

Children with Multi-Sensory Impairment

Rebecca Liddiard outlines the support in the Early Years within the Sense Specialist Services for Children and Young People

When a child has a combined vision and hearing impairment they are considered to be multi-sensory impaired. The impact of the combined impairment of both of their distance senses will affect; their access to information from the world around them, their access to communication and their mobility/orientation skills.

“We normally get most of our information about the world around us through sight and hearing, so multi-sensory impairment (MSI) makes a significant difference to children and young people’s learning and development. Without extra help, MSI effectively restricts experience to the here and now – what is happening at this moment, within arm’s reach. Children may not realise that the wider world exists, or they may find it so confusing and threatening that they ignore it as far as possible.” (*Early Support (2012)*)

Early Intervention

At Sense we, like many educationalists, health practitioners and social care providers recognise the vital importance of early intervention. Early Intervention (or the lack thereof) can have lifelong consequences for the child and their family. The benefits of early appropriate support can transform the lives of children and their families. Intervention is required as soon as practicable in order that support can be offered to the child (and family) to support the child during their earliest stages of development. It is vital that adaptive strategies are employed to support the young child to access their environment, to access and develop communication in different ways, to support the development of their mobility and awareness of their body in space, and to support the development of bonds and relationships with parents, care givers and siblings.

We provide an individualised early intervention service. It is vital that each child and family is supported in a way which is meaningful and accessible to them. We can provide support in different environments and at different frequencies in order to meet the family’s needs best. Flexibility is important in these early stages allowing the family time to adjust, space to develop and thrive as a family unit and timely support to meet their individual, and developing needs. One size does not fit all and therefore a reflective and flexible service is often the most effective and supportive.

We provide support through preschool groups across the country, at home, in hospital and at hospital clinics, at meetings and appointments and also through liaison with other professionals. The support we offer is often a combination of different types of input which changes regularly as the family’s needs change.

Assessment, Intervention and Skill Development

No matter where our support takes place we will work with the child and their family to identify ways in which to support access to the world around them. Interaction, stimulation and motivation are fundamental to all children’s development. We learn through play, modelling, mimicry, feedback and reactions to our actions. It is important that we find ways in which to provide this information to a child who has reduced visual and auditory access. We need to support them to use and interpret any information they can gain from any residual vision and/or hearing they may have. We also need to provide opportunities to enable them to develop their access to information through their other means including the use of movement, touch and vestibular and proprioceptive feedback.

In order to provide appropriate support, functional assessment over time is crucial. Discovering how a child can receive information is central to ensuring that we can then provide activities which will stimulate and motivate them to reach out and explore the world around them.

In the earliest stages of development the use of touch and movement to provide feedback and motivation to communicate, move and explore is vital. It is however important to recognise that many children may be tactile selective – either over or under responsive to touch as a result of limited tactile stimulation in the early years or perhaps negative tactile experiences (particularly if the child has received invasive medical intervention). Part of our role is supporting the child through careful, supportive and responsive interaction to develop trust and the confidence to explore.

A responsive approach to subtle and idiosyncratic communication is also a significant part of our work in the early years. Responding to a child’s individual methods of communication, through speech, touch, sign, on-body touch cues, movement etc. provides the vital feedback and motivation for the child to continue communicating. Often families will need support to recognise that their child is communicating through individual and alternative means. Families will often respond to their child’s methods of communication but will not recognise that these movements, vocalisations, facial expressions are indeed communication. Support with this can then give the family the confidence to develop and celebrate their child’s communication skills.

Early Years Support

As a service we provide:

Weekly pre-school groups for children aged 0 – 5 years

across the country. These are an ideal environment for families to come together to build relationships with each other, share experiences and develop supportive connections. We provide opportunities to experience and learn through play, support to parents so they can develop meaningful interactions with their child, opportunities for children to try new activities which can also be used at home to provide consolidation of learning, a supportive environment which highlights what each child can do as well as individual support from the team to understand diagnoses and navigate the SEND system.



Natalie Cabrera (Sense MSI Practitioner) working with a young child at a specialist pre-school group

Home based support is often similar to the work carried out in groups but on a more individualised basis. This is often more relevant for children who have recently come out of hospital or when they are very young and not yet ready to access the more complex environment of a group. Some families prefer to start with home based support as they develop their own confidence to access a group.

An important element of individual advice and support with future planning is empowering the family to communicate with professionals their child's strengths and their future support needs.

At hospital clinics and appointments we provide a holistic view of the individual child and can ensure that their specific needs as a young child, with multi-sensory impairment, are considered at all times. Pastoral and emotional support is also particularly important while children are in hospital or experiencing medical needs.

Liaison with other professionals including portage, nurseries, schools, preschools, sensory services and therapists ensures that there is a consistent, meaningful package of support around the child, where there are consistent strategies employed and agreed outcomes.

Conclusion

Support in the Early Years is vital for children with multi-sensory impairment. Supporting the child to develop their access to information, access to sensory information (including through tactile means, through movement, through residual vision and/or hearing), individual communication, play skills, interaction skills/opportunities and mobility/orientation opens up their world. Receiving meaningful feedback, in accessible ways, from parents, caregivers and professionals provides the motivation and incentive for them to 'reach out', explore and interact in their world. The impact is additive. The more information we can provide them which they can access, the more they will 'reach out'.

As well as effective, individualised support for the child, support for the family in the early years is equally vital. Supporting the family to recognise and develop their child's skills, as well as empowering them to advocate for

their child's needs is hugely powerful. Arming the family with strategies and knowledge raises confidence and self-esteem (both for the family and child) and future proofs the child's experience of the world.

Sense Specialist Services for Children and Young People

Sense Specialist Services for Children and Young People is a team of Specialist Teachers of Multi-Sensory Impairment and MSI Practitioners who work in partnership with families, professionals and other organisations in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children who are multi-sensory impaired.

Sense

For everyone who is deafblind. For everyone living with complex disabilities. Sense is here to offer personalised support to help people communicate and experience the world. Our experts offer support that's tailored to the individual needs of each person, whether that's at our centres, through our holidays and short breaks, or in people's own homes. In addition to practical support, we also provide information to families, and campaign for the rights of people with complex disabilities to take part in life.

In order to refer a child to access our services please contact our Information and Advice service on 0300 330 9256 or info@sense.org.uk. You can also find further information on our website www.sense.org.uk



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Reference

Early Support (2012). *Information about multi-sensory impairment*, 4th edition

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