

## Learning environment

### What is a learning environment?

The learning environment includes the people, places, objects and activities surrounding a child. Deafblind children get so little information from the environment that it is vital to make the information they do get as clear and relevant as possible.

### Social environment

Those working with the child should follow the [key approaches](#) of building trust, being consistent, helping understanding, taking time, following the child and being supportive.

### Physical environment

The physical environment should help the child in making the best possible use of their residual senses. There are general principles to follow, although not all will apply to every child:

- Provide a good level of even light, including in toilets and changing areas. Avoid sudden changes between bright and dim light, or give the child time to adjust.
- Use contrasting (light and dark) colours to distinguish differences - for example, doors from walls.
- Avoid glare from reflected light. Use curtains or blinds at windows, and matt rather than shiny surfaces.
- Avoid clutter. It distracts children trying to look at other things, and may be dangerous for mobile children.
- Patterns on clothes and busy wall displays can also be visually distracting.
- Don't move furniture around without telling children.
- People moving around unnecessarily are highly distracting.
- Avoid background noise as far as possible - it makes it much more difficult for children to use residual hearing.
- Deaden echoes with carpets and wallboard. Be aware that hearing aid wearers may suffer in noisy echoing spaces such as dining halls.
- Position furniture to make clear routes around the room. Avoid large open spaces without landmarks.
- Be aware of textures - on toys, to mark possessions and places, on walls and underfoot.
- Be aware of smells and air currents which may help children recognise places and activities.
- The environment can be adapted to provide clear mobility routes - both between settings and within much-used rooms.
- Big spaces are easy to get lost in. Arranging the furniture so that children can move from one solid object to another is often better.
- Landmarks are key points along a route that tell a child where s/he has got to. They may be accessed through touch (a corner of a wall, or the draught from an always-open door), sight (a picture), hearing (a string of bells fixed to a door) or smell (the photocopier room).
- Landmarks need to be safe (radiators, for example, may be too hot to touch comfortably). They also need to be consistently available (for example, the kitchen may only smell of cooking at certain times).
- Surfaces that children will trail their hands along need to be checked for safety and comfort - no staples sticking out of noticeboards, for example. Head-height obstacles, such as fire extinguishers, are particularly hazardous.

Think about the information the child receives from the environment during particular activities. What information is irrelevant or distracting? Could it be got rid of or minimised? What information is relevant and helpful? Could its quality be improved?

It may help to explore the environment wearing earplugs and a blindfold or goggles with sandpapered lenses. (Ask someone to watch you and keep you safe).

### Individual children

Individual children may need specific adaptations - for example, some children will see some colours more easily than others. Visual and hearing assessment results should give this information and help with the planning of strategies to encourage sensory development.

### Further information

The RNIB produce a factsheet on improving environments for people with visual and learning disabilities, improving environments for people with [visual and learning disabilities](#) (opens a new window).

An article from DbI Review describes the development and use of learning environments:

- '[Structuring the environment](#)' (opens a new window) by Anthony Best (Deafblind International Review July - December 1998)