

# **VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN IN THE PLAYGROUND AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LAPPSET GROUP'S PLAYGROUND, 2002-2003**

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## **Introduction**

Visual impairment affects a child's movement in different ways. The lack of vision makes it more difficult to perceive space and often makes a child hesitant to move. Generally, a child with visual impairment needs a lot of encouragement and support to move and become acquainted with his or her environment. A child perfects his or her physical skills when learning about the surrounding world. The environment has to be well ordered and safe. Attention should be paid to lighting because many children with poor sight can behave in an illuminated environment almost in the same way as people with good vision do.

In the playground, visually impaired children behave in the same way as other children do. Playgrounds are well suited to perfecting motor skills. From the perspective of integration, a playground offers a natural place for interaction and cooperation. When developing products, playground builders should pay attention to the limitations imposed by vision.

The focus of this study was the motor exercise facility in the Muscle Control Studio at the Rovaniemi Polytechnic and the playground in the Lappset Group's yard in Rovaniemi, where motor coordination tracks have been implemented on the Lappset Group's playground equipment. Those exercising were children with visual impairment (n=5, aged 5-12 years). Forms were used to help with the assessment, and part of the exercising was videoed for later detailed evaluation. The assessment was conducted in autumn 2002 and spring 2003.

## **The objectives of a visually impaired child in physical exercise**

The movement of a visually impaired child should focus on physical capacity, his or her perception of time and space, the speed at which he or she performs movement and his or her motor skills (balance in particular). Some visually impaired children are especially sportive, so consideration needs to be given to safety. The division between exercise and rehabilitation is indistinct and both support the development of a visually impaired child into a youth and adult who has a wide range of opportunities for exercise.

## **Playgrounds from the perspective of a visually impaired child**

The playgrounds in this study guided the children to work together. The children had to take the other children into consideration during their play. The exercise was wide-ranging, with several places that especially developed balance. The tracks were sufficiently demanding. Their parents thought the demanding nature of the tracks motivated their children to exercise, whereas excessively difficult tracks would have made the children passive. The majority of those exercising (n=4) needed to hold a hand the whole time in order to maintain control. The reason may stem from the poor lighting at one of the locations (the Muscle Control Studio) and the dazzling sunlight and unfamiliar surroundings at the other location (the outdoor playground in the Lappset Group's yard), which the children had not visited before. It would have helped the children by arranging a visit there first to carefully examine the surroundings.

## **Conclusions**

Visually impaired children need a lot of differentiation. The playground provided a good opportunity for this. For example, a visually impaired child with a motor disorder received the necessary hand support or guidance provided and was able to join in playing with the other children.

The majority of Finnish visually impaired children are integrated into mainstream schools, where they exercise with other children in the same playgrounds and schoolyards. It is of the utmost importance that playground equipment is safe and that as far as possible, different materials and contrasting colours are used on equipment.

The surrounding environment, which must be distinct and unimpeded, also affects the design of a playground. This will improve the opportunities for everyone to be active in different recreational areas. The concept behind Design for All will add to the opportunities for manufacturers of playground equipment as well as its users.

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