

Crossing the road: junior schools and mental handicap

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The policy of integrating the mentally handicapped into the normal life of the community presents schools with a challenge. Their problems and needs are unfamiliar, and in-service provision for coping may be slight. This article seeks to make teachers more aware of the background training their own charges may have received, and its implications.

It is a sad fact of life that one child in every hundred in this country is born with some form of mental handicap requiring special care. These children find difficulty in doing many of the things one takes for granted: combing hair, cleaning teeth or getting dressed can be almost insurmountable obstacles for a mentally handicapped person.

It was not so very long ago that the mentally handicapped were shunned by society and looked upon as oddities to be afraid of and avoided at all costs. Fortunately, modern thinking means that they are being encouraged to integrate into our society. Part of the process of integration involves teaching them how to cross roads so that they can go shopping, visit friends, and even, in some cases, go to work.

The policy of settling handicapped youngsters who have made good progress in special and ESN schools means that teachers in the lower stream of junior schools may find their particular difficulties a part of daily experience. An example is the training required to learn even the basic skill of 'crossing the road' safely.

Basic road-crossing skills

All pedestrians need to learn six basic skills if they are to cross the road safely. These are:

1. To walk along safely either (1) on the pavement or (2) facing oncoming traffic if there is no pavement.
2. To choose a safe place to cross the road.
3. To cross the road well away from parked cars.
4. To stop at the kerb or the edge of the road.
5. To look and listen for traffic.
6. To cross the road when there is no traffic nearby.

In addition to learning these basic skills, a pedestrian has to see and make sense of a complete situation which is often complex. He or she needs to remember and retain these basic skills whilst, at the same time, maintaining concentration and controlling impatience. Judgments relating to the speed and distance of approaching vehicles have to be made accurately — sometimes in a split

second. For the mentally handicapped person it is as though some malevolent being has devised an obstacle course of all the things which they find most difficult to accomplish.

Safe crossing procedure requires flexibility — the need for the person to adapt themselves to the circumstances prevailing at the time. Mentally handicapped people lack the ability to generalise and be flexible in their approach to the task of crossing the road. They have a tendency to be rigid in their application of instructions and are inclined to interpret instructions literally. For example, a mentally handicapped girl in her mid-twenties was taught how to cross the road so that she could go unaided from the hostel where she lived to nearby shops and pubs. A suitable route was chosen for her, and she was taught to do her road crossing drill at appropriate safe places along the route using 'triggers' (for example to cross by a phone box, or outside a sweet shop) to aid her memory. After a time she was able to go to and from the shops and the pub unaided, having apparently mastered the skills necessary to enable her to cross the road safely on her own. Unfortunately, when her teacher took her along a new and unfamiliar route and asked her to choose a safe crossing place, do the Green Cross Code, and cross the road safely, she was unable to do so without her familiar triggers because she could not adapt to the new situation and transfer what she had been taught to suit the unfamiliar situation. In this particular instance it was felt that if she had been taught to cross the road at preselected points along the new route using triggers as before, she would then be unable to cross the road safely when reverting back to her old route.

The key to teaching road-crossing skills to the mentally handicapped is to break the task down into simple steps which can be taught separately, and then to progress at a pace to suit the individual until their full potential is reached.

A 'skills' checklist

Teaching even the most basic road-crossing skills to a mentally handicapped person

can pose many problems even for the skilled instructor. The basic aim of road safety teaching is, and always will be, 'to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes in road users which will enable them to use the roads safely' (DES, 1979). With mentally handicapped people the work is going to be slow and repetitive, and the task should be broken down into simple stages, each one with a target for the individual to aim for.

Most people working in the field of mental handicap will be familiar with checklists of self-help personal and social skills which represent the minimum competency skills required by anyone who is to be able to live an independent life in the community. This checklist profile highlights the areas where help is needed, and by providing a record of progress over a period of time it facilitates evaluation of the structure and effectiveness of the programme. Additionally, because self-help skills must be practised by the individual at home even when the training takes place elsewhere, the checklist offers a basis for closer collaboration between professionals and relatives. It should be noted, however, that although the road safety skills are graded more or less in the natural order of acquisition, the development of some of the skills will depend on opportunity as well as co-ordination and maturity.

The Portage system

The basis of this system is a curriculum guide based on a developmental checklist of behaviours exhibited by normal children from birth to six years of age, and a set of curriculum cards to match each of the 580 behaviours on the list. The system is administered by supervisors and home advisers: the latter usually spend about 1½ hours each week in a client's home, setting up a series of tasks for the parents and the child. This backs up the work done by teachers and supervisors in hostels, homes, and schools, and forms a part of the overall teaching programme for mentally handicapped people.

With this in mind, I have designed a series of cards which could be used by a Portage adviser and which augment and

cross-reference with the items on the road safety checklist (Figure 1). For example, the card for item 1.5 (*Can choose a place where it is safe to cross with prompting*) suggests that the teacher should try to encourage their pupil to say *why* the place that they have chosen is safe. It also suggests that the teacher should emphasise the danger of crossing from unsafe places, such as from between parked cars. Some pupils will progress steadily up the list of items from one training session to the next, but others fall back in the interval and have to go back to the beginning again.

Conclusion

The introduction of a mentally handicapped child into a junior school needs to be carefully prepared. The staff are used to judging a child by standard yardsticks of performance and behaviour, but these may be misleading in the case of mental handicap. It is easy to over-estimate a child's general ability just because it does some things well: a particular case that comes to mind is a girl who showed outstanding musical gifts but could not understand money. The teacher needs to be aware of the child's achievements in its personal programme if expectations are to be realistic.

As far as road use is concerned, there is a good chance that with patient teaching a great many handicapped people will be able to cross them unaided and thus maintain their independence. To help teachers understand the problems, however, I have tried to bring together various thoughts and ideas from the professional support service. From personal experience I know that teaching any skill to a mentally handicapped person is often a long, laborious process involving endless tact and patience, but with the right insights both the teaching staff and pupils in a school can make a valuable contribution towards their integration into society.

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Review

All about food by Helen McGrath. 1988: Oxford, 223 pages, semi-stiff cover, £4.95. Second edition.

This revised edition should prove to be as popular with teachers and pupils as was its predecessor. The new edition has been prepared to match the new approach to syllabuses and GCSE examinations, and contains revised material which suggests guidelines for working within the structure of the syllabuses. This includes an introduction to making decisions on suitable food choices in the light of current nutritional thinking and in a given situation. It also suggests guidelines on planning the practical preparation of foods and the subsequent evaluation of choices and preparation methods. Suggested practical assignments are suitable for pupils of all abilities.

Content has been updated to include the use of microwave ovens and food processors and the use of additives. The recipe section has been extended to include more vegetarian and multi-cultural dishes.

I like this book very much: it is a useful teaching book as well as one to have in the resource area. It is suitable for all abilities, my only complaint is that the nutrition section may not be detailed enough for the more academic pupil. — *Marjorie Crone-Smith*.

1.15	CROSSES THE ROAD SAFELY AND WITHOUT HELP		DATE
	1.14 Can use a Pelican Crossing without help.		.....
	1.13 Can use a Pelican Crossing with help.		.....
	1.12 Crosses at a safe place without help and prompting.		.....
	1.11 Crosses at a safe place with help and prompting.		.....
	1.10 Looks and listens for traffic without being told.		.....
	1.9 Looks and listens for traffic when told.		.....
	1.8 Stops at the kerb without prompting.		.....
	1.7 Stops at the kerb when prompted.		.....
	1.6 Can choose a place where it is safe to cross unaided.		.....
	1.5 Can choose a place where it is safe to cross with prompting.		.....
	1.4 Can name car, bus, bicycle etc.		.....
	1.3 Can point to a car, bus, bicycle etc.		.....
	1.2 Identifies road.		.....
	1.1 Identifies footpath.		.....

Fig. 1. A checklist of skills necessary for crossing the road.