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Blind Babies Play Program: A Model for Affordable, Sustainable Early Childhood Literacy Intervention through Play and Socialization

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The Miami Lighthouse, in its 81 years of service to persons who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision), has adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of clients of all ages. To meet the significant needs of visually impaired children—more than 80% of early learning is visual (Blind Babies Foundation, 2012)—the Miami Lighthouse introduced its Blind Babies Program in 2003 after reviewing a number of effective early intervention program models from around the country. The early intervention program is designed to serve more than 80 children each year, along with their mothers or primary caregivers. The goal of the Blind Babies Program is to make it possible for young children who are blind or severely visually impaired to grow and develop to their maximum potential.

The Blind Babies Play program began in 2007 and operated for its first three years with volunteer support as a project of the Junior League of Miami. It is a twice-weekly, two-hour supplement to the in-home intervention program (in which vision rehabilitation specialists work with blind babies and their parent or caregiver at home or daycare for one hour a week). The Blind Babies Play program

therefore provides an additional four hours of group interaction weekly to this vulnerable client group.

A total of 73 blind or visually impaired children (unduplicated) have participated in the play program since 2007. Since data collection began (2009–present), the demographics of the children who participated are as follows: 36% female, 64% male, 58% Hispanic, 31% African-American or Haitian, 3% Caucasian, 8% other. Most (66%) of the children have an additional disability.

The structured playgroup approach has enhanced the Blind Babies Program objectives to provide ongoing, individualized, one-on-one rehabilitative services to participating children according to national standards of best practice; offer training and support to parents or caregivers so they can enhance their child's growth and access needed services and resources; and provide training to professionals who work with visually impaired children to increase the capacity of community organizations to meet the needs of this underserved group.

In recent years, early intervention programs funded by the Division of Blind Services (DBS) in Florida receive approximately \$2,500 per child annually, yet some members of the Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind (FAASB) estimate the actual cost per child exceeds \$5,000. Therefore, supplemental funding from donations or grants is required to fully cover the cost of such services. In contrast, excluding the in-kind support of volunteers and the cost of transportation, playgroups can cost agencies about \$500 per child annually. (Playgroup cost estimates per child assume an average class size of 10 children, in-kind volunteer support, staff support at 10% effort, and miscellaneous supplies and snacks.)

HISTORY OF FLORIDA'S EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

In 1999, a grandfather who was working full-time and taking care of his two-year-old blind

grandson; the child's mother, who was a young teenager at the time; and a disabled wife asked the Lighthouse in Port Richey, Florida, what services were available for his grandson, who did not crawl, walk, talk, or play independently. The closest early intervention program was at the Pinellas Center for the Visually Impaired and Blind, attendance at which would have involved a 140-mile round trip for an already overburdened grandfather. At that time, only 3 of 14 non-profit vision rehabilitation centers provided services for children under age six in Florida. These three programs were entirely funded with private donor dollars, and the centers were struggling to keep the programs alive.

With the help of a freshman legislator, FAASB members organized a grassroots effort to advocate for funding from Florida's legislature for vision rehabilitation programs. Lions Club members, adult consumer groups, and others joined this grassroots effort. One mother in particular made several trips to the state capital carrying a small diaper for a premature child, pictures of her son being balanced on her husband's hand, and more photographs of him learning to use a very small white cane. Legislators were moved, and those legislators helped to spread the word—it was possible to hear people all around the Florida state capitol building talking about blind babies. Lobbying efforts reached the office of Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who invited advocates to his office on one occasion and phoned the mother of a blind child at her home. A legislative bill creating "The Blind Babies Program of Florida" was written and co-sponsored by both Republicans and Democrats in the Florida House and Senate. The initial funding request was only \$100,000, but during the legislative session the budgetary line kept increasing.

In the end, and during only one legislative session, the Blind Babies Bill passed without contention and with \$1,000,000 to fund the

three existing programs and to create new programs in unserved communities in Florida. The Lighthouse in Port Richey, Florida, received funds to create a new program to serve blind children under age six. The first child to receive services was "Alex," the two-year-old blind grandson of the Port Richey client mentioned earlier.

OVERVIEW OF BLIND BABIES PLAY

The Blind Babies Play program at Miami Lighthouse was designed to provide interactive learning experiences at a crucial time in the development of blind and severely visually impaired children and toddlers. Prior research demonstrates the necessity for early learning experiences for blind and visually impaired children, as well as the importance of play and socialization skills for all children (Crocker & Orr, 1996; Denham & Brown, 2010; Ihsen, Tröster, & Brambring, 2010; Mandray & Catalano, 2010; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Skellenger & Hill, 1994; Tröster & Brambring, 1994). The supplemental program at Miami Lighthouse can serve as an alternative model for other agencies to follow in the absence of adequate funding for a comprehensive early intervention program.

The Blind Babies Play program was initially offered once a week for one hour, but in January 2011 it was expanded to twice a week for two hours each session. The program runs throughout the year, except in June and July. In the past three years, approximately 1,000 hours of service have been provided. Miami Lighthouse instructors use the *Oregon Project for Visually Impaired and Blind Preschool Children*, which contains a manual, skills inventory, and descriptions of teaching activities, to facilitate the setting of individual goals (always comparing the child to himself, not to the peer group) and the evaluation of progress on those goals (Anderson, Boigon, Davis, & deWaard, 2007). The Oregon Project is a developmental instrument that is widely used, although it has not been "normed" for visually

Table 1
Functional gains in developmental areas for the participants.

Gender, age	Cognitive	Language	Compensatory	Vision	Self-help	Social	Fine motor	Gross motor
Female, 14 months	7	8	10	N/A	5	3	7	10
Male, 8 months	15	8	17	23	7	11	19	15
Male, 16 months	1	1	2	3	1	4	0	0
Male, 3 years, 3 months	47	48	32	29	19	30	21	23
Male, 9 months	24	20	22	25	21	17	18	20
Female, 2 years, 6 months	7	4	6	7	6	7	9	6
Male, 2 months	6	9	8	13	3	3	6	15
Male, 2 months	11	9	11	N/A	25	9	15	18
Male, 5 months	10	5	16	17	7	4	7	4
Female, 2 years, 3 months	9	5	12	7	-6	9	11	10
Male, 1 year	7	2	3	1	10	5	2	4
Female, 2 years, 8 months	8	2	12	9	5	3	10	7
Female, 1 year, 7 months	19	8	12	16	14	14	30	46
Female, 7 months	10	5	15	N/A	14	10	12	14
Female, 5 months	12	10	14	16	2	13	14	8
Male, 2 years, 11 months	9	24	11	N/A	18	18	11	5
Male, 1 year, 11 months	1	3	0	3	0	0	1	5
Male, 2 years	13	14	25	21	39	10	9	14
<i>Average gains</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>13</i>

Note: Oregon Project for Visually Impaired and Blind Preschool Children is a criterion-referenced tool. The scores in Table 1 identify the number of skills a child demonstrated in each of the eight developmental areas and the mean score change in each developmental area for all children.

impaired children and is intended for children ranging in age from birth through five years. The skills inventory comprises cognitive, language, compensatory, vision, self-help, social, fine motor, and gross motor skill sets (see Table 1). After developing an online data management system in 2009, it was possible to track participation. To be included in the evaluation data set, a child needed to take part in a play group a minimum of 5 times, for a total of at least 10 hours of play group participation. The 18 playgroup children who met these criteria all received Oregon Project pre- and posttests, and all of them improved in at least two areas. Typically, improvement was seen in all areas (see Table 1).

The on-site play program serves babies, mothers, fathers, nurses, foster parents, or other caregivers. The value of the Blind Babies Play program at Miami Lighthouse is twofold: in addition to providing vital learn-

ing, literacy, and socialization experiences for blind children, parents and other caregivers benefit from what is effectively a support group of others who share similar concerns for the development of their children. The physical space used to house the playgroup consists of a safe, child-oriented environment with a wide variety of materials that toddlers can reach, explore, and play with in their own way. The storage of materials is consistent and is identified with braille labels and tactile objects.

The routine of playgroup is kept as consistent as possible, but flexible enough to meet the individual needs of the participating children. Playgroup begins as a group activity, with all participants in the circle time area singing a good morning song, greeting all by name, thus providing essential auditory information to the blind child and setting the tone for music and movement. During "circle

time,” children and their parents or caregivers sing, dance, explore musical instruments, and experience turn-taking. Individual opportunities for exploration are personalized according to age, disability, and developmental level, and are geared toward meeting a child’s individual goals. Music and movement are used as means of delivering key cognitive, language, and fine motor skills identified in the Oregon Project. Circle time lasts approximately half an hour before children transition to “social” playtime.

During playtime, activities and materials are available to address each child’s individual strengths and weaknesses, providing the opportunity for learning in a meaningful way. Creating an atmosphere that is stimulating to visually impaired children of different ages and functional levels is a key component of the program. Opportunities for sensory integration are created through play and structured activities. Furthermore, socialization skills development becomes possible, including independent play beside another child, play with 2–3 peers with adult supervision, turn taking, and the like. As social playtime comes to an end, soft music is used as an auditory cue to alert the group that it is time to transition to the next activity, which is literacy.

During literacy time, the parent or caregiver and their child are encouraged to choose a book and find a quiet area in the room for reading. A literacy-rich environment consisting of print-and-braille books, story boxes, large-print books, and books of various genres and in many languages is available for use during story time. Parents are encouraged to read to their child, a key component of building literacy skills and success in school. In addition, story time provides an opportunity for bonding. When sighted siblings attend the playgroup, they are included in all activities and receive the added benefit of literacy reinforcement. Playgroup concludes with all participants returning to the circle time

area and singing a good-bye song, which signals that playgroup has ended.

DISCUSSION

As a component of intervention in the educational development of visually impaired children, playgroups are a cost-effective approach that provides the research-demonstrated enhancements to learning skills that play and socialization offer. The importance of the Blind Babies Play program is demonstrated by the children’s success as measured by the Oregon Project inventory, professionally conducted client surveys, and numerous testimonials from caregiver participants. The benefits participants receive from the program are impressive, given the relatively minor expense of operating the playgroup.

Conclusion

The Miami Lighthouse Blind Babies Play programmatic model can be emulated by agencies across the nation as a cost-effective method for increasing learning opportunities for visually impaired babies and providing support for their caregivers. The authors recommend the program described here as a model for agencies serving babies who are visually impaired, either as a supplement to existing early intervention services or as a stopgap service, depending on whether or not in-home services are available in a particular area or state. With oversight from professionals and volunteer groups such as the Junior League, early intervention services that are not readily available elsewhere can be provided through a playgroup. Several factors will influence the success of a playgroup for babies who are blind or visually impaired.

- Credentialed staff members and dedicated volunteers are necessary. The success of the Miami Lighthouse program described here is attributable in large part to the quality and high commitment level of the staff members and volunteers.

- Adherence to the Oregon Project or a comparable standard of evaluation is needed in order to evaluate the child's ongoing progress and to set goals effectively.
- Materials may be as simple or as elaborate as a budget will allow. At a minimum, braille and large-print books, props, and audio output are necessary in a clean, safe, and attractive environment.
- The outcomes of the program are highly contingent on regular, consecutive attendance, which is encouraged by helping caregivers to liaison with other necessary services such as transportation, and by the positive experience and support caregivers receive and the benefits they see for the children.

Play programs such as the one at Miami Lighthouse are the most accessible, and least expensive, way of reaching out to a client population at great risk of losing educational opportunity.

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