Visual Impairment and Autism

Newsletter 12, January 2014

Introduction
Welcome to this newsletter concerning visual impairment and autism, especially if you this is the first one you have received directly. People continue to get in touch, asking to be added to the contacts list. The most recent was a teacher in Nashville, Tennessee, USA, who had found the material on visual impairment and autism on my website, at http://ianpbell.com/visual-impairment-autism/.

This newsletter is rather shorter than usual, but I thought it was important to keep you in touch and to maintain interest in visual impairment and autism. If you have any news or other items you would like to share via a newsletter, please do email me at vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk.

Spreading the message
I take as many opportunities as I can to spread the word about visual impairment and autism. As well as delivering training (see the next item), I look for other ways to inform people. For example

- I arranged for a link to the visual impairment and autism guidance material on the Mumsnet guide to special needs resources on the web; it’s at http://www.mumsnet.com/webguide/special-needs.
- I wrote a piece about the visual impairment and autism guidance material for a recent Newsflash provided for the parents of pupils at Linden Lodge School.

If you are not familiar with the visual impairment and autism guidance material, see the next item below.

For Linden Lodge School, go to http://www.lindenlodge.wandsworth.sch.uk/.

Mumsnet is for parents in England and Linden Lodge School is in London. If you have any ideas about how I can help to spread the message elsewhere in the world, please email me at vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk.
Visual impairment and autism guidance material

Most of you will know of this material. For those who do not: it is freely available online at www.rnib.org.uk/autism.

Work is still continuing (though very slowly) to revise and correct the material already available and to provide some additional material. As yet, it is not known when the revised and expanded material will be made available.

Training opportunities in Visual Impairment and Autism

I delivered a 1-day course entitled “An introduction to visual impairment and autism in children and young people” at the Scottish Sensory Centre, Edinburgh, on Friday 8th November. I am pleased to say the evaluations from this course were positive.

I hope to deliver this course during 2014 in the North of England and I am exploring the possibility of delivering it in the South of England. If you are interested in attending a 1-day course in visual impairment and autism, please email me at vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk.

Clinical Excellence Network (Specific Interest Group)

This is a reminder that a Clinical Excellence Network (CEN) was formed in 2012-13 to focus on multisensory impairment (MSI) and visual impairment (VI). The group covers the UK and Republic of Ireland and is registered with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT).

Membership is open to all those with an interest in the communication and eating and drinking needs of children, young people and adults who have multisensory impairment (MSI) or visual impairment (VI). There is more information about the group at http://ianpbell.com/news/. If you are interested in attending a meeting or in joining the group, please email me at vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk.

Visual impairment and autism references

You may know that I have a website with a page devoted to visual impairment and autism; it’s at http://ianpbell.com/visual-impairment-autism/. One of the items on that page is a pdf of references which I last updated in March 2013. Since then, an item listed as forthcoming (Ockelford, 2013), has
appeared and I have become aware of two other items; all three are described below. Although none of them specifically focuses on children who have both visual impairment and autism, they are of interest to practitioners involved with supporting this group of people.


This book is fascinating. It includes quite a detailed description of a boy (Shivan) who is blind and has severe learning difficulties, cerebral palsy and autism. Music plays a crucial role in Shivan’s life, strengthening my belief that whenever a child with both visual impairment and autism shows an interest in music (or, indeed, sound), that interest should be used in supporting the child’s development.

I have reviewed this book for the (UK) Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) *Bulletin*; my review was published in the January 2014 issue, so RCSLT members will have received this. I had a very limited number of words for this review and was unable to do the book justice. However, I did conclude that it provides insufficient guidance to SLTs who wish to use music to support autistic children’s functional communication. But much of the book's content is of great interest and it is an important work: its main message is that not all autistic children are visual learners and music should play a much greater role in their education.

**Sanders, J. & Harris, C. (2013)** ‘Nystagmus and the fourth dimension.’ *Insight*, 48 (November / December), 11-14

This article explains the impact nystagmus can have on several aspects of development and daily life, including social communication. Insight is a magazine published in the UK by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB); for more information, go to [www.rnib.org.uk/insightmagazine](http://www.rnib.org.uk/insightmagazine). (Accessed 15th January 2014)


This article describes a study investigating the role of maternal language in assisting the development of mental state language in visually impaired children. It found that mothers of visually impaired children elaborated more and made significantly more references to story characters’ mental states and descriptive elaborations than mothers of sighted children. Mental state elaborations of mothers in the visually impaired group related positively with the level produced by their children. Frequency of maternal elaborations,
including their mental state language, was related to socio-communicative competence of children with visual impairment. Tadić et al. state that the findings offer insights into the potential contribution of maternal verbal scaffolding to mentalistic language and the social–communicative competences of visually impaired children.


**Online resource**

I have become aware of a potentially useful website which focuses on tactile learning strategies for working with children who have multisensory impairment and those who have visual impairment and additional disabilities. There is an extensive list of references, some of which are new to me. Go to [www.projectsalute.net/](http://www.projectsalute.net/). (Accessed 15th January 2014)

**Research**

This is a request: if you are involved in research in the field of visual impairment and autism, or know of any such research, please do let me know. The purpose of this newsletter is to keep readers informed and up-to-date. Unfortunately, practitioners are often not aware of potentially valuable research. Conversely, researchers do not always know of the concerns of practitioners. So, please email me with information about both ongoing and completed research: [vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk). I would also like to hear from practitioners who have a question which research could help to answer.

A current study of interest is entitled “Socio-cognitive skills in school age children with visual impairment”. This is a multi-disciplinary study based at the University College London Institute of Child Health and Great Ormond Street Hospital. It is investigating the development of visually impaired children aged 8 to 12 years. The aim is to learn more about the progression of children with visual impairment in mid-childhood. The findings will highlight the strengths of children with visual impairment and areas that might need extra help and intervention. This knowledge will be integrated into clinical practice and will be used to inform families, educators and doctors.
Please pass on this Newsletter
If you know of anyone who does not receive this newsletter, but who is interested in visual impairment and autism, please do pass the newsletter on. Obviously, the easiest and greenest way is to share it by email. But, if you feel it’s appropriate, please do print it and pass it on, or display it somewhere to attract attention.

Newcomers to visual impairment and autism
If this newsletter is your introduction to visual impairment and autism, welcome. If you wish to be added to our database, or if you have any comments or queries, please do contact me – contact details follow.

Contact details
The visual impairment and autism email address is still vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk
The postal address is: c/o Medina House, Mill Lane
Codsall, Wolverhampton, WV8 1QH, UK
The visual impairment and autism guidance material is freely available at www.rnib.org.uk/autism.

Retaining your details for emailing
If you do not wish me to retain your name and email address, please email (address above) and ask to have your details removed. But, please note: if I do not have your details, I will be unable to send any further newsletters or other up-dates.

This newsletter was written and distributed by Ian Bell,
Specialist Independent Speech and Language Therapist; Formerly Project Leader, Visual Impairment and Autism Project (September 2008 to March 2011)
Email: vi-autism.medina@tiscali.co.uk
Website: http://ianpbell.com/