

TIP SHEET # 3

Orientation and Mobility

for students who are Blind or Visually Impaired

What is Orientation and Mobility (O&M)?

Orientation and Mobility includes travel concepts and orientation strategies that facilitate safe, efficient, interdependent travel for students who are visually impaired or blind. If the student has remaining vision, instruction in efficient use of that vision is a key component.

Why do students who are blind & visually impaired need orientation and mobility instruction?

Throughout their lives, sighted children have rich experiences where they learn concepts casually or incidentally. Students with visual impairments often miss or learn concepts in an incomplete or distorted way. Since these essential ideas provide a foundation for future learning, these concepts must be explicitly and systematically taught (integrating other senses) to ensure that the student with visual impairment learns and applies this information.

Where does O&M training occur?

Students with vision loss need to gain skills to travel safely and as independently as possible; to learn about and from the environment through which they move. This requires systematic instruction in how to orient themselves and avoid obstacles without the benefit of visual cues. Early instruction helps the child to develop foundation skills in body image and essential spatial concepts. Throughout the school years, instruction involves travel in school, home and community, including travel in residential, city and rural areas.

Who provides O&M instruction?

A certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) is the only professional who can assess the student and provide the full array of instruction across a variety of environments. The O&M Specialist is member of the student's IEP or IFSP team. A Teacher of Students with Visual Impairment (TVI) and a Vision Rehabilitation Therapist (VRT) can reinforce basic O&M techniques, such as human guide and trailing.

How does a student get O&M instruction?

Through the expanded core curriculum (ECC) students with vision loss can receive O&M services. The ECC is the body of knowledge and skills needed by students with visual impairments to be successful in school and in post-graduate pursuits as a result of unique, disability-specific needs. Students who are blind or visually impaired should be assessed annually and receive instruction, if necessary. O&M is a related service and is added to the IEP or IFSP to foster collaboration and consistency in the global plan of services. Depending on the extent of visual impairment and the impact of additional disabilities, various devices may be needed such as a long cane and low vision aids.

O&M Services and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

O&M services have been a bona fide related service since 1975 (when PL 94-142, Education of All Handicapped Children the precursor to IDEA, was enacted). O&M services are specifically named in the (1997) Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Reauthorization (IDEA Reauthorization).

O&M services are named as an example of a related service in the section of the Act that addresses the requirement under IDEA for schools to provide related services to students in special education programs.

Some examples of school-based instruction:

Room familiarization: The O&M Specialist not only familiarizes the student with various rooms in their schedule but also teaches the student how to self-familiarize and how to “understand” spatial relationships within the given environment as well as cues and clues within the space.

Routes within the school: The O&M Specialist will teach the student to safely negotiate various routes in the school, eg. to classes, the gym, the nurse’s office, the main office, restrooms, the cafeteria, etc. Also, routes to and from the bus area and playground (or outside common areas) are commonly addressed in O&M instruction.

Both independence and interdependence are stressed depending on the task, age, and capabilities of the student. Knowing when and how to ask for assistance (interdependence) is a critical aspect of O&M instruction.

Environmental and Safety issues:

For students who have remaining vision (usually 80% or more of those with vision impairment) environmental modifications may be helpful. Contrasting colored tape or paint on the edges of steps and playground equipment can increase visibility for some students.

The O&M Specialist will instruct the student about changing environmental factors and the impact on functional vision.

Examples are:

Lighting: For some students, increased lighting is preferable while others may function better with dim lighting. Ways to control glare are beneficial to most students. Some students have difficulty with lighting changes (from bright to dim lighting and vice versa) and some may have figure ground (visual clutter) problems that the O&M Specialist can address.

Emergency situations: Students with vision loss often need specialized instruction about emergency evacuation plans and routes.

Staff training: The O&M Specialist will often provide training for staff, other school personnel, and students about visual impairment in general, optimal environmental conditions, and specific student needs.

Additional Resources about Orientation and Mobility

Comprehensive site about O&M
<http://www.orientationandmobility.org/>

For Parents of Children with VI:
<http://www.spedex.com/napvi/>

Texas School for the Blind
www.tsbvi.edu

ACVREP
www.acvrep.org

American Foundation for the Blind
www.afb.org

General O&M information
<http://www.wayfinding.net/services.htm>

For more information, contact



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