

Short-Term Programs

A Vital Component
for Students who are
Blind or Visually Impaired



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Introduction

Children who are blind or visually impaired have the same need for intellectual stimulation, social acceptance, emotional support, and physical activity as do all children in our society. Therefore, the outcomes of education which are identified for all children enrolled in our schools will be appropriate for children with visual impairments. In addition to these outcomes, children who are blind and visually impaired have unique learning needs associated with skills required to accommodate or compensate for the effect of vision loss on learning and development. The extent to which individuals with visual impairments are empowered to assume meaningful roles in our society relates directly to the success with which their unique educational needs are identified and addressed. While the individual needs of a given child will be specific to that child and the particular environment, there are universally recognized program needs for students who are blind or visually impaired. This array of disability specific skills is known as the “Expanded Core Curriculum” for students who are blind or visually impaired and includes compensatory or functional academic skills, including communication modes; orientation and mobility; social interaction skills; independent living skills; recreation and leisure skills; career education; use of assistive technology; and visual efficiency skills. At specific times during their educational careers, students will need intensive and specific instruction to acquire disability-specific skills in a timely manner. In this document, access to short-term programs will be presented as an essential component to support the inclusion of children who are blind or visually impaired in home, school, and community activities.

Expectations for Children and Youth who are Visually Impaired

Students identified as blind or visually impaired should leave school having fulfilled all of the graduation requirements of their local school districts. With appropriate strategies, adaptations, support, special and general education services, and, if necessary, additional learning time, they can be meaningfully involved in the educational process. In addition to the standard curriculum or Core Curriculum, students with visual impairments have many unique educational needs that vary according to their individual characteristics. The lack of vision creates profound challenges to learning that may be summarized as follows:

- the need to learn through alternative mediums such as touch and sound;
- the need for specialized skills and equipment for learning through alternative sensory modalities;
- the need for direct instruction of skills which others learn incidentally through observation and modeling;
- the need for individualized instruction when group instruction for teaching/learning specialized skills may not be meaningful or appropriate; and
- the need for instruction in the Expanded Core Curriculum as previously outlined.

What is a Short-Term Program?

A short-term program has a detailed, specific curriculum designed to provide the student with specific skills in a designated time period. Programs vary in length and focus from one week to five months. In contrast to a residential placement provided as an alternative to a public school placement, a short-term program is intended to address only very specific learning needs to support inclusion in the public school program.

Short-term programs are essential because:

1. Needs associated with disability specific skills can be addressed in a timely manner (e.g., two-week program to learn voice access technology).
2. The stress of the multiple demands experienced by students in the inclusive school setting are temporarily removed.
3. Students have an opportunity to have peer role models, socialize, and discuss common issues with those who share similar experiences. This has a significant influence upon the development of high self-esteem.
4. Students have an opportunity to develop social networks which provide a source of support during their school years. Short-term programs provide an environment where having a visual impairment becomes secondary to social and intellectual development.
5. Some students who are blind or visually impaired reach a point in their school careers when curricular demands become too great to keep pace with their peers who are sighted. Gaps in learning develop as the student attempts to master all the disability-specific skills in addition to the standard academic curriculum.
6. Most students who are blind or visually impaired must work much harder than their peers who are sighted to keep pace with the rate of instruction provided in the regular classroom. Typically they spend twice the amount of time on completion of homework and assignments. Short-term programs provide an opportunity to master specific skills in a timely manner thereby supporting the probability of success in the classroom.
7. Short-term programs can address the needs of several students at the same time for very specific needs requiring specific instructional expertise (e.g., use of a refreshable braille device) while also providing an opportunity for students to learn from one another.
8. Short-term programs provide parents with exposure to an array of specialists and programs which focus on the education of children who are blind or visually impaired, thereby increasing their knowledge and insight into the needs of their child.

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9. Short-term programs provide parents and school based teams with an opportunity to learn about disability-specific needs of children who are blind or visually impaired and to begin to plan for the successful transition to adulthood.
 10. Short-term programs provide an opportunity for parent coaching, exposure to role models, and access to expertise. This encourages parents to implement programs in the home as well as to become more actively involved in the local school individualized education planning process.
 11. Short-term programs provide information to assist parents and school based teams with problem solving and program planning for students who are blind or visually impaired.
 12. Short-term programs in Atlantic Canada have two additional advantages. First, given our small population and limited access to instructional expertise in specialist areas such as assistive technology, or the Nemeth Code for higher level mathematics, short-term programs enroll a critical number of children with similar needs allowing for an efficient approach to specialty instruction. Second, APSEA Centre staff can maintain a core of expertise in unique specialized areas of instruction for students who are blind or visually impaired which are more difficult to access in home communities (e.g., recreation and leisure activities, use of assistive technology).

Summary

The most appropriate and enabling educational environment for students who are blind or visually impaired must be based on the individual needs of the student as determined through the educational team process. A student's need for specialized instruction will require various educational programs during his or her school years. An array of services from a combination of program options are necessary. One component of this array alone is not likely to meet all needs of a student throughout his or her school career. Short-term programs are a vital component to meeting the needs of students who are blind or visually impaired in Atlantic Canada.

1–5 MONTH PROGRAMS

Short-term programs are designed to meet individual student program needs which may be difficult to incorporate in the classroom. Since school terms vary from province to province, the length of short-term programs is flexible to accommodate these differences. High school credits may be earned in some subject areas by working collaboratively with teachers in the student's home school (e.g., English, math). Students may also receive high school credits at the APSEA Centre which can be transferred to the home school. *School based teams and parents must make a commitment to play an active role by attending one or more days during the program.* This will promote successful transition back to the public school classroom. The following short-term programs have been designed to respond to identified student needs in Atlantic Canada:

- Compensatory Skills
- Cooperative Education
- Extended Vocational Assessment
- Independent Living
- Transition Year
- Programming for Students with Multiple Disabilities
- Adjustment to Newly Acquired Vision Loss

Compensatory Skills

- *Elementary students grades 1–6*
Junior high/middle school students grades 6–9
High school students grades 9–12
- *3–4 students required*
- *Program length may vary*

The programs to teach and reinforce compensatory skills are intended to focus on the expanded core curricular needs of students who are blind or visually impaired. These skills are sometimes difficult to address in an inclusive setting where the focus of instruction is on academic programs. Yet, without these skills, students who are blind or visually impaired may have difficulty participating in activities in their schools and communities, being accepted by peers, and realizing career and employment goals.

Students enrolled in this program will have specific goals and objectives designed to address their identified needs relevant to compensatory skills. The mathematics and language arts/English programs they have been following in their local schools are continued while they are participating in short-term programs. For junior, middle and high school students, credits may be earned in such areas as technology education, home and personal management, physical education, orientation and mobility, braille, and computer science in consultation with the students' local schools.

Instruction in the following areas may be included in a student's program:

- braille literacy
- reading efficiency skills for print readers with low vision
- orientation and mobility
- organizational and study skills
- concept development
- coping strategies
- interpersonal communication skills
- listening skills

- efficient use of adaptive aids such as low vision aids, abaci, talking calculators, measuring devices, etc.
- assistive technology designed for those who are blind or visually impaired
- independent living skills
- recreation and leisure skills
- development of high self-esteem
- social skills
- peer interaction
- physical education
- braille music
- career awareness and exploration
- cooperative learning skills
- mathematics
- counselling

To ensure the student's needs are addressed during the short-term program, it is important to document the specific objectives for each student well in advance of the placement. This requires open communication among the student's parents, school team, and APSEA staff. *Onsite visits by school based teams and parents are vital to the transition process back to the public school classroom.*

Cooperative Education

- *High school students grades 9–12*
- *3–4 students required*
- *3–5 month program*

This program is intended to provide experiential learning opportunities for high school-age students in partnership with employers and teachers. Their program at the APSEA Centre includes math and language arts based on their local school program. Career exploration and experiences are tailored to individual needs, abilities, and plans for initial career entry. The priority of the cooperative education program is community job experiences with job site analysis, support, and adaptations necessary to allow the student to develop realistic career objectives. Career education classes emphasize independence and the development of socially mature attitudes toward employment, employee requirements and responsibilities. The program is designed to provide personal exploration of a variety of career options and objectives, including labour market projections for careers under consideration. *School based teams and parents must make a commitment to play an active role by attending one or more days during the program.* This will promote successful transition back to the public school classroom.

Supported Work Skills

- *High school students with additional disabilities*
- *3–4 students required*
- *3–5 month program*

This program is intended for students who have a sensory loss (vision, hearing, or a combination of both) and have limited functional academic skills (e.g., grade 1-2 reading level), requiring small group, or one to one instruction. The aim of this program is to help students explore and develop career skills, responsibility, and independence through career exploration and supported on-the-job experience. The program provides basic skills training, both in the classroom setting and on job sites at the APSEA Centre and/or in the community. The focus is on identification of students' abilities, interests, and career options. *Collaboration with parents, local school staff, and community agencies is maintained to provide recommendations for future school programming and/or further training.* Instruction may be provided in the following areas:

- functional academic skills
- career awareness and preparation
- prevocational skills
- independent living skills
- orientation and mobility skills
- social skills
- physical education
- recreation and leisure skills
- listening skills
- training with adaptive equipment and/or assistive technology

Independent Living

- *High school students*
- *1–4 students required*
- *Program length may vary*

Some students may have had a limited opportunity to master independent living skills while enrolled in public school. As they approach the time for graduation, they realize they have not mastered basic skills required for independent living outside their home community. Their plans for post-secondary training may be jeopardized because they are fearful of leaving home without such skills. This program is designed to provide an opportunity for participants to live independently in an apartment/residential setting while receiving instruction essential to such independence. *The request must be supported by school based teams and parents.* Onsite visits by school teams are encouraged.

Instruction may be provided in the following areas:

- personal hygiene
- clothing maintenance
- home-making skills
- meal preparation
- budgeting for independent living
- managing personal finances
- independent living skills
- social skills
- organizational skills
- orientation and mobility
- recreation and leisure skills
- time management
- career awareness
- assistive technology

As the student’s program nears completion, an APSEA staff member may visit the post-secondary program (i.e., university, community college) to assist the student in making the transition to this new environment. Progress is monitored during the student’s first few months to assist in addressing any problems which might arise. *School based teams and parents must make a commitment to play an active role by attending one or more days during the program.* This will promote successful transition back to the public school classroom.

Preschool Transition

- *4–5 years of age*
- *Children preparing for school entry*
- *2–4 students required*
- *Program length may vary*

To ensure assessment and programming arrangements are made well in advance of the child's September entry into the regular classroom, children beginning school in the fall may attend a short-term program at the APSEA Centre during the spring prior to school entry. The focus of this program is to identify the child's learning style, initiate formal instruction in required compensatory skills, practice skills associated with successful adjustment in a regular classroom, and identify and order all necessary materials and equipment for September. Programming is designed to address both the learning needs of the child and programming and training needs of the home school staff. *The child's future school principal, classroom teacher, itinerant teacher for the visually impaired, provincial preschool consultant, parents, and teacher assistant (if applicable), participate in the transition planning process, visit the APSEA Centre to observe instructional approaches being developed, and participate in program planning meetings.* The provincial preschool consultant monitors the child's transition until December of the primary/kindergarten year.

Junior High/Middle/High School Transition

- *Students from 12 to 21 years of age*
- *1–4 students required*
- *3–5 month program*

Since students who are blind or visually impaired frequently struggle to access much of the visual information available, they may have difficulty keeping pace with their peers in a regular class placement. In this program, assessment of gaps in the student’s learning and comprehension guide instruction. As well, there is focus on remedial instruction and upgrading skills. Each student has an individualized education plan designed to address her/his specific learning strengths and needs.

Programming may be provided in the following areas:

- remedial reading and writing skills
- mathematics
- listening skills
- independent living skills
- orientation and mobility
- instruction in identified subject areas where past progress has been limited
- physical education
- recreation and leisure skills
- social skills
- organizational and study skills
- self-esteem
- efficient use of adaptive aids and technology

To ensure the student’s needs are addressed during the program, it is important to document the specific objectives for students well in advance of the placement. This requires open communication among the student’s parents, local educators, and APSEA staff. *School based teams and parents must make a commitment to play an active role by attending one or more days during the program.* This will promote successful transition back to the public school classroom.

Programs for Students with Multiple Disabilities

- *Students with visual impairments and additional disabilities*
- *1–4 students required*
- *Program length may vary*

This program is designed to identify special program needs of students with multiple disabilities in addition to visual impairment and to teach new skills which will improve their level of involvement in their public school programs. Specific needs identified in advance of the student's placement are a focus of this short-term program (e.g., communication difficulties, disruptive sleeping patterns). *School based teams and parents must make a commitment to play an active role by attending one or more days during the program.* This will promote successful transition back to the public school classroom.

A variety of programs and services are incorporated to address the specific learning needs of each student. They may include the following:

- independent living skills
- physiotherapy
- communication skills
- concept development
- sensory-motor development
- occupational therapy
- recreation and leisure skills
- music therapy
- orientation and mobility
- play skills
- social skills
- behaviour management

Adjustment to Newly Acquired Vision Loss

This program is intended to assist students who have experienced a recent or significant change in their visual abilities. Students learn to make adjustments to this significant change in their lives. The program is individualized, varying in length depending upon the specific circumstances of the student. *School based teams and parents must make a commitment to play an active role by attending one or more days during the program.* This will promote successful transition back to the public school classroom.

Programming may be provided in the following areas:

- independent living skills
- orientation and mobility
- adaptive reading and writing skills (e.g., braille)
- use of assistive technology
- counselling in adjustment to blindness
- use of low vision aids
- social skills
- development of high self-esteem

1–2 WEEK PROGRAMS

Short-term programs which run for one or two weeks are designed to focus on very specific skills with the intention of having the student make significant gains in these skills and/or awareness. Since all programs are offered in the residential setting, participants are exposed to a variety of opportunities such as recreational swim, city outings, and independent living skills. Programs are offered in the following areas:

- Orientation and Mobility
- Assistive Technology
- Career Education
- Independent Living Skills
- Individualized Programs
- Social Topics
- Consultations for Teachers and School Based Teams
- Parent Education/Consultation

Orientation and Mobility

- *1–4 students required*
- *1 week program*

Orientation and mobility training prepares students who are blind or visually impaired to know where they are in relation to their environment and to move safely, independently, and with confidence. It is an essential curriculum area for students who are blind or visually impaired. Timely mastery of orientation and mobility skills ensures students have access to the age-appropriate activities of their peers. Short-term programs focus on specific areas of instruction such as urban travel, night travel, awareness and acceptance, and transition from school to work or to post-secondary educational facilities. Students are grouped by age and specific skill needs for programs scheduled throughout the school year (e.g., urban travel for high school students, orientation and mobility awareness for elementary students).

Assistive Technology

- *1–2 week program depending on the complexity of the technology and student needs*

Short-term programs designed to introduce the student to assistive technology or to expand their skills with a specific device are intended to increase the student's access to visual information, enhance their learning efficiency, and promote their independence. Short-term programs focus on specific areas of instruction such as software using large print or voice access, software used to access the Internet or use e-mail, and mastery of assistive technology developed specifically for students who are blind or visually impaired (e.g., refreshable braille devices). Students participate in other instructional sessions during this program (e.g., orientation and mobility classes, recreation and leisure activities.).

Career Education

- *Students grades 9–12*
- *6–16 students required*
- *1 week program*

Career Education short-term programs are designed to increase the student's awareness of career opportunities for those who are blind or visually impaired and to assist in initial planning for future employment. Components of the program include career interest inventories, self-evaluation, available resources, accessing resources, work site visits, job shadow opportunities, and exposure to successfully employed adults who are blind or visually impaired. Career education programs are developmental in nature and students are encouraged to participate in two one-week programs offered over two consecutive years. *Collaboration with local school personnel (e.g., guidance counsellors), parents, and the student's itinerant teacher is essential to ensure necessary follow-up to these programs.*

Post-Secondary Preparation Week

- *Students in grade 12*
- *6–14 students required*
- *1 week program*

This is a one week program designed to prepare graduating high school students who are blind or visually impaired for some of the challenges encountered when entering university or community college. Participation in this program provides students with an increased awareness of the educational, recreational, and social challenges of the post secondary environment. Components of the program include budgeting, strategies for improving time management and study skills, participation in a mock lecture, tips on meeting professors, and explanation of student loans and other financial information. As well, students are exposed to an array of assistive technology, take a tour of a university, participate in discussions with a panel composed of students who are blind or visually impaired currently studying at the university or college level, and meet with student services representatives from various colleges and universities.

Independent Living Skills

- *1–4 students of similar age required*
- *1 week program*

Short-term programs focusing on the acquisition of independent living skills are intended to provide an opportunity for students to be exposed to and practice a variety of independent living skills. This program includes such things as meal preparation, personal hygiene, knowledge and understanding of eye conditions, clothing maintenance, housekeeping, use of adaptive aids and equipment, and organizational skills. Participants develop strategies for orientation to a new community, for solving problems related to their visual disability, and for seeking assistance and resources, as necessary. *Parent involvement at the planning and follow-up stages is vital to the success of this program.*

Social Topics

- *Elementary students grades P-2, 3–4, 5–6*
Junior high/middle school students grades 6–9
Senior high school students grades 10–12
- *4–8 students required*
- *2–5 days*

Vision loss has a significant effect upon the development of social interaction skills as well as acceptance by peers who are fully sighted. This short-term program provides students with a comfortable learning environment in which to explore their concerns about peer acceptance. Sessions on social skill development, building high self-esteem, problem solving, and role playing assist the students in increasing their self-confidence and taking the initiative to become socially involved in community and school activities. Programs are designed to accommodate the social needs of various age groups. Students develop a network for future support from other students enrolled in the program. The APSEA family counsellor is involved in the presentation of this program and arranges any necessary follow-up in the home community.

PROGRAMS WITH CONSULTATION/COACHING

Consultation for Teachers and School-based Team

- *1 student required (individualized program)*
- *2–4 day program*

This short-term program is designed to provide the classroom teacher with ideas and recommendations for effective programs and instruction for the student who is blind or visually impaired or who has multiple disabilities in addition to a visual impairment. During their stay at the APSEA Centre, the student works with an APSEA teacher and an array of other specialists depending on identified needs (e.g., physiotherapist, speech and language specialist, psychologist, play therapist, and/or active learning specialists). The student's teacher and other interested members of the school-based team spend two days with the student to observe and consult with the APSEA specialists who are designing programs and instructional approaches. In some cases, the parent accompanies the student to the Centre and participates in the programming/consultant process. A follow-up report with specific recommendations is forwarded to those involved and a post-placement meeting is held to discuss any issues that have been identified during the short-term program.

Parent Education/Consultation

- *1–2 students required*
- *2–5 day program*

This program is designed to assist parents of children who are blind or visually impaired to address the variety of challenges associated with parenting a child with special needs. The parent(s) and the child spend several days to a week at the APSEA Centre and focus on areas of need identified by the parent(s) (e.g., behaviour, feeding, sleep patterns). Parents(s) are provided an opportunity to discuss issues and concerns, observe specialists working with the child, participate in program planning and instruction, learn new instructional methods and coping strategies, and to become an advocate for themselves and their child. The child participates in assessment and programming sessions with APSEA Centre staff. Follow-up consultation with the parent(s) is planned in conjunction with the child's itinerant teacher to ensure the transfer of skills to the home setting.

Parent Education Workshops

Parent Education Workshops on a topic of interest (e.g., albinism, orientation and mobility) are presented by APSEA staff. Parents attend presentations on a special topic or an array of related subjects, participate in panel discussions, and take advantage of networking opportunities with other parents. Activities are designed to increase knowledge and awareness, introduce new strategies, and/or learn new skills associated with parenting a child who is blind or visually impaired. Where appropriate, professionals from other fields (e.g., medical, CNIB) are invited to present or to participate in the workshops. One goal of all parent workshops is to encourage parents to become advocates for themselves and their child. Workshops are usually presented during the weekend to increase the probability that parents will be able to attend.

Conclusion

The learning and development needs of children and youth who are blind or visually impaired are complex. The programs outlined in this document cover programs appropriate for many of the more common needs. From time to time a very specific area of compensatory skill development may be required. APSEA staff are committed to working collaboratively with parents, local school educators and other involved professionals to design and implement individualized programs addressing the identified needs of children and youth who are blind or visually impaired.

For more information,
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