

## **Big Night Out Innovative O&M group programs for children and families**

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The state of Victoria has two independent agencies providing services to people who are blind or vision impaired. I work for Guide Dogs Victoria<sup>1</sup>, the mobility specialists. We have four mobility departments - Guide Dogs, Orientation and Mobility, Acquired Brain Injury and Children's Mobility Services. We also employ two occupational therapists, a range of other consultants and operate a 13 bed residential facility in a bushland setting.

I am part of the Children's Mobility Service. There are 6 Orientation and Mobility Instructors on our team. At any one time we provide O&M services to about 150 clients aged between 4-24. Our clients' vision ranges from blindness to mild low vision. We have no visual cut off point – as long as clients have some degree of vision impairment we can work with them. Some of the young people we work with are extremely high functioning, attending mainstream schools and learning to travel independently between home, school and community venues, while others have multiple disabilities and will never live independently.

Typically, Orientation and Mobility Instructors work one to one with their clients to tailor an individual program to meet that client's needs. Increasingly though we are finding new and fun ways to work with students in small groups. We run at least five camps a year and a variety of day and weekend O&M programs. Our manager values the new ideas which come forward from the team and encourages us to trial these ideas. If the ideas work, we continue to include them in our program for the year.

In 2002, Linden was working with a teenage girl who refused to do a one-to-one mobility program. This girl was ready to travel further away from home – perhaps to explore the city. She wanted to be able to meet with her friends and go out at night. Linden thought she might be interested in meeting with other vision impaired kids to do some mobility work together. And so the Big Night Out came about.

We run a couple of Big Nights Out each year – generally in winter when it gets dark earlier in the evening. We meet the students under the clocks at Flinders Street Station – a well known Melbourne landmark - at 5.30pm. We tend to have about 7-10 kids in a group. When everyone has gathered, we give them the challenge for the evening and they have to work together to achieve it. The O&M Instructors follow, sometimes closely and sometimes at a distance. We tend to give help only if asked, or if an individual student is struggling with the group process.

One time the kids were asked to get to the Docklands for dinner, a newly developed area near the city, but they weren't told how to get there. They had to use the Information Centre in the city to research the route and get directions. Then they used public transport to travel to the Docklands, explore the area and locate the restaurant for dinner. Teamwork was essential and they achieved it!

Another time they had to explore the entertainment venues in the city, the cinemas, shopping areas and the alleyways which lead to the pubs and clubs. They had to identify some safe areas and danger areas for teenagers. They had to work out who they could go to if they needed help. At dinner they discussed with the O&M Instructors what they noticed about the city that was different at night, as well as the safety issues they encountered.

When several Instructors mentioned they were working with teenage boys with night blindness problems, we decided to run a Boys' Night Out. The boys didn't have to travel very far to get from the Station to their dinner venue at Southbank. Over dinner they chatted about night travel and some became visibly more tense about going out in the dark. After dinner, when it was quite dark outside, we walked along the concourse next to the river. Some boys were experienced long cane users. Some used hand-held or head-mounted torches. Some were not using any mobility aid. While walking and chatting together with each other and with the O&M Instructors, the boys could see for themselves who was able to walk confidently and why. The O&M Instructors just happened to have spare long canes and torches in their bags for some of the boys to try out! This experience motivated several of the boys to do long cane training for night travel. It was far better that they made this decision for themselves after watching their peers, than agreeing under duress because an O&M Instructor suggested it was time for long cane training.

On a Big Night Out program, the kids get to be adventurous in a supported environment. When they go home and tell about their evening, their parents are often astonished at what they were able to achieve. This led to a Family Night Out. The students were asked to bring at least one member of their family to meet at the Station. Beforehand, they had been given the address of a restaurant in Port Melbourne (about 5kms out of the city) and asked to do some research at home, then bring their ideas about how to get there. They arrived with maps and timetable details written on scraps of paper, ready to argue for their plan. At the Station, family members were encouraged to stand back and watch the students at work. Some parents found this hard to do – they are used to making the decisions for their children, protecting them and it was difficult to hold back and trust the children. We did not take the quickest or most direct route to the restaurant, but we did get there safely. The parents were impressed and proud of what their children could achieve.

As you will have gathered, Big Nights Out are run very informally. The emphasis is on having fun, connecting kids with others who have vision impairment, facilitating social skills, encouraging group decision making, utilising public transport in the city, developing orientation to the city and suburbs and eating together in public. Orientation and Mobility issues emerge very quickly in this social environment, which may take months to emerge in a one-to-one O&M relationship. And the best thing is that students become very enthusiastic about independent mobility. They swap contact details with other kids and keep in touch with their new friends. When they are ready, they test out their new travel skills on their own.

So what happens behind the scenes to enable Big Nights Out to take place? In the first part of the year we choose a date (often a Thursday), a venue and a theme for the night. We promote the Big Night Out through our Children's Mobility Service newsletter which goes out to all clients once a term. Individual O&M Instructors or teachers working with vision-impaired students tend to encourage those children to apply who would most benefit. To be eligible, the students have to be 14 or older. They need to send in a medical form from their doctor, detailing any health issues we need to be aware of. We bring these forms with us on the night in case of emergency. They also have to get a permission form signed by their parent and send this in before the event. A few days before the event, we book a restaurant in the area.

On the night, parents ensure that their children get to the starting point safely. Some students travel into the city independently during daylight. After the event, the O&M Instructors drive the students back to their homes. O&M Instructors get time-in-lieu for the hours they work in the evening. Guide Dogs Victoria has a policy of free services for all clients, and we certainly pay the bill where students can't afford to eat out. But we encourage the students to bring their own money, order food they can afford, and pay for it themselves as this is an important part of eating out at a restaurant.

Some of the students we work with live a long way out of the city, that is 30-40 kms. Their parents find it difficult to get them into the city after school by 5.30pm. The O&M Instructors also found they had a very late night by the time they dropped the children at their homes after the event. This led to a new Big Night Out program where the O&M Instructors met groups of students at four different railway stations around the suburbs, then travelled into the city with the students in small groups. The city part of the Big Night Out took less time than usual then the O&M Instructors travelled back to the suburbs with the children on the trains and ferried them home in cars from there. This had the benefit of linking suburban travel with city travel, but of course it meant that less time was spent working as a whole group in the city.

We have found that there are immeasurable benefits in doing group work with older students. A Big Night Out event extends our vision-impaired students in all eight areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum<sup>2</sup>:

- Compensatory Skills (Braille, listening skills, handwriting skills, monocular)
- Orientation and Mobility (route travel, safety, exploring, body language, road crossings, public transport access)
- Social Skills (table manners, ordering food, asking directions, negotiating & decision making)
- Independent Living Skills (reading menu, eating in public, organising possessions)
- Recreation and Leisure Skills (accessing venues in the city)
- Career Education (awareness of jobs outside the school environment – waiters, chefs, train drivers, street sweepers, police, information services, retail assistants)
- Assistive Technology (CCTV, Internet, palm pilot, telephone info services, public transport information)
- Visual Efficiency Skills (reading maps & timetables, scanning, street signs, tram numbers, landmarks)

Food is a great social lubricant and we find that during dinner, the kids relax together and share their own stories. If they cannot read the menu, they need to ask the waiter for the options. The O&M Instructors leave the students to work out what they will eat and place their order, then sort out who ordered what when the meals arrive. Listening in to their conversation from the other end of the table is very enlightening. It is also great practise for the waiters in dealing with diners who are vision impaired.

Big Nights Out are just one of the innovative programs we run at Guide Dogs Victoria. Others include an RP weekend for children with Retinitis Pigmentosa, and their families. This took place in our residential facility and involved a range of guest speakers (Retina

Australia, psychologist, older RP clients) as well as mobility activities for all participants. We ran a 'Test Drive a Guide Dog' day on a weekend. At this event, vision impaired students and their families had the opportunity to try long cane travel under blindfold and guide dog travel as well as hear from a young adult guide dog user. We hosted a Multi-Impairment Forum for parents of children with multiple disabilities and vision impairment to discuss orientation and mobility, school issues, therapies, mobility aids and put parents in contact with each other. This year we are planning a Girl's Night Out looking at make-up and skin care, and a Bike Education day where kids will learn about bike maintenance and develop their visual skills for cycling. In addition to these events we tailor workshops for schools and community groups to educate the wider community about low vision and orientation and mobility.

We run two junior camps each year at our residence, on themes like measurement, shop till you drop, careers and the games. We run a city travel camp for senior students in the summer holidays and in the winter holidays we take a group of senior students into the country for a rural experience away from home. We also take a small group of senior students to Sydney each year (900kms away) to test their travel skills in an unfamiliar city.

These group programs are a fabulous way to develop Orientation and Mobility skills, but they are an adjunct to the solid work done by our team on a one-to-one basis with clients each year. This variety of work is possible because we have a manager, Dean, who treasures our ideas, a team leader, Rachel who is highly organised and does the paperwork and liaison for all our camps and group programs, and a dedicated team who work odd hours to teach independent mobility to the vision impaired kids in Victoria.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.guidedogsvictoria.com.au>

<sup>2</sup> *The Core Curriculum for Blind and Visually Impaired Students, Including those with Additional Disabilities* Phil Hatlen, Co-Chair National Agenda Advisory Board, Revised January 10, 1996  
<http://www.tsbvi.edu/Education/corecurric.htm#Expanded>