

Questions from Kids about Blindness

Who? What? Where? Why? How? Will? Do? Should?

We receive many letters and questions from children who wish to learn more about blindness. It is important for blind children to learn that blindness will not prevent them from living happy and normal lives, and so blind children need to learn from good blind adult role models. We have developed this list of some of the most often asked questions by blind children, and we think it is just as important for sighted children, too.

Who was Louis Braille?

The Braille system of reading and writing was developed by a Frenchman named Louis Braille when he was just a boy. He became blind through an accident, and he discovered that trying to read raised letters was much too slow. He wanted a faster way for blind people to read and write. He modeled Braille after a system of codes used by the military, and then he expanded his system. For more information about Louis Braille, please visit your school or public library.

Who was Helen Keller?

Helen Keller was both deaf and blind. Although she had to fight to get the opportunity, she graduated from Radcliffe College. She wrote several books and worked hard to improve opportunities for the deaf and the blind. At the time when she lived, people who were both deaf and blind did not have very many opportunities. Now there is better education, training, employment, and other opportunities for the deaf-blind. You can learn more about Helen Keller from your school or public library.

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What is Braille?

Braille is a system of making raised dots on paper to form letters and words that are read by the blind with their fingertips. The basic Braille "cell" consists of two columns of three dots. The dots are numbered 1-2-3 from top to bottom on the left side of the cell and 4-5-6 from top to bottom on the right side of the cell. Each Braille letter, word, punctuation mark, number, or musical note can be made up using different combinations of these dots. Braille can be written with a Braille writing machine (similar to a typewriter). It can also be written by using a pointed stylus to punch dots down through paper using a Braille slate with rows of small "cells" in it as a guide. This method of writing Braille compares to writing print with a pen or pencil. For more information about Braille go to <http://www.nfb.org/brailco.htm>.

What is the White Cane Law?

Each state has a law that says blind people using canes or dogs have the same rights of public access as the sighted. This means that blind people can take their canes and dogs into public buildings, businesses, offices, restaurants, theaters, roller skating arenas, bowling alleys, amusement parks, on busses, trains, planes, and other public places. These laws were established from the work of the National Federation of the Blind to make sure that blind people have the same rights as everyone else.

What kind of jobs do blind people have?

Just about anything. Here's a list of some occupations in which blind people are working today, but there are many more. Farmers, lawyers, secretaries, factory workers, drill press and lathe operators, nurses, restaurant managers, child care workers, social workers, computer programmers, insurance salespeople, chemists, housewives, doctors, gas station attendants, teachers, professors, telephone operators, counselors, maintenance workers and janitors, scientists, engineers, hardware and toy store managers, librarians, beauty operators or cosmetologists, car mechanics and repair people, electrical engineers, stockbrokers, accountants, journalists, and many, many more. If you believe you can do the job, and if your employer believes you can, there are very few jobs blind people cannot do. It is most important for blind people to have the chance to choose whatever job they want, and for the public to give blind people the opportunity.

What causes blindness?

There are many things which cause blindness. Sometimes babies are born blind, but most blind people become blind later on. Glaucoma, cataracts, and diabetic retinopathy are the three most common causes of blindness today. Many older persons lose their vision from macular degeneration. Some people become blind through accidents.

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Where do blind children go to school?

In the past most blind children went away from home to attend residential schools for the blind. There still are special schools for blind children in most states. Now, however, most blind children are able to attend school in their home communities. Most children who now attend the residential schools for the blind have other disabilities in addition to blindness. Blind children in public schools are in regular classrooms, and use a cane and read and write Braille. These blind students might work some of the time with a special teacher who would also help get the special books needed by blind children. These Braille books would contain the same things your books would have in print. Blind children take the same classes that the other kids the same age take. At first, the special teacher would correct the papers that would be in Braille, until the blind student learned to type the work on a typewriter. Then, any teacher could correct the papers.

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Why do some blind people use dogs and others use canes for travel?

It is simply a matter of personal choice. Some blind people like using canes better, and some enjoy using dogs. No matter what you choose, the most important thing is that blind people are able to go wherever they want, whenever they want, independently.

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How does a blind person identify money?

Coins such as nickels, pennies, dimes, and quarters are easy to tell apart. They all are different sizes, and quarters and dimes have ridges around them, while pennies and nickels are smooth. There are many ways that paper money—like one, five, ten, or twenty dollar bills—can be identified. Some blind people like to keep different bills in separate places in their wallets, especially if it is a larger bill that they perhaps do not often carry with them. The most common way to tell paper money apart is to fold the bills in different ways. Each person will have his or her own way of folding them; there is no standard for everyone. Maybe a five dollar bill is folded in half the long way, and a ten dollar bill is folded in half the short way. Or maybe the ten is folded twice. A one dollar bill might be folded one way or not folded at all. Or maybe a twenty dollar bill is folded in fourths or not at all. Everyone uses his or her own methods. When we get money back from someone else, we ask which bill is which and then fold it.

How do blind people get around?

There are many ways for the blind to go from one place to another. Using a long white cane when you walk allows someone who is blind to locate steps, curbs, streets, driveways, doorways, bicycles, elevators, escalators, people, chairs, tables, desks, or any other object or place. The cane is long enough to be about two steps ahead of your feet as you walk, so you

find things with your cane before you get to them. There are canes of all sizes, including very small ones for children and long ones for tall people. Some blind people like to use a guide dog to get around. These dogs are especially trained to move around things, go through doorways, and stop at curbs and stairs. When the blind person hears that it is safe to cross the street, he or she will tell the dog to go ahead. And when the blind person gets to the address of the restaurant or business, the dog will find the door. The blind person using the dog is always in charge and must tell the dog what to do.

How do blind people identify their clothes?

Most articles of clothing will have at least one distinct way of identifying them by feel. They will have different buttons or snaps or bows or ties or the fabric or texture will be different. Some dresses or skirts will have belts or elastic at the waist or different kinds of pockets. You might know that the red shirt is the one with the funny-shaped buttons, or the blue pants are the ones with no pockets. You can tell that the blouse with the fuzzy collar is green and is the one that matches the green pants with the belt that feels like rope. In this way, blind people can tell their clothes apart by touch, and they can tell what clothes match each other. Sometimes, however, there may be more than one shirt or blouse that feels alike; men's ties can feel alike also. For these times, some blind people like to mark their clothes in a special way in order to tell them apart. There are tags that are meant for sewing in Braille labels, or use a safety pin to identify that this is a black pair of jeans. Some people sew a button to the tag of a blue suit and cut out a corner of the tag on a gray suit. Some people make a list of the suits, shirts, ties, and other clothes that feel alike and match them with each other using Braille numbers and letters attached to each piece of clothing. When you buy something at the store or when someone gives you clothes as a gift, ask him or her to describe the item(s) so you can learn how they look and how they feel.

How do blind people recognize colors?

Some blind people are able to see some colors. Sometimes a blind person might have enough vision to see all colors, or maybe he or she can only tell bright colors. Some blind people can see some colors but not all of them, or they might have a hard time telling blue or black or brown apart, or pink from white. Some blind people do not see any colors. It is important to learn about colors even if you cannot see them. You need to learn what colors look nice together, and what colors do not match, and about stripes, plaids, and other patterns. This is important for clothing and decorating. You need to understand that the sky is mostly blue and grass is mostly green, and the colors of the ocean and the colors of leaves in the fall are just as important for the blind to know as everyone else.

How do blind people shop for groceries?

There are many kinds of food that can be identified by touch, such as fruits and vegetables, hot dogs, chicken, and other items. But things like cans of soup, cereal boxes, canned vegetables,

gallons of milk, ice cream containers, and other things may be hard to identify. Many blind people like to shop with a friend who will help to find things and can read the different brands and types. Or a blind person might use a store employee who can help find the groceries. Some blind people (especially if they are buying a lot of things) will make a print list for someone else to read, and they will use a Braille list for themselves.

How do blind people read Braille?

It takes some practice to become a good reader of Braille, just as it does with print. We learn Braille by feeling the different dots in each Braille “cell” and memorizing what the different combinations of dots stand for. It is best to learn Braille when you are young, even if you can still read some print. That way, you have had many years of practice and experience to develop good Braille skills by the time you are an adult. Blind adults can learn Braille through many different types of programs or classes. Good Braille readers—like good print readers—can read much faster than they can talk. Today blind people use Braille to take notes in high school and college, to write letters, to read books and magazines, to keep addresses and phone numbers, to keep recipe files, to write books and other materials, and to do the other things you might do using print. There are special libraries that provide Braille and recorded books and magazines for the blind free of charge. Most states have one or more of these libraries where blind people can borrow these materials.

How do blind people cook?

Blind people can use the same gas or electric ovens, microwaves, grills, mixers, food processors, blenders, electric knives, skillets, fryers, crock pots, and other kitchen tools and appliances as the sighted use. We can put Braille labels on the microwave touch buttons, and some blind people like to use Braille or a special marking glue to put dots on some of the stove or oven temperature dials. It is easier to use things like measuring cups and spoons that stack with different sizes rather than ones with lines drawn on them. We can tell by the smell, sound, temperature, time of cooking, texture, and consistency how our foods are cooking. If you are newly blind, there are special training programs to help you learn to cook without vision. Some blind people, just like some sighted people, will enjoy cooking more than others.

How do blind people know what is in the can or package on the shelf?

Many different foods and packages can be identified by the size, shape, or kind of container they come in. Boxes of spaghetti, ketchup bottles, tuna cans, bags of rice or beans, flour, sugar, coffee or tea, chocolate syrup, peanut butter jars, nuts, and other kinds of snacks are some of the packages that are easy to tell what they are. Other things, like cans of vegetables or fruit, soups, sauces, cake mixes, and some spices can be labeled in Braille, or a portion of the wrapper can be torn off to tell the tomato soup from the chicken soup. Some Braille labels are written on cards, that can be used many times and are attached to the can or package with a rubber band. Sometimes you can use smell or taste to tell things apart. Cinnamon is very

different from pepper, and grape jelly is different from strawberry. Some blind people like to label their foods right at the store as they buy them, and some people like to do this at home with someone who can read the labels to them. Each blind person will have his or her own way of identifying or labeling different packages.

How does a blind person tell time?

There are watches that open up so a blind person can feel where the hands are and can feel Braille dots at the different hour points. There are also talking watches that speak the time and have an alarm built in. And there are many talking clocks that have many different types of alarms that people can use in their home, in their office, or when they travel. For people who can read some print, there are also clocks and watches with large print faces.

How does a blind man shave or tie a necktie?

Blind men can do each of these things by feel, without looking, just like sighted men. With practice, shaving and tying ties become habit and routine, and you can do them without even thinking about it very much. Some men like to shave in the shower, and some do not. Men can feel where they need to shave, and if they have beards or mustaches, they can feel where to trim them. Actual shaving techniques, such as how long to make each stroke or what angle to use, or what types of shaving products to use, are a matter of personal choice and are the same for men whether they are blind or sighted. Tying ties can take a bit of practice if you are sighted, too. Once you have learned the kinds of knots and what length is correct for you, you can tie a tie easily; you do not have to look in a mirror or see it. Some men learn how to do these things from their fathers, older brothers, friends, from seeing it done on television, or from reading about it.

How does a blind woman put on make-up and do her hair?

Each of these things can be done without using a mirror or any vision. It can take some practice in the beginning, but blind women do as good of a job with their make-up and hair as sighted women. It is often helpful to work with someone who can show you some techniques when you are first learning. You can feel the different ways of drying, curling, or styling your hair. You can feel when the hair is right, or if you have missed a spot. You can apply make-up by touch, by feeling the different places where you want different kinds of the make-up to be. You may want to learn the colors that are best for you by asking people whose opinions you trust until you discover what you like best. As in cooking, some blind women will like wearing more make-up and styling their hair more than others, just like sighted women.

How does a blind person know he's in front of his house?

Blind people can use many cues to help them find addresses and places. Learning to locate specific addresses is an important part of getting around. In addition to this, we can locate

places by looking for perhaps the second driveway on the right, the third set of stairs on the left, or the house with the wooden fence along the sidewalk. We can also look for the large tree in the front, the signpost, or a special kind of door. Blind people help to keep track of where they are and where they are going by using directions such as north, south, east, or west, and by using other cues, such as a busy one-way street, an empty lot, or a schoolyard. Any of these kinds of information can help blind people travel from one place to another. And if it is someplace where you are a lot (like your home or office) you become very familiar with it.

How does a blind person know when to cross the street?

A blind person can tell when it's safe to cross the street by listening to the sounds of the traffic. If there is a light at the intersection, it is easy to hear when the cars going across in front of you begin to slow down and stop, and when the cars along the side of you start to move. Then you know the light has changed and you have the green light to cross. You can even start to listen for this when you are a half of a block away. If there is no light, you can simply listen to hear if there are any cars coming.

How does it feel to be blind?

When you are newly blind, in the beginning, it can feel frustrating or scary. This is because you have not learned how to do things for yourself as a blind person. But once you learn the skills that blind people use, you no longer feel that way. Blind people do the same things as sighted people. We go to school or work, and we do the things that we need to do. We do this naturally, without even thinking about being blind. The blindness becomes just another part of who we are and what we are like. We don't think about being blind every day, just like you don't think every day about whether or not you have red hair or brown hair.

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Will I learn more about blindness if I close my eyes or wear a blindfold?

No, it is not a good idea to try to pretend to be blind. As a matter of fact, you could get just the opposite impression about what it is like to be blind. You might have a hard time finding things, you might bump into things, you might knock something over, or you might hurt yourself. You might feel frightened, frustrated or confused; then you might think this is what it is like for blind people. But it is not like that for us. Blind people (depending on how long they've been blind) have training and experience that you do not have, and we know how to do things (sometimes differently) that you do not. It is easier for us than it would be for you. If you want to learn more about blindness, instead of pretending to be blind, you might want to ask a blind person to talk with you. Perhaps you will want to contact a [local chapter](#) of the National Federation of the Blind.

Do blind people play games or cards?

Yes. It is easy to put Braille on decks of cards, including cards for games like Uno. Some cards are printed with very large numbers and letters for people who use large print. Many games such as Scrabble can be played with Braille letters and a board with raised or tactile squares. Backgammon boards can also be tactile and so can boards for chess or checkers. These pieces can be made of different textures, shapes, and colors to tell them apart, or a small piece of tape can be put on one set. Monopoly cards can be Brailled, and the board can also be Brailled or marked. Yahtzee and other games using dice are easy if you use dice with dots that you can feel and count. Not all games have to be made especially for the blind. Many games and toys that you buy at the store are easy and fun for the blind. Sometimes you can use your imagination to think of ways that a blind person can use the same things as a sighted person.

Do blind people feel bad about being blind? Do they like to talk about it?

Most blind people are too busy to think about blindness very much. But being blind is nothing to be ashamed of. Blindness is a perfectly respectable characteristic of a person. Most blind people would be glad to answer any questions you have about blindness, just ask them. When someone first loses sight, then he or she might be unhappy. After receiving special help to learn how to do things as a blind person and having a more positive attitude about being blind, then a person can learn to feel okay about blindness.

I hope these questions have helped you to learn more about blindness and blind people. If you wish more information I hope you will contact us.

Should I help a blind person to cross the street?

If a blind person asks you for help, then you may certainly help. You can ask if any help is needed, but understand that the answer may be “no.” Blind people, if they have learned to use a cane or dog and travel independently, may not need help. It is important not to grab someone who is blind. If a blind person wants help, he or she may take your arm, or simply walk beside you. Some blind persons may have a harder time hearing the cars and traffic, especially if there is construction or a lot of noise around the area. Then they might want help that they might not need other times.

Should I help a blind person to a chair?

The same rules apply here. Some blind people will appreciate help in locating a chair, but some can find chairs, tables, and desks on their own. Sometimes a blind person may ask where the chairs or tables are, then go to them on his or her own.

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