party games

Depending on the amount of vision a child has – and crucially, how they use that vision – they should be able to join in most of the same activities as their sighted friends. Games such as musical chairs that rely heavily on vision and the ability to negotiate crowded spaces quickly might be more challenging for a child with very limited vision but some parents have told us that they manage this by asking all participants to wear blindfolds.

Before the start of any game, clearly explain the rules and what will happen at different stages of play. Make sure that a child with vision impairment knows who is there, when the activity is about to start and when it has finished.

“We do parties with VI and sighted kids all mixed together and they’re always a lot of fun for everyone. Playing musical chairs or pinata blindfolded creates a glimpse into his world for the other kids.”



Pin the tail on the donkey

A popular party favourite and a great example of a game where sight doesn't give you an advantage. Ideally all participants – including any children with vision impairment – will wear the mask or blindfold so that everyone's experience is the same, but do be mindful of explaining what you are doing so that the child can be prepared for the touch of the material on their face.

Pass the parcel

Another great activity for children with vision impairment because of its reliance on sound and tactile information. Pass the parcel also lends itself well to peer support, as children are usually very willing to help their friends unwrap the layers!

Feely/comparing bag

A simple activity but, with a bit of imagination, this can be a lot of fun for younger children. Take a fabric bag or box and put a different item in it each time, for example an orange, cotton wool, shoelace or hairbrush. Ask the children to put their hand in the bag or box and, using touch alone, guess what it is.

A variation on this game is to give each child a bag containing a selection of smaller items (household objects, such as pegs, washers, bolts and buttons work well but you can vary these according to any 'theme' you've adopted). Sit the children around a table, or in a circle on the floor, and ask them to find matching items from other children's bags. This is the perfect tactile find-and-match game that younger children particularly will enjoy.

Taking the party outside

Whether hosting a birthday party or entertaining a friend on a playdate, fresh air and open space can add a whole new element to the fun. Outdoor play is important for all children and the garden environment not only encourages different types of play but also makes it easier to tidy up once everyone goes home!

Garden games:

Art attackers

Either place a large piece of paper in the bottom of an empty paddling pool, add some paint and a tennis ball and see what kind of art the children can create by tilting the pool back and forth. Try adding a tactile element such as sand to your paint.

Or, if you want them to get really 'hands-on' with the artwork, spread out an old white bedsheet next to a paddling pool containing paint, get the children to dip their hands and feet in then stand back as they create their masterpiece (old clothes are definitely recommended for this activity!)

Music makers

Collect as many old pots, pans, baking trays and other assorted objects that you can get hold of, spread them out across the floor or hang them from a fence, and make a 'music wall' in your garden. Give children a wooden spoon and let them make their own music.

Bubble bursters

If you'd prefer to keep your paddling pool paint-free, then why not fill it with foam or bubbles instead? Add a selection of toys and turn your garden into a giant car wash. Chasing and bursting bubbles will keep children entertained for as long as the bubble solution lasts.

For more information about the benefits of outdoor play and ideas for games to enjoy in the garden, download our Messy and Muddy guide: rnib.org.uk/messy



Themes

Depending on the age and preference of your child, you might want to consider giving your party a theme. The choices for this are endless and a quick internet search will provide you with plenty of inspiration should you need it. If your child plays a sport or has a hobby, then a party themed around this can be great fun as well as a positive way to share their passion and demonstrate their abilities to other children and parents. Talk to your child about their interests and those of their friends and see whether you can come up with a plan for a party that everyone can enjoy.

Harry Potter themed party

- Create your own tactile wand with twigs, ribbons and other decorations.
- Pin the scar on Harry. Make the scar tactile using different materials and be sure to cut it out as a zig-zag so children can feel the shape of it.
- Themed prizes, such as owl soft toys, jumping frogs, mini magic sets, chocolate (Gringotts) coins.
- Sensory potions making.
- Props booth for dressing up/photographs
- Butterbeer (lots of different recipes available online)

'Hunt the Golden Snitch'

A variation on the audible Easter egg hunt! You can use fillable plastic eggs or balls (paint them gold or wrap in gold foil) which you fill with goodies. Hide them around the house or garden. A beeping device, like those used in key trackers, can be placed inside one ball to help a child with vision impairment find the Snitch. It is probably a good idea to let children take turns at this rather than all play at once: when it is the turn of a child with vision impairment, they can locate their own Snitch by following the sound of the beeper.

An alternative way of playing this game is to attach each Snitch to a brightly coloured balloon using a length of ribbon and place them at different points around the room or garden. Clear away any trip hazards, cover each child's eyes and let them find the Snitch by locating a balloon and collecting the treasure at the end of the string.

"We entered the party through a painted material wall. I made a sorting hat and the party bags had chocolate frogs in."



Food and drink

Whatever the occasion, providing fuel to keep your guests going will always be important so, once you've accounted for any dietary needs or allergies, you might want to consider some of the following when catering for a child with vision impairment:

- Finding and helping themselves to food can be challenging for many children. If you're setting the table, a plain tablecloth may be an easier option as one with a pattern can make it more difficult to distinguish plates, cups and other items.
- Another option to help children with low vision at mealtime is to give out individual snack boxes. Having all their party food in one handy container minimises the need for a child to negotiate their way round the table and is something that many children will delight in: why not, as part of the fun, let children decorate their own box ready for filling?
- When offering drinks, juice boxes or cups with lids work well. To help a child locate their drink safely, explain where it is in relation to their plate or snack box. Spills and mess are to be expected at parties so try not to worry too much if accidents do happen.
- Some children may not like touching food of a particular texture and so it's always important to consider this when planning party treats. If your child isn't a fan of sticky cake or icing, then one alternative might be to offer

cookies decorated with Smarties or M&Ms instead. If your child is a braille reader, why not use these to form letters so that each child receives an individualised cookie with their initial in braille?



Party Bags

After the fun of a party, the one thing that makes going home bearable is having a well-packed party bag to rummage through on the journey! Try to choose contents that are bright, noisy and have good tactile quality. Here are some fun ideas to consider:

- Instead of standard pens, pencils and stationery, why not offer scented versions of these popular items? Some manufacturers now sell a wide range of scented items including key rings, notebooks, pencil cases and more.
- Avoid plastic models or toys that come with instructions written in small print, but anything with tactile appeal is great: squeazy, squishy toys (especially scented versions), slime and fidget cubes are all still popular and appeal to most children.
- Musical or sound toys are ideal: fill the bag with whistles, party blowers and anything that makes a noise.

"My mum always made a big effort with party bags, filling them with lots of stuff like scented lip balms and pens."



Parties and playdates away from home

Cinema

Most children look forward to a visit to the cinema and, providing you can agree on something that everyone will enjoy, watching a movie together can be the ideal starting point for a party or playdate.

Audio description

Audio description (AD) is additional commentary that explains what's happening on screen. AD describes body language, expressions and movements, making the film clear through sound. Many cinemas – particularly the larger chains – are now AD ready. Check when you are booking for audio described performances so that, if they want to, a child with vision impairment can enjoy more of the film than just the dialogue. Audio description is usually provided through a headset which the cinema will provide free of charge but it's worth checking beforehand; first, that the child wants to use this and, secondly, that the equipment will be available to use when you go. Often, a child will not like to feel like they are the only one using specialist equipment so, if the cinema has enough headsets, why not encourage the whole group to try out audio description?

Lighting

Even if a child has relatively good vision for everyday activities, the low lighting in cinemas might mean they need a bit of extra support. Take into account how the child uses their vision when choosing seats - it may be that they will see better on one side of the cinema than the other, for example

– but aim to stay close to the exits so that you don't have to walk too far in the dark to find your seat (and so that any trips to the toilet during the performance are kept as simple as possible.) Minimise the number of obstacles that a child will have to negotiate, such as stairs or other people on their row, and encourage them to use any mobility aids they have, like a cane, to find their way around the cinema. It's always nice to have a buddy on hand to support or guide them and you'll often find that other children are very willing to take on this role for their friends.

When it's all a bit loud.

A trip to the cinema is guaranteed to expose children to a range of sensory experiences; the impact of the big screen, the different smells and tastes from the food outlets and the often ear-splitting surround sound! Some children find the cinema environment overwhelming and it's worth remembering that, for a child with vision impairment, this sensory overload might be something that they need help to manage. Noise reducing headphones can make children with additional needs feel more comfortable. It's also worth checking with your local cinema whether they have relaxed performances where the lighting is left on and the sound turned down.

Parent/carer discounts

Ask when booking, but many cinemas offer reduced price tickets for parents or carers accompanying someone with additional needs. For more information visit: ceacard.co.uk



Bowling

Bowling is a fun, energetic activity that suits a range of ages and abilities. It comes with built-in adaptations in the form of ramps (that a child can use to help roll the ball) and bumpers (barriers that come up and down to stop the ball going into the gulley at the side of the lane). Once you've figured out how to set up the scoring system it's a game that everyone can join in. Bowling is a good activity to try with a child with vision impairment: even someone with very limited vision will enjoy the satisfying sound their ball makes when it hits the pins – particularly if they all fall down! There are a few adjustments you may want to make to ensure that a child with vision impairment is able to participate safely and fully.

Lighting

Bowling alleys are often dimly lit, with the focus of the lighting being on the target at the end of the lanes. This can make it tricky for a child with vision impairment to find their way around. Speak to the bowling centre staff to find out whether they can leave the lighting on for your lane whilst you play.



Steps, level changes and obstacles

Most bowling alleys have arcade games, pool tables and other fun distractions for children to entertain themselves with whilst waiting for their turn, making for a busy, obstacle – filled setting. There are often different levels to negotiate whilst bowling, including a step up to reach the lane. Although mobility aids are invaluable in helping children move around independently, some might be more of a hindrance here as a child's cane hand is also likely to be the one they want to use for bowling! When you first arrive, support a child with vision impairment to get their bearings, walking through the different areas and helping them get used to level and surface changes. Lane surfaces are often quite slippery so ensure they feel comfortable enough to negotiate this area safely.

Trapped fingers

The ball return presents a hazard for any child and a quick briefing to warn all players not to put their hands in or try to collect a ball until it has stopped moving will save everyone the discomfort of bruised fingers. Encourage a child with vision impairment to listen out for the rumbling sound that indicates a ball is on its way back, followed by the noise it makes once it hits its stopping point.

Noise

As with all public spaces, a bowling alley will be filled with noise and this can be quite disorientating for a child with limited vision. Take some time to ensure the child is comfortable, understands the rules of the game and knows when it is their turn to play. Bowling is a lovely social activity and lends itself brilliantly to 'buddying up' – encourage all players to support each other and make sure that everyone's efforts are celebrated.



Other play/party venues

There are many different places you can take children, whether for a playdate or the full party package. Using a hired venue takes the pressure off parents to cater (and clear up after!) a party but they can be quite costly and not all might be suited to the needs of a child with vision impairment.

Soft play centres are usually bright, colourful and, given the nature of the environment, adapted to soften the impact of trips and falls. They do, however, contain many obstacles that some children might find challenging and the noise levels are guaranteed to be high – again, something to consider for a child with vision impairment.

If you are planning a soft play party or playdate, check with the centre first whether adults are allowed on the equipment or whether they offer sessions for children with additional needs. It is worth visiting a venue before booking to discuss any specific support needs of a child and whether the facilities are suitable for your group.

More and more places are now offering party packages so, if your child has a particular interest it's always worth looking into whether or not there is the option to incorporate a party experience into this. Whether it's pizza-making, a football party or a trip to the local museum, a few simple questions will help you establish whether a child with vision impairment is going to be able to fully participate in the fun.

Getting the right information

Here are some points to start with:

- Has the venue/staff had experience of working with children with vision impairment previously? Has anyone had visual awareness training? (RNIB can support organisations wishing to undertake this.)
- What staff support will be available on the day? What will their specific role be?
- Can parents/carers participate in the session if a child needs their support (and will there be an additional charge for this)?
- Can you visit the venue in advance to look around and discuss your requirements with someone?
- Talk to them about your child's vision impairment and explain their individual needs. You will often find that venues are happy to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate different groups and have a legal obligation under the Equality Act to do so. A venue should welcome your advice on how to go about this to ensure your child has the best possible experience with them.

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)



Starting from scratch: when your sighted child wants to invite their friend with vision impairment to play

If your child has a friend or classmate with a vision impairment that they would love to invite to a party or playdate then here are some simple tips to make sure everyone is included in the fun.

"Some of my friends' parents didn't know what my vision was like so party activities weren't always brilliant for me. I was a confident kid and enjoyed the social side so I just had a go anyway."

Asking the right questions

Every child is different. Finding out a little bit more about your guests might help them – and you – feel confident that their needs are being met when they come to play. A good first step is to talk to your own child; their experiences of playing and interacting with their friend will be invaluable in giving you an idea of what they like, dislike, what they can do independently and when they may need a bit of support.

School staff are another good source of information but do respect their need to maintain confidentiality as they may not be comfortable to speak to you without the consent of the child's parent or carer. A good idea is to focus your questions on the activities rather than the child: Can they go on the trampoline? Will they need someone to guide them in the cinema? How can I adapt activities so that they can join in on an equal basis to their friends?

Talking to another parent about their child's disability does, of course, need to be handled sensitively but you will probably find that most parents of children with vision impairment are happy to answer questions about their child's vision and how they use it. Remember that a child with vision impairment is a child first and their parents will be keen to ensure that they are allowed the same opportunities to play and socialise as their sighted friends.

"My boys are 5 and this was their first party. They invited all sighted peers. I'm hoping they still want friends to come over for their birthday at 10."



Don't be afraid to ask questions that relate specifically to a child's ability to see in different situations. There is often a misconception that being registered blind means a person cannot see anything but most blind people have some useful vision, even if this is just the ability to distinguish light and shade. Children are taught how to use any vision they have and to use technology and other aids to enable them to be independent.

In the same way that all children are different, so are all parents and their willingness to have an open conversation with you about their child's vision impairment may vary. Try to maintain a positive tone and focus on what the child can do and what they enjoy. It's ok to use words that relate specifically to sight so don't worry too much about saying the wrong thing or finding alternative ways to ask everyday questions, e.g. "Will he enjoy watching this film?"



Top tips

Invitations and thank you cards

If you are making your own party invitations or thank you cards, then adapting one so that a child with vision impairment can read it will make their day! Speak to the parent or carer (school might be able to help with this too) to find out the child's preferred reading format.

Some children read enlarged print, whilst others may see text best if certain colours are used. If a child is a braille reader, there are some different options to try. Often a child who is learning braille will be supported by a teaching assistant who can read and write in this format and they might be willing to help. If this help isn't available, then why not make a tactile invitation: use puffy paint, Wikki Stix, pipe cleaners or similar to create a tactile picture for the child to explore. The details of the party can still be included in standard text for the child's parent to share.

Sometimes the small details can make a big difference and making a party invitation accessible shows a child with vision impairment that you really want them to feel included.

"We had Adam's last birthday party at a local leisure centre – he had a great turn out and everyone had fun. One friend even ordered him a special birthday card that was written in braille!"

Adapting the home environment

Earlier we covered things to consider if you are taking children to the cinema, bowling or out and about in general but, if you are planning a party or playdate at your home, here are some simple ways to make a child with vision impairment feel welcome and stay safe while they are in your care:

Before guests arrive

Remember that children with vision impairment are used to moving around and negotiating new places and obstacles all the time. With the right support, time to become familiar and some easy health and safety considerations, everyone will be able to have fun.

Walk through the different areas of your home that the children are likely to have access to and consider:

- **Location and position of larger objects.** You will probably want to move furniture to clear space if you are planning party games anyway, so keeping areas open and obstacle free will be helpful for everyone. If you have heavy furniture that can't be moved, point this out and allow children time to work out their bearings around this.
- **Steps, level changes and access to different rooms.** Are there any specific points where a child with low vision might need to be guided or supported to move around freely and safely? Glass doors can be a hazard for all children so why not decorate with banners or bunting to minimise the risk of someone walking into them?

- **Lighting.** Some children may see well in certain conditions but are less comfortable in dimly lit or overly bright spaces. Check with parents beforehand and adjust lighting in different rooms as appropriate. Some children's vision takes time to adjust to changes in light level so don't rush if moving between indoor and outdoor spaces.
- **Toys and equipment.** See earlier sections for ideas of activities to try but make sure any toys or equipment children will be using are within easy reach and accessible to a child with limited vision. It might also be useful to have a plan for where you will store these before and after activities so that they don't present a trip hazard when not in use.
- **Doors.** Leave them fully open or fully closed, so that no one bumps into the edges.



First impressions

When a child arrives at your home for the first time, it might be useful to give them a quick tour of the different rooms and areas they will be playing in. Allow them, with support if needed, to explore rooms and work out where everything is. It is worth speaking to parents in advance to check how their child will manage toilet visits. Some children may not be comfortable around animals but a quick chat with their parents will help you decide whether to add your pets to the guestlist or find them somewhere quiet to sit out the celebrations.

If you move into a different space, the garden for example, allow some time for the child to orientate themselves within this new environment. Some children may just take a short time to adjust before they are happy to run off and play with friends whereas others may need a little longer. Be prepared to adapt play activities to the pace a child is comfortable with.

Playing with friends

Your own child will be used to playing with their friend and, if they attend the same school, hopefully, will have some understanding of vision impairment and ways to help them take part in activities. Here are some quick and easy tips for helping your guest to feel included:

- **Use names.** Once everyone has arrived, sit them round in a circle and ask people to say their own name out loud so that the child with vision impairment knows who is there and can start to recognise voices – adults should do this too. Turn this into a game by asking everyone to say their name followed by a fact: their favourite colour,

animal, hobby or similar. If your party has a theme, why not link it to this? For example, “My name is Bobby and my favourite Harry Potter character is Ron Weasley.” Each time you speak to an individual child, use their name first to make it clear who you are talking to and encourage other children to do this too.

- **Introduce a buddy system.** Children love to be helpful and having a trusted friend on hand if needed can be reassuring. It’s important to set clear guidelines for this, though, because too much attention and fuss might be unwelcome. Where an activity allows, encourage paired or group work so that a child with vision impairment can ask for support if they need it.
- **Keep instructions clear.** When explaining games and activities, avoid vague statements such as “over there”. Instead, use specific language such as “Bobby, the parcel will be passed to you by Amira who is sitting to your left” or “Holly, the pens are in a plastic box straight in front of you”.



Show and tell!

We would love to hear from you if you have more party and playdate ideas, or stories about what has worked well. Please contact cypf@rnib.org.uk so that we can share the fun.

Further information

RNIB provides a range of products, services and support for children, young people and families. Visit rnib.org.uk/children or telephone **0303 123 9999**.

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With thanks to the parents and young people who have contributed to this guide. Thanks also to Kate Casey, Miriam Evans and the Holton bakers for the braille cookies.

Useful Links

If you need further inspiration, visit: pathstoliteracy.org or wonderbaby.org

Or search 'Playful explorations for children with visual impairment' on Facebook.



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