Regional Blind – Low Vision Early Intervention Programs

Ontario’s Blind – Low Vision Early Intervention Program provides its services through the following regional offices:

- Hamilton, Niagara, Brant and Halimand-Norfolk: 905-385-7027 ext. 221 or 1-866-826-4337 ext. 221
  www.everywords.ca
- Dufferin, Halton, Peel, Waterloo and Wellington: 905-565-4352 or 1-877-565-6625
  www.enwinakids.ca
- Central Ontario: 705-428-2800
  www.firstwords.ca
- Manitoulin-South Bruce, Algoma, Cochrane, and Nipissing-Timiskaming: “Wordplay / Jeux de Mot” 1-877-522-6665
- Kenora Rainy River: “North Words” 1-877-563-7122
  www.northwords.com
- Ottawa, Renfrew County and District and Eastern Ontario: “FirstWords” 613-698-3599 or 1-866-452-7447
  TTY 613-820-7427
  www.firstwords.ca
- Simcoe County and Muskoka-Perry Sound: Children’s Development Services 705-739-5696 or 1-800-876-7397
- Kingston and counties of Frontenac, Lennox & Addington, Leeds, Grenville, Lanark, Hastings and Prince Edward 613-549-1332 ext. 1146 or 1-800-267-7675 ext. 1146
  TTY 613-549-7692 or 1-866-209-1136
  www.klispalaeo.ns.ca
- Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay District Health Unit 807-625-6922 or 1-888-234-6630 ext. 5502
  www.tbdhu.com
- City of Toronto: Toronto Preschool Speech and Language Services 416-338-8355
  TTY 416-338-0025
  www.tpsls.on.ca
- York Region, Durham, Haliburton, Kawartha and Prince Ridge: Child Development Programs 1-888-703-5437
  TTY 905-773-7392
  www.beyond-words.org
- Windsor Essex and Chatham Kent: “Talk 2 Me” 519-252-0636
  www.smflc.ca
- Chatham-Kent, Huron-Bruce, Lambton Kent, Huron, Huron-Bruce, Lambton Kent, Huron: “FirstWords” 519-663-0273 or 1-877-818-8256
  www.beyond-words.org
- Middlesex-London: Ontario’s Blind-Low Vision Early Intervention Program 519-252-0636
  www.beyond-words.org
- Toronto: Ontario’s Blind-Low Vision Early Intervention Program 1-888-821-7770
  ServiceOntario
  www.serviceontario.ca
- For more information, contact: ServicesOntario 1-866-821-7770
  TTY 1-800-387-6659
  www.children.gov.on.ca

Services for children who are blind or have low vision

1. Family support
   The program provides support to parents when their child has been diagnosed with blindness or low vision. These services are provided by family support workers who are graduate-level social workers specially trained in the impact of a visual impairment on child development. The family support worker will help the family understand and cope with the implications of the diagnosis and help them make informed decisions about support services.

2. Intervention services
   For a child with visual impairment, touch, hearing and the use of remaining or residual vision are critically important for learning and development. Support by trained and knowledgeable professionals in the area of visual impairment is essential to help the child develop these senses to the best of his or her ability.

   Intervention services are provided by specially trained early childhood blind/low vision consultants in the family’s home. The consultant teaches parents how to support their child’s development in the following areas:
   - intentional movement (orientation and mobility)
   - development of motor skills (e.g., rolling, reaching, crawling, walking, and use of hands to manipulate and explore objects)
   - daily living skills (e.g., eating, dressing, toileting)
   - concept development (e.g., object identification, function, and characteristics)
   - social and emotional development
   - language and communication development
   - how to make the most of residual vision
   - how to use all the senses to promote development

3. Consultation services
   When your child enters a child care or early learning centre, Blind – Low Vision Program staff will help the early childhood educators at that centre learn how to best work with and teach your child.

Ontario’s Blind – Low Vision Early Intervention Program is designed to give children who are born blind or with low vision the best possible start in life. Specialized family-centred services are funded by the province and are available for children from birth to Grade 1.

The program provides education and support for parents so they can encourage the healthy development of their children. Parents learn to help their children develop the skills they need for daily activities at home and in early learning and care settings.

Without special support from an early age, a child who is blind or has low vision may have trouble learning to talk, explore and make friends when he or she begins school. A child who is blind or has low vision is at a significant risk for difficulties in all areas of development, including:
   - communication and language
   - fine and gross motor skills
   - understanding and thought processes
   - social skills
   - emotional development
   - self help

With the right intervention from skilled professionals, parents can learn how to encourage the healthy development of their children, and help them learn the skills they will need to succeed in school.

Program services
   When children are diagnosed with blindness or low vision, a referral can be made to the local Blind – Low Vision Program by a physician, ophthalmologist, optometrist, parent or caregiver. Check the back of this brochure to find the program closest to you.

The Blind – Low Vision program offers three types of services:
   1. Family support
   2. Intervention services
   3. Consultation services
As their vision develops, babies enjoy:

By 6 weeks
- looking at you while you hold them close
- looking at toys with bright colours
- watching mobiles with simple black and white shapes
- watching things that move

By 3 months
- watching toys move from the side to the front of them
- toys with bright colours and interesting patterns
- using a night light in their rooms

By 6 months
- looking at their reflection in a mirror
- looking back and forth between two favourite objects
- toys that have complex patterns and toys that move (e.g., "jack in the box")
- playing "peek-a-boo" games

By 12 months
- putting toys in and out of containers (and also in their mouths)
- playing with similar objects of different sizes (e.g., stacking rings, nesting cups, blocks)
- pushing buttons or twisting knobs to make toys start
- watching outside activities through a window

By 2 years
- reading books with pictures of simple scenes and objects
- playing with simple board puzzles
- making trips outside to the store, the park, the library to watch people and activities

You should continue to monitor your child's development

It is important to monitor your child's visual development, since early identification of a problem can sometimes eliminate or decrease the risk of long-term complications. If you notice that your child has any of the following symptoms, talk to your doctor immediately:
- swollen or encrusted eyelids
- bumps, sores or styes on or around the eyelids
- drooping eyelids
- does not make eye contact with you by three months of age
- does not watch or follow an object with the eyes by three months
- haziness or whitish appearance inside the pupil
- frequent "wiggling," "drifting," or "jerky" eye movements
- misalignment between the eyes (eye turns or crossing of eyes)
- lack of coordinated eye movements
- drifting of one eye when looking at objects
- squinting, closing or covering of one eye when looking at objects
- excessive tearing when not crying
- excessive blinking or squinting
- excessive rubbing or touching of the eyes
- avoidance of or sensitivity to bright lights
Nearly 85% of a child’s early learning occurs through vision. Children who are born with (or acquire in early childhood) blindness or low vision are at greater risk for developmental delays and communicative disorders. With access to the Tri-Regional Blind – Low Vision Early Intervention Program, families with children who are blind or have low vision are given the resources they need to support the healthy development of their child in the first years of life from birth until they enter Grade 1.

Markham Stouffville Hospital has received funding from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services under the Best Start Strategy to offer these services across York, Durham, Haliburton, Kawartha and Pine Ridge regions. The Tri-Regional Blind – Low Vision Early Intervention Program builds on the existing resources in our community. Partnerships have been developed with CNIB, the Ontario Foundation for Visually Impaired Children, infant development and early intervention services as well as the network of paediatric ophthalmologists, optometrists, and physicians across the Region.

How to Refer
If you live in the region and have concerns about your child’s vision, please contact us.

- Parents, guardians, family physicians, optometrists or ophthalmologists and other professionals can refer to the Program by calling the Central Intake Line at 1-888-703-KIDS (5437) (and selecting #2 from the menu options).

- A referral form can be downloaded from our website: www.beyond-words.org and can be faxed to 905-762-2099.

- Children need an ophthalmologist’s referral prior to admission to services; however, we can assist in obtaining a referral if you do not already have one and can provide supports in the interim.
What does the Program offer?
We are committed to making sure that your child is receiving the best services possible and have designed a program to do exactly that. The Tri-Regional Blind – Low Vision Early Intervention Program is based on four activities critical to the healthy development of children with blindness or low vision, including:

**Family Support Services:** Family Support Workers trained in understanding visual impairment support families through the diagnostic process, and prepare them for decision-making and support for their infants and children. Services include grief counselling, assisting with coping and family adjustment, service coordination and access to resources in order to be better able to meet the needs of their child. Services are provided by Markham Stouffville Hospital (York Region), Grandview Children's Centre (Durham Region), and Five Counties Children's Centre (Haliburton, Kawartha, and Pine Ridge Regions).

**Early Intervention Services:** Early Childhood Vision Consultants from CNIB or the Ontario Foundation for Visually Impaired Children provide in-home service delivery focusing on helping parents support the development of their child. Based on on-going functional sensory assessments of the child, families will be given instruction and experience in daily living activities that will enhance cognitive, communicative, social, emotional and physical development of the child. The Early Childhood Vision Consultant will arrange for a consultation from an Orientation and Mobility Specialist and other professionals as appropriate.

**Child Care Consultation:** Early Childhood Vision Consultants consult to child care providers to help them understand and respond to the needs of children living with visually impairment who are integrating into early learning and child care settings.

**Public Awareness and Professional/Parent Education Strategy:** The Tri-Regional Blind – Low Vision Program is working closely with the Ministry to develop a strategy to inform parents and the local community about visual disorders, understanding their child’s diagnosis, the signs and symptoms to watch for, and the services available to support them. The Program provides the opportunity for families to meet other families to share experiences as well as personal resources.

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- Swollen or encrusted eyelids
- Bumps, sores or styes on or around the eyelids
- Drooping eyelids
- Does not make eye contact with you by three months of age
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- Frequent “wiggling,” “drifting,” or “jerky” eye movements misalignment between the eyes (eye turns or crossing of eyes)
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- Drifting of one eye when looking at objects
- Turning or tilting of the head when looking at objects
- Squinting, closing or covering of one eye when looking at objects
- Excessive tearing when not crying
- Excessive blinking or squinting
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