



Blind Swimming

Guidelines

Background

Blind Sports & Recreation Victoria (BSRV), established in 1977, is a thriving not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting people with vision loss of all ages and backgrounds to lead healthy and active lifestyles.

In Victoria, there are over 100,000 people living with vision loss, and as the population ages, this number continues to increase. There is a growing need for sport and recreation providers to build their capacity to develop programs and offer support to ensure they are welcoming and inclusive of this cohort.

Aim of Guide

This guide has been produced to help aquatic sport and recreation providers, including aquatic facility staff, swimming teachers, club coaches, school teachers and volunteers, to overcome some of the challenges involved in effectively including people with vision loss.

This document will assist in the following:

- Understanding blindness and vision loss.
- Understanding the benefits of swimming for people with vision loss.
- Ways to ensure your facility is accessible.
- Ways to ensure you are being an inclusive service.
- Sighted guide principles.
- Different water way environments.
- Guidelines for Physical Contact - working with children. (Appendix)
- Key Services & Supports. (Appendix)

BSRV would like to acknowledge Sport and Recreation Victoria for supporting the production of this training manual and Life Saving Victoria for their input.

Understanding Blindness and Vision Loss

These eye conditions can affect mobility and confidence, and may lead to a general feeling of nervousness around water. Here are some of the conditions to be aware of:

Glaucoma

Glaucoma is a slow progressive eye condition that is hereditary. Symptoms include loss of peripheral vision and glare sensitivity.

Cataracts

Cataracts is a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye and can be compared to looking through a frosted or steamed window. Symptoms include blurring of vision, poor night vision, fading of colour perception and glare sensitivity.

Diabetic Retinopathy

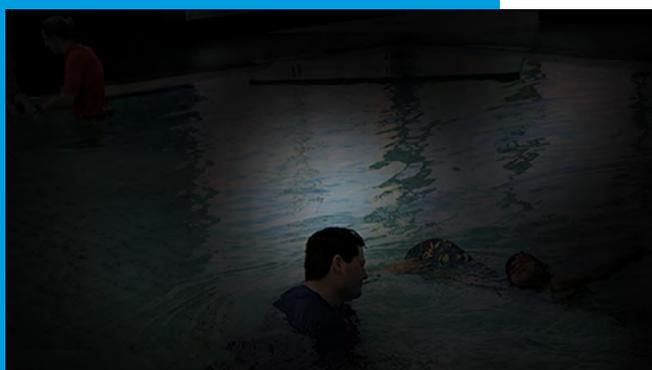
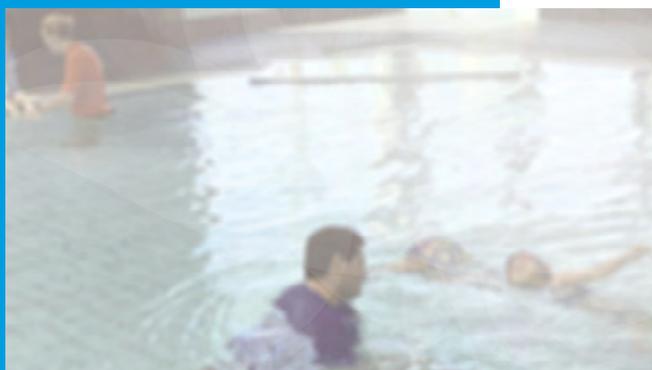
Diabetic Retinopathy is a complication of Diabetes and can lead to total blindness. Symptoms include blotchy or blurred vision, glare sensitivity and difficulty seeing at night.

Macular Degeneration

Macular Degeneration causes damage to the macular at the back of the eye and central vision loss. Symptoms lead to a blind spot in the middle of the eye, inability to see fine detail, distorted vision and fading colours.

Retinitis Pigmentosa

Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) is an inherited eye condition caused by a progressive degeneration of rod cells in the retina at the back of the eye. Symptoms include loss of peripheral vision, night blindness, seeing flashes of light, and light and glare sensitivity.



Why Swimming is Important

People who lose their vision are at increased risk of experiencing social isolation, anxiety and depression, and living sedentary lifestyles. Facilitating participation in local aquatic classes or swimming at the beach can promote valuable opportunities to improve physical fitness, mental health and overall well-being.

Swimming provides some important benefits:

Water Safety and Survival Skills

- Learning how to tread water and float are important safety skills.

Physical Fitness

- Swimming is a full body cardio-vascular and respiratory workout, enhancing overall stamina, flexibility and muscle strength.

Mental Well-being and Connection

- Swimming is a great way to bond with peers and make new friends.
- Increased confidence in the water can in turn boost one's self-esteem and mood.
- Swimming provides a sense of freedom to move rapidly without fear of collision.
- Immersion in water is stimulating to the entire skin area which can feel very relaxing.
- Swimming is fun and a great way to cool down in summer!

Social Cohesion

- More people with vision loss accessing pools and aquatic centres enhances the public awareness of blindness and vision impairment and reduces negative attitudes and prejudice.



“My son had participated in mainstream [swimming] classes from the age of only a few months old. At the age of 9 he was still unable to perform any of the technical strokes and had become disengaged and no longer wanted to have swimming lessons. In his first lesson with the [Blind Sports Swimming] program the instructor was able to explain and physically demonstrate to him how to freestyle and he managed to swim to the edge of the pool...The benefits of instructors who are able to express to the kids how things will feel in sensory terms is immense.”

Mother of child with low vision.

Making Sure your Aquatic Centre or Venue is Accessible

Practical ways to make swimming accessible for people who are blind or vision impaired:

- Train all staff eg. customer service and lifeguards, in Vision Loss Awareness - contact BSRV for further details (03) 98228876.
- Ensure the lifeguards are made aware that there are swimmers with vision loss in the pool.
- Brightly lit pools can cause discomfort and alter a person's ability to see in this environment. Install tinted windows or use lanes without sun glare to prevent this.
- If the acoustics of the pool environment are too loud, it can be challenging for the blind swimmer to hear the teacher's voice. Provide lessons during quieter periods, have small group sizes and reduce unnecessary noise, like background music and teacher-to-teacher chat.
- Think about the colour of equipment used. Red is often a good stand-out colour.
- Have audible balls containing bells on hand. These a great way of including young people with vision loss in fun games.
- When swimming laps, have 'tappers' on-hand to gently tap the person on the head when they are approaching the wall to avoid collision.
- Does the person need support in the changing area or getting to the poolside? If yes, provide a sighted guide to accompany them.
- Is your information provided in accessible formats eg. Braille, large print or audio. A person with vision loss may find technology overwhelming. A phone call can really help people stay informed of changes.
- Check that guide dogs are welcome at the centre. Ensure there is somewhere for the dog to stay safely while its owner is in the water; and that a water bowl is provided.



“My son loves his swimming lessons and is so confident now, he happily joined in the school swimming program.”

Mother of 10 year old boy who is vision impaired.



Being Inclusive

Practical ways to support people who are blind or vision impaired to join in your aquatic activity:

- Make it clear that the person with vision loss is welcome by approaching them and introducing them to others.
- Perform a roll call at the start so the person who is blind or vision impaired knows who is in their group.
- Use descriptive language when teaching. Remember, some people may not understand swimming terminology such as 'star fish' or 'dolphin kick'.
- Use the person's name when directing a question or instruction to them.
- Ask the person to repeat what you have said to check they have understood.
- Facial expressions are learnt, so do not be misled by a lack of expression or eye contact.
- Have the swimmer start with their back to the wall 'squaring off' so they can push off in the correct direction.
- Provide tactile demonstrations where necessary but always tell the swimmer in advance what you are going to do and ask permission eg. "Is it okay if I put my hand under your back to support you while you're floating?" (See Appendix for further details)
- Keep swimming lane clear of obstacles.
- Incorporate regular rests, as it can be extra tiring learning new skills when you are blind or vision impaired.
- Be aware that backstroke poses a particular challenge as having ears in the water impacts on hearing and an overall sense of orientation.
- In the deep end, the person who is blind will lose contact with other senses and can be frightened. At first, use a floatation device or have the person stay close to the edge of pool for security.
- In between swimming drills, ensure the individual can participate in the fun activities!



How to Help Someone Who is Blind or has Low Vision

Anxiety manifests in different ways - coaches/trainers should be aware it can be difficult for people who are blind or vision impaired dealing with new, unknown and potentially dangerous environments:

- Is the individual properly acquainted with the facility's layout? Encourage an orientation tour at an earlier time.
- Make the first lesson a double lesson so that quality time can be provided to set up a good working environment for student and teacher - you need time to LISTEN, get information from the family and student, and let them explore their environment.
- Some people who are blind or vision impaired have co-morbid conditions like, deafness or Autism Spectrum Disorder. Please see a list of Key Services and Supports in the Appendix.
- Unfortunately, people who are blind or vision impaired can be forgotten when they are in a group class with sighted people. For kids, this situation can lead to rowdy behaviour and getting in trouble.

To avoid this happening, consider:

- Slowing down the practice
- Providing regular reminders about what they should be doing
- Creating a buddy system with a sighted participant to provide help during class
- Providing clear handover notes with the change of teachers



“I’ve seen so many students with vision impairment struggle with anxiety as they commence swimming lessons.”

**Catherine Hill,
Volunteer - Swimming
Program Coordinator.**



Sighted Guiding #1



Some basic guiding principles:

- Identify yourself and ask the person with vision loss if they would like some assistance, do not just presume they do.
- Ask which side they prefer to be guided on, and offer your elbow for them to hold. Children may prefer to hold your hand instead of your elbow.
- Keep your guiding arm relaxed and still.
- Ensure you walk a foot in front at all times, and check if they are happy with your pace.
- Always use the person's name when directing questions to them.
- Orient the person with the change room/toilet and give them the option of using the disability or men's/women's toilet.





Sighted Guiding #2



Explain when approaching an obstacle, such as entry gates, a low ceiling or changes in surface and where the deep end of the pool is.

- When using staircases, describe how many stairs there are and whether they lead up or down.
- Narrow spaces, like doorways, can get tricky - tell the person to walk behind you, while still holding your arm.
- To assist the person to sit down, place the person's hand on the back of the chair or pool bench and tell them if the chair is at a table. Do not back them into the seat.
- Give warning if you, the coach or trainer are leaving the person's side for any reason.





“During the past three months, Formston [a surfer who is blind] and Crisp [sighted volunteer] have crafted a shorthand form of communication to cut through the noise of the waves and wind. In, out, north, south, paddle, hold (wait) and now: the essential words deployed to steer a blind surfer around the ocean.”

Heath Gilmore,
Good Weekend. 26/7/21

How to Navigate the Australian Coastline

Swimming in open water, like the beach or a river, requires a different, if not more proactive, set of precautions:

Some helpful websites to recommend to swimmers with vision loss or their parents/guardians include:

www.beachsafe.org.au

(describes beach, safe swimming section and patrol info)

www.sls.com.au/inclusivebeaches/

(Australia-wide inclusive ‘nippers’ clubs for kids)

www.accessiblebeaches.com/directory

(beaches with matting, dates and times)

- Swimmers with vision loss should always swim between the red and yellow flags at a patrolled beach where lifesavers are on duty
- Inform the lifesaver that there is a swimmer with vision loss before entering the water.
- An experienced, sighted swimmer should buddy up with the swimmer who is blind or vision impaired when going into open water and keep an arm’s distance from them whilst in the water. A rope attached between your hips and the hips of a blind swimmer is a great way to stay together.
- For reassurance, talk to the swimmer and provide intermittent physical contact, such as a brief tap on their shoulder. Discuss this need for physical contact before getting in the water. (See Appendix)
- To determine the shoreline, remind the swimmer to listen to audio cues like people talking, dogs barking, music playing or vehicles driving past.
- In an emergency, remind the swimmer that swimming in the direction the waves are travelling in eventually takes you to shore.
- If caught in a rip remind the swimmer to stay calm, float and raise an arm to attract attention. NEVER swim against the rip, only swim parallel to the shore.
- Consider wearing water shoes to avoid injury on rocks etc. when entering/exiting the water.



Top Tips - Things to Remember

It is important to remember that everyone is different, every eye condition is individual and every person will have unique needs, so always check-in with the person and their parents or carers beforehand to assess their level of vision and how to maximise, where possible, the use of any sight they have.

- It is good practice to inform facility staff and lifeguards that there is a swimmer with vision loss in the pool so they can look out for them in the event of an emergency.
- A new environment can be challenging, so offer a tour of the pool and facilities before lessons/classes commence.
- Ensure the pool is well lit, but sun glare reduced, if possible.
- Keep group sizes small to help meet communication/support needs.
- Give verbal descriptions of drills/strokes/instructions rather than giving visual demonstrations.
- Use tactile demonstrations with permission from the participant.
- In the deep end, at first, provide the swimmer with a flotation device or ensure they stay close to the edge of the pool for added security.
- Relax and be yourself, it takes time to develop these skills.

“As we know, Australians have a love of the water, whether it be the ocean, pool or rivers. It is imperative for all people, including those who are blind or vision impaired to learn the skills and techniques to swim with confidence. This will enable everyone to enjoy the benefits of swimming with freedom and participate in this much loved Australian pastime.”

**Maurice Gleeson OAM,
President of Blind Sports &
Recreation Victoria.**

To take part in BSRV's Vision Loss Awareness Training please email info@blindsports.org.au or call Blind Sports and Recreation Victoria on: (03) 9822 8876

This publication can be requested in an alternative format.



Appendix

Guidelines for physical contact when working with children

How should appropriate and required physical contact be undertaken?

Below are some points taken from Vicsport's 'Guidelines for physical contact when working with children'. This is just one of the many child safe resources you can refer to at <https://vicsport.com.au/child-safe-sport>

- Always seek permission from the child to touch them prior to any contact occurring. For example, "Can I move your forearm to adjust your technique?"
- Be aware of and respect signs indicating the child is uncomfortable with physical contact. This may include limited eye contact or moving away from you.
- Have a polite and respectful conversation with parents/guardians and children (especially teenagers) to ensure you are aware of any sensitivities specific to children from diverse cultures or children with a disability or medical condition.

Key Services and Supports

Organisation	Website address	Contact number
Able (DeafBlind Association)	ableaustralia.org.au/	1300 225 369
AMAZE	amaze.org.au/	1300 308 699
Blind Citizens Australia	bca.org.au/	1800 033 660
Blind Sports Australia	blindsportsaustralia.com.au/	03 9864 9409
Blind Sports & Recreation Victoria	blindsports.org.au/	03 9822 8876
Deaf Sports Recreation Victoria	deafnav.com.au/services/deaf-sports-recreation-victoria	03 9473 1111
Diabetes Australia	diabetesaustralia.com.au/	1800 637 700
Glaucoma Australia	glaucoma.org.au/	1800 500 880
Guide Dogs Victoria	guidedogsvictoria.com.au/	1800 804 805
Macular Disease Foundation Australia	mdfoundation.com.au/	1800 111 709
National Disability Insurance Agency	ndis.gov.au/	1800 800 110
Retina Australia	retinaaustralia.com.au/	1800 999 870
Vision Australia	visionaustralia.org/	1300 847 466

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