Introduction
Welcome to this newsletter – we’re now into double figures.

Visual Impairment & Autism guidance material for practitioners
Those of you who have been in the contacts list at least since the start of this year should have received an email during the spring concerning the guidance material for practitioners. In effect, that email announced that the material had been posted online by RNIB.

As most of you will know, the material was initially provided in the form of a CD-ROM published by RNIB. It sold out in late 2012. It was then modified slightly and posted on the RNIB website, where it is freely available. To access the material, visit www.rnib.org.uk/autism.

As mentioned in a previous newsletter, a formal evaluation of the material was carried out during 2012, and the feedback provided is being used to inform a revision. However, there is no funding for this and I am undertaking this work as and when I can.

Work is also underway to provide additional case studies to broaden the range of young people covered and to add further strategies. During the Visual Impairment and Autism Project, the team decided not to reveal the names of the educational settings which supported its work, or those of the practitioners involved. This was to protect the identity of the children, some of whom attended mainstream schools. Because each of these schools had only one child with both visual impairment and autism, to have named the school or the practitioners involved would have resulted, in effect, in identifying the child. I will therefore not reveal the source of the additional material which is currently in preparation, or the name of the practitioner who is working so hard on this.
This newsletter provides me with another opportunity to thank all the educational settings which have been involved over the years and the practitioners who have so generously given their time. And I also wish to thank the parents who have given consent for their children to be involved and the children themselves.

**Further Visual Impairment & Autism material on the web**

This is a brief reminder that I have posted material on visual impairment and autism on my own website. The address has changed slightly; my homepage is now at [http://ianpbell.com/](http://ianpbell.com/) and the visual impairment and autism material is at [http://ianpbell.com/visual-impairment-autism/](http://ianpbell.com/visual-impairment-autism/).

**Training opportunities in Visual Impairment and Autism**

There are two training opportunities I wish to bring to your attention. In chronological order they are:

1. I am presenting a seminar at the National Autistic Society conference, “Autism and complex needs” in Birmingham on Tuesday 15th October 2013. My title is “Supporting children with visual impairment and ASD; guidance for practitioners”. This one-day conference is aimed at exploring best practice around supporting people with autism who have complex needs. For more information and to book, visit [http://www.autism.org.uk/conferences/complexneeds2013](http://www.autism.org.uk/conferences/complexneeds2013).

2. I am delivering a 1-day course at the Scottish Sensory Centre, Edinburgh on Friday 8th November. The course title is “An introduction to visual impairment and autism in children and young people”. The course costs £110. For further information and to make a booking, visit [http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/courses/VI&multi/vnov13.html](http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/courses/VI&multi/vnov13.html).

In June I delivered a 1-day course on visual impairment and autism at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning in Coventry. I have not yet received full information about the delegates’ evaluations, but I understand the course was well received. The course was over subscribed and the Pears Centre has a list of people who enquired about the course after the places were all taken. It is possible that the course will be put on again in the coming months. If so, I will email information about it to you.
If you are interested in attending a re-run of the course, you may like to contact Sophie Edge at the Pears Centre and express an interest: Sophie.Edge@rnib.org.uk.

At the beginning of July I delivered a session on the research concerning autism in visually impaired children at Whitefield School in Waltham Forest. In the next few months I am delivering training at the Royal Blind School, Edinburgh and at the Royal School for the Blind in Liverpool. This training is for the staff at the respective schools only – it is not open to others. I have mentioned these training events in order to draw your attention to the current level of interest in visual impairment and autism. It is very gratifying.

**Retirement of two key figures**

Two key figures in the field of visual impairment and autism are retiring this summer. The sequence of the following paragraphs reflects the sequence in which I heard each piece of news.

The first is Peter Hobson, Tavistock Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, University College London. Many of you will know of the very important work Peter and his colleagues undertook on the prevalence and nature of autism in blind children and their follow-up work which suggests that autism is “reversible” in some blind children. If you don’t know of this work, I suggest you consult the relevant literature. A good place to start with regard to the work on the prevalence and nature of autism in blind children is Peter’s chapter in the book edited by Linda Pring. The chapter is called “Why connect? On the relation between autism and blindness”. Details of the book follow in the next paragraph. For “reversible autism”, see Hobson, RP and Lee, A (2010) ‘Reversible autism among congenitally blind children? A controlled follow-up study.’ *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51, 11, 1235–1241.

Mention of the book edited by Linda Pring is appropriate here, as the second person retiring this summer is Linda. Linda has long been interested in the connections between visual impairment and autism, as is clear from the book she edited: Pring, L. (Ed.) (2005) Autism and Blindness. Research and Reflections. London: Whurr. Linda was Professor of Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is now Emeritus Professor. Her interests include creativity in autistic spectrum disorder, psychological aspects of visual impairment (associations with autism, children’s memory, language, autobiographical memory, braille) and museum access for people with visual impairments or autistic spectrum disorders.
Both Linda and Peter were very supportive of the Visual Impairment and Autism Project. Indeed, the encouragement of Linda at a Mary Kitzinger Trust\(^1\) workshop when my wife, Judy, and I were first exploring the possibility of establishing a project, was extremely important. Peter was one of the key speakers at the conference arranged by the Project team in November 2010 and Linda chaired the first day for us.

I am sure those of you who know of Linda’s and Peter’s work in the field will join me in wishing them both a long, happy and healthy retirement.

**Children who have autism and who also have visual impairment**

The vast majority of the children and young people for whom the guidance material is intended are those whose “primary” disability is visual impairment and who also have (or could have) a diagnosis of autism. The team involved in the Visual Impairment and Autism Project recognised that there are also children and young people whose “primary” disability is autism and who also have visual impairment. These two groups may have some needs in common, but it is also likely that there are strategies which are unique to the two groups.

I have recently received enquiries concerning children and young people whose primary disability is autism and who also have visual impairment. It is, perhaps, no surprise that one of the issues for this group is the eye test. For many autistic children, this is a major challenge. Another difficulty for practitioners is that of providing information to the autistic child about his/her vision, especially when this concerns a progressive sight loss.

It occurs to me that this is a need for a project investigating the needs of children and young people whose primary disability is autism and who also have visual impairment. Such a project could develop guidance material to parallel that now available for children and young people whose primary disability is visual impairment and who also have autism.

This is only a very embryonic idea at present. Such a project would need to be funded and would require a team of people with a range of expertise.

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\(^1\) For information about the Mary Kitzinger Trust, visit [http://www.marykitzingertrust.org/](http://www.marykitzingertrust.org/).
Please contact me if

- you work with children and young people whose primary disability is autism and who also have visual impairment and feel the need for a project

- you would like to be involved in such a project.

New book: “Music, Language and Autism” by Adam Ockelford

Many of you will know of the wide range of work carried out by Adam Ockelford. For example, he is the author of the “standard” text on objects of reference, founded the AMBER Trust (http://www.ambertrust.org/) and developed Sounds of Intent (http://soundsofintent.org/).

Given how important music is in the lives of many children who have both visual impairment and autism, this new book by Ockelford may be of interest to you. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of autism. The next chapter, a lengthy one, is on language. Chapter 3 is called “Making sense of music” and deals with how music functions. Chapter 4 deals with the development of musicality and links with Sounds of Intent. The next chapter is on music, language and communication. Chapter 6 is on what Ockelford calls “Exceptional Early Cognitive Environments” – those in which autistic children grow up. The final chapter is called “Teaching the 1 in 20”, which refers to Ockelford's view that 5% of autistic children have special musical abilities.

The book is published by Jessica Kingsley and is on their website at http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781849051972/review/. You may be able to buy it more cheaply elsewhere on the internet.

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 us – 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

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/

Visual impairment and autism page:

http://ianpbell.com/visual-impairment-autism/