

Children with vision impairment need more early years support if they are to have the same life chances as sighted peers, warn leading charities

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The RLSB (the Royal London Society for Blind People) and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) have launched a report which underlines the challenges facing children living with sight loss in the UK and highlights the need for greater intervention and support.

The report, 'Sight Impaired at Aged Seven', reveals worrying differences between children with sight loss and their sighted peers around happiness, success at school, financial hardship and social inclusion.

The findings show that sight loss can have a major impact on every aspect of a child's development and that without the right support many are at risk of being less confident, having fewer friends and under performing at school. However, the results also indicate that with the right kinds of early intervention, blind and partially sighted children can flourish.

The report comes at a time when many local authorities are having to reduce specialist educational support in response to public sector spending cuts. How this will impact on the life chances of children with vision impairment as they grow older is an ongoing concern.

Key facts to emerge from the report are:

- Parents told us that children with sight loss are twice as likely as fully sighted children to have emotional, concentration or behavioural difficulties
- Children with vision impairment and an additional disability are particularly at risk of poor emotional, social wellbeing and educational outcomes
- 50 per cent live in households with a weekly income below £300
- They are three times more likely to be rated by their teachers as reading at 'below' or 'well below average' level
- Teachers told us that fewer than 6 in 10 children with vision impairment had at least one good friend, compared with 8 in 10 children without vision impairment
- Both parents and teachers were more likely to report that children with vision impairment are bullied at school and twice as many children with vision impairment told us that they are bullied 'all of the time' at school.

Dr. Tom Pey, Chief Executive of the RLSB, said: "This report will alarm many, but it's a story that has gone untold for too long. We must put into sharp relief exactly how challenging the prospects are for so many young children living with sight loss. Progress has been made in improving many young lives, but this report demonstrates that we still haven't got it totally right.

"Experiences in your early years have a huge significance on the rest of your life, that is why RLSB will now put in place a firm plan of action for early years development which is detailed in our accompanying campaign document, 'The Untold Story'. We are also revolutionising our services in order to give these children a fighting chance to fulfill their ambitions."

Julie Jennings, Head of RNIB's Children, Young People and Families team, said: "This research builds on previous evidence that sight loss has a significant effect on early childhood development. What makes this study particularly powerful is that teachers, parents and the children themselves are all telling us the same thing.

"The report comes at a time when many local authorities are reducing specialist educational support services to blind and partially sighted children. This is of great concern as the results of the survey indicate that these children are more likely than other children to experience economic disadvantage, which in turn is linked to poor educational outcomes.

"Early intervention and ongoing support from specialist teachers and other professionals are key to

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reducing the risk of poor social, emotional and educational outcomes for children and young people with vision impairment and in helping them to reach their full potential."

Both RLSB and RNIB will continue to work alongside each other to improve the early experiences and development of children with vision impairment.

Ends

Notes to Editor

The report, 'Sight Impaired at Aged Seven' is a collaboration between RLSB, RNIB and NatGen Social Research and presents findings from a secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Survey, based on 357 blind and partially sighted seven year olds from a cohort of 14,000 children born in the year 2000.

About RLSB

The RLSB has been working with blind and visually impaired young people for the past 175 years. Following publication of the report, the charity will now increase its Early Years support with new Drop In nurseries and parent support and development classes, it will expand its social and peer groups, and roll out a new sports engagement programme. The RLSB is also calling for a fresh look at how support is given to visually impaired children and their families right from the very point of diagnosis.

About RNIB

RNIB's Children, Young People and Families team offers support to education professionals working with blind and partially sighted learners from birth to 25, including those with complex needs. We want to ensure children with vision impairment get the best possible start in life and go on to achieve their full potential.

- RNIB is already working in collaboration with Great Ormond Street Hospital and Fight for Sight to support a major national research project to learn more about the early development of babies and young children with vision impairment and how different methods of early intervention and care might best promote children's development
- RNIB has set up and is continuing to develop its emotional support service for children with vision impairment plus hosting networks of specialist teachers and other professionals
- RNIB will continue to providing resources to support specialist education support services that are under threat of cuts to provision and work with our regional campaigns officers to retain local authority education services for children with vision impairment. Our leaflet 'Protecting Specialist Services for Children with Visual Impairment' aimed at local authority officers sets out why it is so important to maintain specialist services and the legal implications of reducing provision.

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