

SUPPORTING LIFE SKILLS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT AND OTHER DISABILITIES

An Early Years Habilitation Handbook

Fiona Broadley



A **Speechmark** Book

Supporting Life Skills for Young Children with Vision Impairment and Other Disabilities

This practical resource is designed to help professionals, parents and carers as they support children with vision impairments to develop independence in everyday tasks. Using the Early Years Foundation Stage framework as a basis, it provides a wealth of strategies and activities to develop key skills, including dressing, maintaining personal hygiene, eating and drinking and road safety.

This is an invaluable tool that can be dipped in and out of to help make learning fun, boosting the child's confidence and helping create a positive 'can-do' attitude when faced with new challenges.

This book:

- ◆ Addresses the main problem areas for babies and young visually impaired children and their families, by providing simple explanations of skills and offering strategies and techniques to support progression onto the next stage.
- ◆ Is written in a fully accessible style, with photocopiable pages and additional downloadable resources.
- ◆ Provides a variety of documentation to chart the child's development and show progress over time.

Research shows strong indicators that early intervention can reduce or eliminate developmental delays in children with a vision impairment. The supporting strategies in this book help busy professionals and carers to make every opportunity a learning opportunity, allowing children with a vision impairment to become confident and independent individuals.

Fiona Broadley has worked for the last 30 years, exclusively teaching mobility and independent living skills to children and young people with vision impairments, many of whom have additional needs.

As the Chair of Habilitation VIUK (formerly MISE), she assisted in the gathering of research for the Mobility21 Project, which ultimately led to the creation of the National Quality Standards for the delivery of habilitation training and the creation of the new profession of habilitation specialist.

She heads a team of registered qualified habilitation specialists, all of whom have contributed to the ideas and practice found within this book. She now also lectures to student habilitation specialists at Birmingham City University, and with her team delivers the habilitation elements of the training for specialist teachers of the visually impaired at the University of Birmingham.

She lives in (not so) rural Warwickshire with her family and the school buddy dog, Griff.

*Supporting
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with Vision
Impairment and
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An Early Years
Habilitation Handbook*

Fiona Broadley

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Common terms used in this book

- ◆ **You** will refer to the parent, guardian, carer or professional supporting the child.
- ◆ The use of **he**, **she** or **they** is interchangeable when referring to the child.
- ◆ The book will use the term **vision impairment** to refer to a range of different eye conditions affecting vision. A child may be referred to as **vision impaired** or **severely vision impaired**, which may be abbreviated to **VI** or **SVI** respectively. Occasionally, the terms **sight impaired** and **severely sight impaired** may be used, as these are the currently accepted terms used on the certificate of vision impairment. These both replace, but are synonymous with, 'partially sighted' and 'blind'.
- ◆ Reference may also be made to **tactile learners**. These children are unable to draw any visual information and are dependent on tactile communication learning methods such as **Braille**, **moon**, on body signing, etc. It does not necessarily preclude the use of speech. References to children with useful vision or residual vision target those who would benefit from increased contrast or well-saturated colours.
- ◆ **Dual sensory impairment** relates to sight and hearing loss.
- ◆ **MDVI** stands for **multiple disabilities and vision impairment**, and **MSI** for **multi-sensory impairment**.
- ◆ **Habilitation training** is the term used for the teaching of orientation and mobility and independent living skills (or life skills) to children and young people with vision impairments.
- ◆ Anything in **bold** throughout the text can be found in the Glossary.



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Part one

Introduction



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Introduction

If you have no previous experience, it can be very daunting supporting a child with a vision impairment. You want to do the best for the child, but don't know where to begin. The aim of this handbook is to introduce you to a range of practical activities, skills and strategies which will help a child with vision impairment to be as independent as possible. It is aimed at children of all ages, but specifically targets the Foundation Stage (ages 0–5), with Intermediate and Higher stages to follow. These divisions are artificial, as targets should be stage, not age, appropriate. You should use your own judgement about whether any task is age or ability appropriate or seek guidance from your **habilitation specialist**.

Whilst a number of these skills should be achievable in the Early Years, this does not always happen, and the majority of the tasks and skills in this handbook can also be incorporated into a life skills programme for older children. There are some activities that require greater developmental maturity to provide progression. Chronological age is no indicator of maturity, ability or skill, and for some children delays could stem from factors not related to sight impairment. Bear in mind that there are optimal learning windows for developmental skills. If you miss a window, the skill can still be learned, but it may take longer. Think of it as a roadblock in the brain: it's not insurmountable, it just needs a detour.

The UK Government (2014) published a Code of Practice for organisations who work with and support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), 0 to 25 years which applies in England. They maintain that:

All children and young people are entitled to an education that enables them to:

- achieve their best;
- become confident individuals living fulfilling lives; and
- make a successful transition into adulthood, whether into employment, further or higher education or training.

However, this begins with early, effective intervention and there are not enough specialists to meet this need. With appropriate early intervention, children with vision impairments would achieve the same developmental milestones at the same time as children who are fully sighted (Norris et al. 1957, quoted in Mason and McCall 1997). Vision impairment is regarded as a low incidence, high impact condition. This means that, whilst the numbers are quite low, the specialist teaching, adaptive strategies and devices are time-consuming and expensive. With such a small market, most devices never make it to mass production.

Achieving an appropriate level of independence cannot be valued too highly. Apart from gaining practical skills, learning to undertake independent living tasks improves self-esteem and confidence, and prepares a child for greater involvement in society and the world around them.

There is still a shortage of **registered, qualified habilitation specialists** (RQHS), which cannot be immediately addressed. Therefore, this handbook is intended to set you on your way to supporting children with a vision impairment achieve a variety of independent living skills. It is specifically UK based, so the terminology, services and equipment are relevant and available here. You don't need to read from cover to cover, but rather dip in and out as the need arises.

This handbook primarily targets children and young people with vision impairment. However, a high proportion of the children also have additional disabilities. From personal experience, it has become clear that many of these strategies work equally well with children without a vision impairment who (for whatever reason) have struggled to absorb the necessary skills. Many are particularly suitable for children with autistic spectrum or sensory processing disorders. Much lateral thinking will be needed, because the most obvious way is not always the best. There is no correct way; safety and success are key. Consider each child as an individual and help them achieve as much as they can, safely within their own capabilities.

Most sighted children learn incidentally – that is, by observing their parents and siblings and modelling behaviour. Many exhibit an innate desire to achieve tasks independently. Those who have limited or no vision are at a great disadvantage in the learning process. Without the visual prompt and stimulation, it can be difficult to self-motivate. This is where you come in, as these children need to be specifically taught each of these skills that, with vision, are absorbed effortlessly. Most parents begin encouraging independence from very early on without even realising. Once aware of what you can do, the possibilities are endless!

Bear in mind your aim is to build independence. Your child may need a high level of support and intervention initially, but this should gradually reduce over time as your child learns and takes responsibility for their own development.

BASIC SKILLS AND STRATEGIES YOU WILL NEED

Patience

Repetition of tasks may try the patience of you both. Persevere but try and add in other activities to break monotony, and always try to build in some element of success, even if the entire task cannot be achieved. Don't be afraid to try different techniques if the first one doesn't work.

Never try to introduce tasks when you are short of time. Children tend to work best without time constraints or other pressures. If you are struggling, break the task down into each of its smallest component parts and find a way of working on them first.

Praise and encouragement

Focus on the good. Make it easy for the child to succeed, don't set them up for failure. Prepare the task well and, as the child succeeds and gains confidence, you can either gradually withdraw your assistance or add to the task, making it more challenging. Consider trying new

tasks yourself, blindfolded. Consider which aspects you might find difficult, then try thinking how your prior knowledge affects your abilities! Encourage the child to share their success with others. Consider the introduction of appropriate rewards and incentives if necessary. Create a 'Can do' rather than a 'Can't do' environment.

Consistency

Once you have found a method or strategy that works for your child, stick to it and encourage everyone else who works with him to work the same way. He will only get confused if different people present different strategies. Use the same correct terminology as far as possible, as this also promotes consistency.

Working at the child's level

This means you physically get on the floor with him if necessary, to make eye contact easier, but also choose activities that are suitable and engaging. You will need a young child to perceive you as playing with them, or participating in their activity. However, an older child must never think you are patronising. For this you may find it useful to have a basic understanding of child physical, motor and sensory development. You may not think twice about sitting at home with your own child singing nursery rhymes, but for some this can seem intimidating with an audience. Simple songs and rhymes increase learning and add enjoyment: 'The early years of life provide a foundation for all later learning ... If teaching is aimed at the child's developmental level, then effective learning will result' (Blythe 2005).

Communication

Choose methods of communication suitable for your child. That means choosing language he will understand – babies and toddlers respond best to higher pitches and exuberance. Babies can recognise their mothers by their scent. If there could be any confusion, address the child by name – a good habit to get into. If you are not immediate family, introduce yourself. Wearing the same bracelet, watch or other jewellery item, provides tactile identity reinforcement. Some people go as far as using the same perfume or body spray. These and similar strategies also work well with children on the autistic spectrum. It is no fun trying to guess who you are talking to when you can't see. Think how you might feel if you met someone out of context and couldn't remember their name.

Poems, songs and rhymes all add enjoyment and make learning more memorable. Remember: you really can hear a smile in your tone of voice. Children with severe sight impairment, like those on the autistic spectrum, require clear instructions. Avoid idiomatic use of language and if specialist terminology or jargon is necessary, be prepared to explain. If you had no prior awareness, think what the phrase 'It's raining cats and dogs!' conjures. Would *you* want to go outside?

Your child is likely to be very dependent on verbal description and instruction, so help him to build his skills. If you have any concerns, seek a referral to a **speech and language therapist**. Contrary to popular belief, those with sight impairment do not have super hearing. They do have brain capacity to

make good use of listening skills and draw more information from auditory sources, though. However, good listening skills and concentration need to be taught.

If your child needs **objects of reference**, try to build progression into the objects you choose. For instance, choose a toilet roll, rather than a nappy, to indicate the toilet. Progress can take some time, but you want objects of reference to promote the idea of greater independence and be age appropriate as your child matures.

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

If at first you don't succeed, try a different way!

Recognise that there is no set way of doing things.

There may be tried-and-tested ways that work with most

children, but your child is unique. As long as he is safe

and successful, the 'how' doesn't matter. Achieving success at the first attempt is not the norm.

Trying again builds resilience. After all, 'FAIL' stands for '**F**irst **A**tttempt **I**n **L**earning'! We all have to overlearn things. We need to do them over and over again until we get the whole process right without breaking it down into component parts or even thinking about it at all. Some children may need more practice than others.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED,
TRY, TRY, TRY AGAIN.

When to seek help

Every child is different, and some have complex conditions and medical needs that must be taken into consideration. Find out as much as possible about any conditions the child has, and what potential effects they may have on their development. If you have any concerns, don't be afraid to ask other professionals for help and guidance.

Many different teaching skills and strategies are explained in more detail in the Glossary (pages 223–235). These include **demonstration, forward chaining, backward chaining, hand over hand, hand under hand, verbal directions, scaffolding**, or a combination of any of these. The Glossary also contains contact details for specialist organisations and charities that may offer resources, support or advice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Children learn through play. It is an essential part of child development and provides a means by which you can identify the stage a child is at. Play gives the child a chance to rehearse scenarios and build an understanding of the world.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), play is defined as being for its own sake (without a specific goal), voluntary, enjoyed by participants and imaginative. It can be solitary or social, and with or without objects. Young children acquire and consolidate developmental skills through playful interactions with people and objects.

Modern society has changed expectations for children. Children are generally left to their own devices less often. Parents and carers seek to entertain and 'make memories' with their children. Fewer children have day-to-day responsibilities within the household. 'Their own devices' have become electronic ones. This is not to dismiss the value of electronic devices entirely – they have great entertainment value and offer amazing access for children and young people with vision impairment – but movement is vital to development and boisterous play also needs to be encouraged. See Sections 5.00 and 6.00 'Movement' and 'Concept development' and the recommendations for further reading on pages 237–238.



You can enhance understanding and develop concepts through play, without your child noticing. Think about playing trains together. If you ask questions or provide a commentary, action and language combine to build understanding. 'The train is going up and over the bridge.'

And, finally, don't feel obliged to buy expensive specialist toys and equipment. There are plenty available on the high street.

Children love attention, so dig out those nursery rhymes from your own childhood, because they offer a wonderful way to interact with your child and mask all the teaching that is happening!

Check the later sections on activities and story bags for ideas, including using a cardboard box!

BASIC DEVELOPMENTAL SKILLS YOUR CHILD WILL NEED

In order to achieve, your child will need these skills at each relevant developmental stage:

- Body awareness.
- Gross motor skills.
- Fine motor skills.
- Dexterity and manipulation.
- Spatial awareness.
- Sensory development.
- Appropriate understanding of his environment.
- Communication.
- Comprehension/understanding of the task.
- Cooperation.

It is not possible to cover all these in detail, so it may be worth obtaining a good child development book if you are unsure of any of these areas. There are recommendations in the Further reading section (pages 237–238).

Body awareness

Body awareness is difficult when you cannot see. Use activities like bathtime to increase body awareness, and to draw attention to body parts, limbs and movement. Use massage to increase awareness of hands and fingers and to show how they bend and flex. Fasten Velcro® rattles and bells to ankles and wrists, so movement is rewarded by sound. All babies are fascinated by their own image – even with a severe vision impairment, many will still be able to see themselves in a mirror. Provide a safety mirror that your child can get close to. Good lighting and maybe magnification (depending on the type of vision your child has) may make it more accessible. And, when he is ready, give your child a cardboard box to play in. There's nothing better for helping a child realise how he fits into a space.

For progression, draw round your child on the back of some old wallpaper. Then cut out the shape and decorate it together. This will give your child a rough idea of his size and shape.

For a child with severe sight impairment, the hands provide the window to the world. Therefore, good hand and finger development enables a child to extract the maximum amount of information.

Gross motor skills

Gross motor skills are included here, because if they are good they form the basis of fine motor skills. Where these are underdeveloped, there will be fine motor problems, too. As a parent/ carer or specialist practitioner, it is vital that you liaise with other involved professionals, such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists and paediatricians. This will inform your intervention, avoid contraindications and get the best level of care and support for the child.

In order to successfully achieve the tasks in this handbook, your child will need to develop neck and shoulder strength as well as core stability (if not already in place). **Tummy time** is essential, even if your child hates it. It will also develop leg strength, as your child pushes up onto all fours and eventually starts to crawl. Many sighted children are not ready for school because they have missed vital developmental phases. A general reduction in physical activity and gross motor risk taking is responsible for this. There are increasing concerns about children's sedentary lifestyle and dependence on screen time (rather than engaging in boisterous play).

Your child will also need to develop **core stability**, so he has the strength and muscle tone to sit, stand and move around.

Encouraging fine motor skills

Fine motor skills refer to movements and actions of the hands and fingers. This includes:

- Recognition of and isolation of individual fingers, e.g. to poke and press.

- Hand and finger stability and strength.
- Bilateral coordination, using left and right hands together.
- Eye and hand coordination.
- Types of grasps, e.g. palmar, grasped in the palm of the hand; pincer (forefinger and thumb); tripod (index, middle finger and thumb).
- In-hand manipulation (being able to tuck little objects into the fingers and shuffle them away).
- Motor planning (being able to adapt to the new or changing demands of movements or actions, including coping with timed or sequenced movements).

If your child is going to be a tactile learner, it is important to develop hand and finger skills and strength.

Activities

Finger isolation and recognition

- Make story bags to enhance your child's enjoyment of a story, but get them to hunt for the correct prop in the bag.
- Treasure Island. Show an object to the child and then, without them looking, hide the object in a tub of sand/sandpit. See if they can recognise and describe the object before it is revealed.
- Put a selection of everyday objects with different textures in a bag, e.g. fork, sandpaper, cotton wool. Let the child identify the items by feeling them in the bag.
- Create a sensory treasure box, containing a wide range of different natural textures, feathers, shells, wood etc all covered by rice. The RNIB produces a wonderful leaflet on treasure boxes (www.rnib.org.uk/health-social-and-education-professionals/education-professionals/teaching-and-learning-guidance).
- Play hand action rhymes together.

Finger dexterity

- Play with pegboards and small pegs. Copy patterns (they may need to be tactile or high-contrast).
- Play with playdough, shaving cream, sand, etc.

Introduction

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- Spoon from one vessel to another. Vary size weight and density. Wet sand sticks to a spoon, whereas dry sand flows.
- Use **Wikki Stix®** or pipe cleaners.
- Do finger painting. Put a different colour of paint on each fingertip and make colourful paintings with lines and dots.
- Tear paper into small pieces and roll them into balls. You can use these balls to make collages.
- Play bashing pegs into board, progressing to Pop-Up Pirate!, or play games such as Operation or Bed Bugs if a child has enough vision.
- Sorting out small objects into colours, shapes, sizes.
- Extend your range of finger action rhymes ('Tommy Thumb', 'Two Little Dickie Birds', etc.).
- Make or buy finger puppets for thumb, index finger and middle finger. Do action rhymes or play finger games/stories that require the fingers to move separately and together. Finger puppets can make the fingers be seen more easily.
- Encourage the child to play a musical instrument. The sound provides gratification for the finger movement.
- Roll coins, small balls, throw dice, then recover them.
- Coins – post into a money box or piggy bank. See if the child can retrieve them.
- Play with a jack-in-the-box – traditional toys have stayed around for a good reason. As well as finger dexterity, a jack-in-the-box adds an element of surprise and anticipation to play.

Using both hands together

Bilateral hand use is using two hands together to grasp and manipulate objects. It starts with bringing the hands together at the midline. Eventually, one hand will become dominant. It is important to encourage passing an object from one hand to the other.

- Start with clapping games and action rhymes like 'Wind the Bobbin Up'. If your child is not doing this spontaneously, use the hand over hand method (see Glossary, page 227).
- Play with a balloon. Choose a strong colour and put some grains of rice inside it, or perhaps a little bell. The child will have to use two hands to hold a balloon.
- Give your child two-handled beakers.

- Introduce musical toys or noisy toys to bang together, so success is rewarded. Tambourines, drums and maracas all work well. However, spoons and a pan can be just as effective.
- Splash hands in the bath.

Progression:

- Playdough. Show the child how to make a ball. Roll the ball into a sausage using two hands.
- Threading activities. Give the child a shoelace and some beads. Make sure the beads will thread easily. Can she make a pattern on the lace with the beads? Make sure she is using both hands in this activity. Progress to threading smaller beads, buttons, pasta shapes, cotton reels, etc. or to making jewellery on elasticated thread.
- Play with construction kits with bricks, nuts and bolts or interlocking pieces. Building toys and construction toys – such as Duplo, blocks, boxes are all useful activities to encourage the child to build using two hands, or each hand separately. The next step would be to try Lego®, K'Nex®, Stickle Bricks® or Popoids®, which all need to be pushed together with more dexterity and force.
- Playdough. Show the child how to cut up a playdough sausage, using their knife and fork for fun. Contrast the dough with the surface or plate. Progress to making smaller sausages with their fingers, and making little peas by rolling the dough in their fingers. Aim to make little peaks in the dough using their index finger, middle finger and thumb.
- Make paper chains.
- Use stencils and templates. Use Blu Tack® to hold stencil in place, if necessary.
- Use scissors to make collages, mosaics, etc. Investigate which scissors are best for your child. There is a huge range on the market.
- Draw around cardboard shapes. Try making patterns and pictures. Put thick dark lines or tactile markings on card or heavier-weight paper to guide your vision impaired child. Alternatively, look out for embossing tools or stick something onto the paper. You may need to draw a line from the edge of the card to the object you want him to cut out.
- Art activities. Print using blocks, sponges, little cars, cotton reels and/or leaves. Give the child wool and junk to make a collage. Let them paint with a chubby brush or dip string into the paint to drop onto the paper.
- Do colouring or drawing on small pieces of paper. This encourages the child to stabilise the paper with their non-dominant hand.

Finger strength

- Pop bubble wrap. Get people to save packaging for you, or you can buy it on a roll from stationers.
- Punch holes into paper using a hole punch or craft punch.
- Cut cardboard with a pair of scissors. Try making mosaic patterns. Use the strategies above to assist low vision children.
- Play with squirty bottles.
- Play with playdough. Pinch, pull, roll, squeeze and cut.
- Play with stress relievers or stretchy toys. You can make your own with rubber gloves filled with different textures. Try ordinary flour and cornflour (which has a gelatinous feel).
- Peg or hang out dolls' clothes on a line or clothes airer.
- Cooking – mixing, sifting, kneading or use of a rolling pin or cutters. Get your child involved in making playdough.
- At bathtime, load a sponge with water, then squeeze it out.
- If you can, obtain an old-style wipes tub (rather than a box). Clean it out and then fill it with different colours and textures of materials and ribbons, all knotted together. As you pull the material, there will be resistance on each knot as it pulls through the opening.

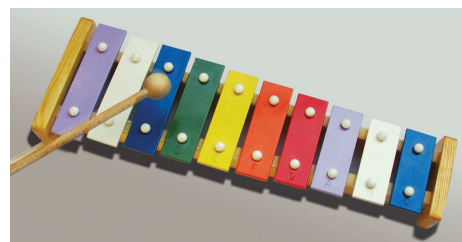
Hand strength and control

Look for connective or construction toys that need an element of force to join or separate, or stacking toys that need delicate control to avoid knocking them over.

Pushing and pulling games strengthen hands arms and shoulders. As a starting point, use rhymes like 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat'.

When your child starts nursery, he will need arm strength to get through doors, and for Braille (if he's a tactile learner).

Hammering toys are good. Select sturdy toys with bright contrasting colours if your child has some vision. Plastic



or wooden is fine, but (if possible) use it to reinforce colour, shape and texture. Remember: plastic generally all feels the same.

Right from the outset, Montessori nurseries use specially constructed real things. They place a strong emphasis on natural materials, which offer a wealth of textures and help to build descriptive language. Sometimes less is more. There is nothing wrong with allowing your child to play with an old pan and a wooden spoon! It encourages coordination, builds anticipation, demonstrates action and consequence, makes a lovely noise, and it also lets your child feel he is helping in the kitchen.



STORYTELLING

Young children love listening to stories. Don't worry if she asks for the same book over and over again. Include different voices and lots of intonation. A child with a vision impairment is highly dependent on listening skills. Reading to children from an early age builds a love of reading, and develops language, comprehension and complex concepts – all wrapped in a highly entertaining package. Silly voices and rude noises all add to the fun.

If you don't feel confident reading out loud, you can also use YouTube for ideas and reassurance. Try Michael Rosen reading *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (<https://youtu.be/ytOU2Waz4s>) or look on the National Literacy Trust website (www.wordsforlife.org.uk/) for other stories and rhymes to use with your child. You may also find Language Launchpad a useful resource: www.ouh.nhs.uk/languagelaunchpad/

Perhaps add an extra dimension to storytime by using **ClearVision** books, which all have Braille, print and pictures. This allows children with little or no sight to share books with their sighted friends and family (www.clearvisionproject.org/).

MAKE YOUR OWN STORY BAGS!

As well as enhancing the story, story bags can help with the delivery of many different concepts and can provide opportunities to develop coordination and fine motor skills.

For example, three different teddies and a doll are a brilliant start for *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

In this story, you can explore big and little, tall and small, keeping yourself safe and respect for others.

Appendix 4 contains story bag ideas (see pages 218–222).

SORTING

Sorting is a really useful activity. You can build visual and tactile discrimination, as well as learning more about specific things and developing fine motor skills. Take the opportunity to use items in a range of colours, sizes, textures and weights.



Make your own sorting tray

Save the inserts from biscuit or cake selection packs. If they seem dark or offer poor contrast, add coloured paper into each compartment or section.

If your child is sorting cutlery, they can sort directly into your cutlery drawer. While this is great in terms of taking on chores and responsibilities, for some children it may prove too complex or a bit daunting.

If you do not have an old cutlery tray available, they can be purchased in pound shops, or else in inexpensive hardware stores. They can be used for a range of things, and help to keep everything together and within reach. Takeaway containers are another sorting option, but ideally things are best kept together on a tray.

Smaller items can be sorted in an eggbox, from another container. This activity works well with coins.



Household items useful for sorting

- Buttons – organise by colour, size, texture.
- Coins – before sorting into value, try separating coins from other things, or splitting them into copper and silver.
- Cutlery – sort by type or size or texture, or match into sets, in preparation for moving onto bigger cutlery or setting the table.
- Toy cars.
- Smarties or jelly beans.



Note: Never leave children alone with anything they might swallow.

Part two

Habilitation skills: Foundation skills (Early Years) curriculum

1.00–2.00: DRESSING, UNDRESSING AND FASTENINGS	17
3.00: PERSONAL HYGIENE	27
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