



Chapter 1

How Can I Help My Child?

The Stories of Kamala and Rani

Kamala

Kamala and her parents Suma and Anil live in a small village in southern India. When Kamala was very young, her parents noticed that she never reached for the toys they offered her. So they took her to the doctor in a nearby town to see what was wrong.

The doctor told them that Kamala was almost blind. She could see some movement and the difference between light and dark, but nothing more. "Her sight will not get better," the doctor said. Suma and Anil returned home, very sad. "How could this have happened?" Suma thought. "She is such a nice child." Suma was sad for a long time.

Suma and Anil cared for Kamala the best they could.

Because Anil's work did not pay enough to feed his family, Suma and her 2 older daughters made clothes to sell at the market. There was little time to play with Kamala while the family worked, and she spent most of the day sitting quietly in the corner. Sometimes Suma worried that Kamala rarely moved or made sounds, but she also was relieved that Kamala seemed content just being near them.

By the time Kamala was 3, she knew only a few words. She seemed to be lost in her own world most of the time, making strange movements like poking her eyes or flapping her hands. She could not feed or dress herself. It was faster for Suma to do these things for her.

*Suma,
you have
been crying
for months.*

*Kamala is
blind, but
your other
children can
see.*

*Try to
think of
other
things.*





Because Kamala did not play as other children her age did, and had not learned to care for herself, her arms and legs never grew strong. When other children her age were learning to stand and walk, Kamala's legs were too weak to support her weight.

When she was old enough to start school, Kamala's parents carried her to the schoolhouse. But school frightened her, because she had never been away from home. Day after day Kamala sat in class and cried. If the teacher spoke to her she would not answer. Finally, Suma and Anil decided that school was not helping Kamala and stopped taking her. But they worried about her future. "If she can't get an education, how will she live? Who will take care of her when we are gone?"

Rani

Rani is a little blind girl, born in another village in India. When her parents Jeevan and Aruna learned their baby was blind, Rani's grandmother Baka said, "We should do everything we can to teach this baby. Look at me. I lost my sight 5 years ago. I can still do most of the things I used to do. I still bring water from the well. I still milk the goats."

"But you could already do all those things before you went blind," Jeevan replied. "How could a blind baby learn?"

"We must help her learn," Baka answered him. "Just as I've learned to do things by sound and touch, so Rani must learn."

I can help Rani learn how to do things, since I know what it's like to be blind. Maybe the health worker will have some ideas, too.



The health worker suggested they give Rani lots of objects to play with, and encourage her to use her hearing, touch, and smell to make up for what she could not see. "And talk to her a lot," the health worker said.

Baka, especially, had Rani touch and listen to everything. She played games with her and sang to her. When Rani was 2, Baka taught her to feel her way along the walls and fence, just as she did. By age 3, Rani could find her own way to the latrine and the well.



Jeevan, Aruna, and Baka did not have a lot of time to do special activities with Rani. They worked long hours in their small shop. But they helped Rani learn new skills by including her in what they were already doing, like going to the market. These simple, everyday activities made a big difference in helping Rani develop many skills.

When Rani started school, the local children came for her every day. When the villagers saw them all walking down the road together, it was hard to tell which child was blind.

Understanding the stories of Kamala and Rani

If your child cannot see well or is blind, you can help her learn many skills, just as Rani's family helped her. But it is important to understand why Rani was able to learn the skills other children her age were learning while Kamala did not learn them.

To understand this, it helps to know:

- how children develop (learn new skills as they grow)
- how difficulty seeing affects development

How children develop

Every child develops in 3 main areas: physical (body), mental (thinking), and social (talking, listening, and getting along with other people). In each area, a child learns new skills step by step in a certain order.

Before a child can learn to walk, for example, he must first learn many simple kinds of body control:



- ① First, he needs to be able to hold his head up and to move his arms and legs.



- ② Then he can use his arms and legs to lift himself to sit.



- ③ While sitting, he begins to reach, lean, and twist. This helps him develop balance – a skill he will soon need for standing and walking.

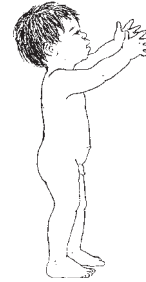


- ④ Then he pulls himself up to a standing position.

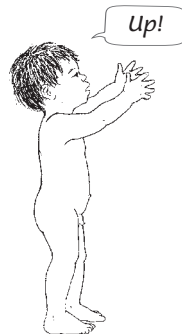
Before a child can have a conversation with other people, he needs to learn many simple communication skills like:



① understanding simple words and requests



② using signs or gestures



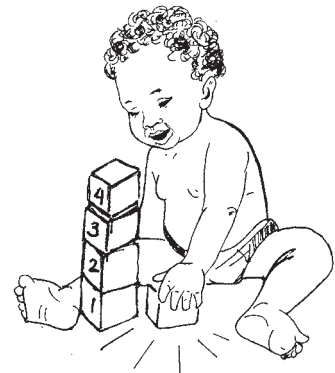
③ saying simple words



④ using short sentences

Each new skill a child learns builds on the skills he already knows and prepares him to learn other, more difficult skills. So when a child does not learn a skill, this means he not only has problems with that skill, but with other skills that depend on it.

For example, if he has a problem holding up his head, he will then have difficulty learning skills like sitting or crawling in which holding up the head is important. Over time, his development begins to fall behind other children his age.



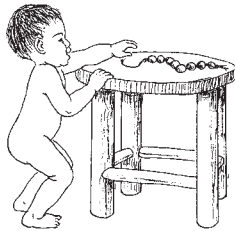
Each new skill builds on already-learned skills, like building blocks.

How vision problems affect development

When a child can see, she usually develops skills 'naturally' as she watches and plays with the people and objects she sees around her. Playing gives a child many 'natural' opportunities to move about and to learn.



When a child sees an interesting object, she reaches for it or crawls to get it. This helps her arms and legs grow strong.



Playing with objects helps a child learn thinking skills, like solving simple problems. Here a child learns how to bring her toy closer by pulling its string.

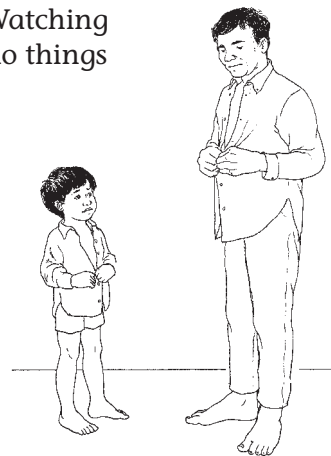


Playing also helps a child to talk. When she is interested in objects, she learns to name them.

Children naturally copy what they see. Watching other people helps a child learn how to do things and how to behave.

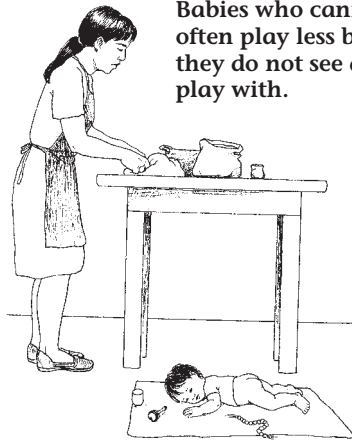


A young child learns to speak by hearing other people speak and by seeing what they talk about.



A child learns how to dress himself by watching other people.

A child who cannot see well has fewer 'natural' opportunities to learn. So he may learn skills more slowly than children who see, and his development may begin to fall behind.



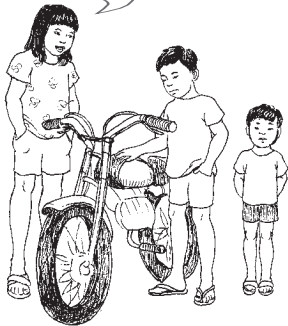
Babies who cannot see well often play less because they do not see anything to play with.

This baby cannot hold up his head. This happened because he did not move about and play, so his neck muscles never grew strong.

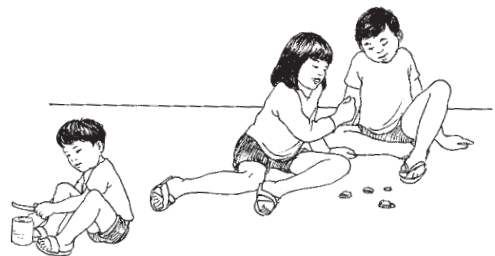


His social development may begin to fall behind as well.

Papa let me ride with him yesterday. We went fast!



A child who cannot see well may not understand or take part in conversations because he cannot see what is being talked about.

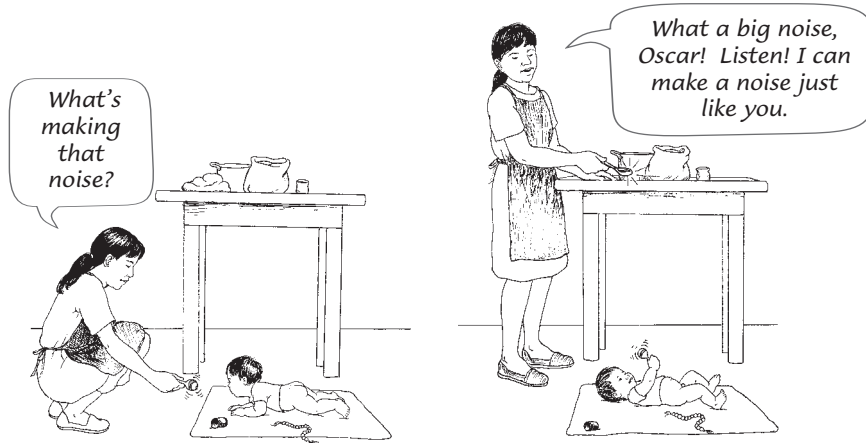


So he may begin to spend a lot of time alone because he does not understand what others are saying.

Most of these problems do not have to happen. Children who cannot see can learn to use their other senses — their sense of hearing, touch, smell, and taste — to help them understand their world and to learn what other children usually learn by seeing.

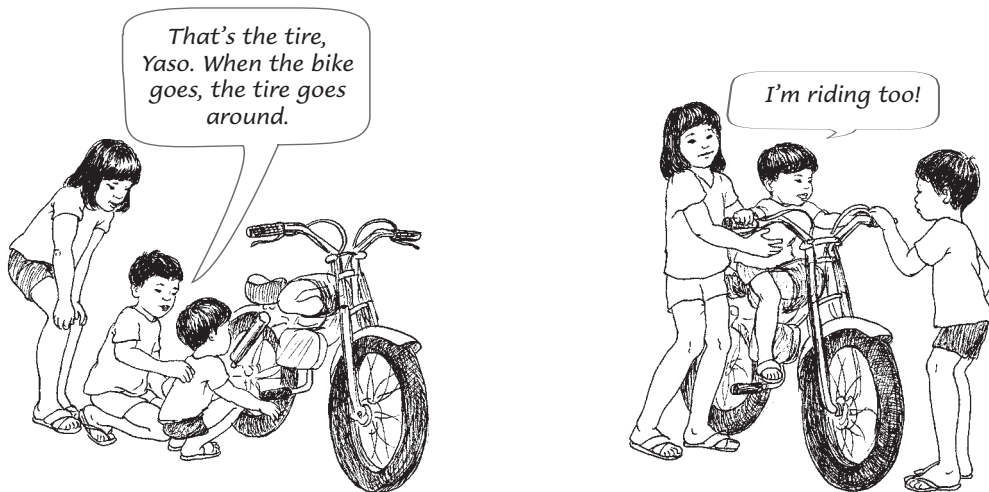
How you can help

Helping young children develop all areas of their body and mind through planned opportunities to experience, explore and play with things is called 'stimulation' or 'early assistance.' In this book you will find many simple activities that can be done as you play with your child or as you do your daily work. You can also adapt these activities so they fit with your child and your daily life. For example:



If you get your baby's attention with a noisy toy and show him the sound it makes...

...he will be more interested in playing. He will also learn to pay attention to sounds and where they come from.



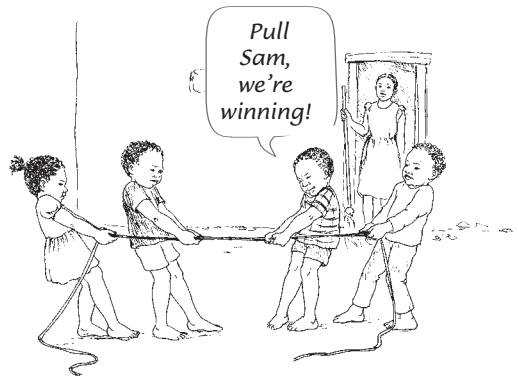
If you encourage a child to use his sense of touch, hearing, and smell to find out what objects are like...

...he will learn more about the world and be able to talk about what he knows.

If you do these kinds of activities often, your child will have a childhood as full of fun and learning as any other child. As he grows up he can learn to:



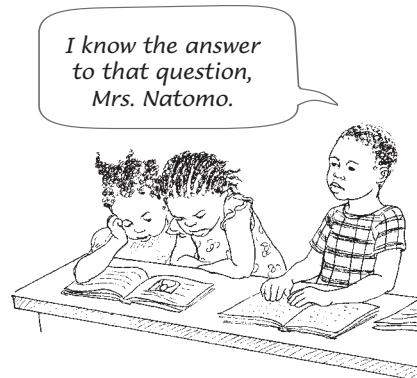
move about by himself



play with other children



help with the family's work



go to school or learn a trade

What about my child's future?

Many parents worry about their child's future, even after he begins to learn new skills and go to school. They wonder, "What will happen when he grows up? How will he manage when we are gone?"

Sometimes it helps parents to learn about others who, even though they cannot see, have grown up to lead full and satisfying lives — to have families of their own, to earn a living, and to become respected members of their communities. Blind people can achieve this when:

- people understand that blind children, like all children, can learn.
- their families and communities help them succeed.

Here, for example, is what the future held for Rani:

As Rani grew up, she often helped her parents in their shop. By the time she had finished school, Rani was so good at math she was able to help with the store's accounts. She also kept track of supplies by writing the lists in Braille. Rani's parents were pleased with her accomplishments.

When Rani turned 18 her parents accepted a proposal of marriage from Mani, a young man from their village. Mani and Rani were married, and after Rani had her first baby, she kept the baby beside her as she worked at the shop.

Rani was so capable, people began to rely on her skills in other ways. Children asked her to help with their school



We've seen you manage your accounts. Can you teach us too?



work. "Rani usually knows the answer," they said. And when some neighbor women started a weaving cooperative, they came to Rani for help setting up their accounts.

Sometimes Rani thinks about her life and how it might have been different if she could see. "Perhaps I would have done less if I could see," she says. "Being blind made me determined to have a life just like other people."