Walking together
A collaboration between a visually impaired person and a sighted guide

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A note on terminology: For the sake of convenience, the visually impaired person is referred to as "he" and the guide as "she" throughout this text. This also reflects the cast in the accompanying video to this publication.
Briefly about Orientation & Mobility

This booklet describes sighted guide techniques – ways for a visually impaired person to travel with a sighted guide. The ability to travel independently (without a guide) when one has a severe visual impairment is called Orientation & Mobility.

In Denmark, training in Orientation & Mobility for adults is offered in three settings:

• The counties offer training locally through the county's rehabilitation office.

• The county may refer people to the Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted, which offers courses for individuals with severe visual impairments. These courses include Orientation & Mobility as a major component.

• The Danish Association of the Blind offers courses annually to individuals with severe visual impairments. These courses include Orientation & Mobility.

Training in Orientation & Mobility for children takes place at Synscenter Refsnæs in Kalundborg or locally in courses arranged by the county's rehab consultant for visually impaired children.

The Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted offers courses to people who work professionally with visually impaired persons. The Institute also has consultants who offer advice and counselling to visually impaired persons and staff in their local setting.

Introduction

This booklet is directed especially at persons with a visual impairment and their family, friends and co-workers as well as professionals who occasionally encounter people with a visual impairment.

For a person with a visual impairment, using a sighted guide is often a good approach. It is a safe and efficient way to get around, particularly in unfamiliar surroundings or if there are temporary changes to familiar areas. When a visually impaired person walks with a sighted guide it is convenient to have a common understanding of how to do things, for example how to handle doors, stairs etc.

This booklet offers a brief presentation of the basic techniques that it will be helpful for both of you to be familiar with. These approaches are commonly referred to as sighted guide techniques. If you often travel together in this manner you may want to modify some of them and develop your own approach. Many visually impaired persons have some residual vision, which helps with orientation. Many only have problems after dark or when the lighting is poor. It may therefore depend on the circumstances whether one wants help or prefers to get by on one's own.

Sighted guide techniques are not difficult. The most important aspect is collaboration: A sighted person should never push a visually impaired person in front of her or suddenly drag him off. Sighted guide techniques should be an equal collaboration between two people travelling together. Often, both parties are unsure of what to do. Therefore the booklet opens with some basic advice to both of you. Next, it offers a review of the basic sighted guide techniques and a look at some specific situations. Some of the points include variations to be used if the person being guided is walking impaired or needs additional support, for example due to dizziness.
**Advice for the guide**

- When you encounter someone with a visual impairment, tell him who you are. It can be difficult to recognise someone from the sound of their voice alone.
- If you want to shake the person's hand, say so.
- Always use the visually impaired person's name when you address him in a group of people; this lets him know that you are talking to him.
- Face the person when you are talking to him.
- Use the word "see" as you normally would.
- Always announce it when you enter or leave a room (and use your name when you do so). It is not nice to have to guess who is in the room – or to continue talking to someone who has in fact left.
- If you want to show a visually impaired person something, do not move his hands. Instead, let him trail your arm or hand to the object.
- Do not leave doors half-open, and push chairs in when you get up; otherwise the visually impaired person risks bumping into them.
- If you want to warn the person, do not use "alarm expressions" such as "Careful!", unless the situation actually calls for urgency. Instead, offer useful directions, for example, "There is a coffee cup right in front of your hand."

**Wheelchairs**

If the visually impaired person uses a wheelchair, it is important for the guide to make him feel safe and include him in what is going on by talking about the walk and the things you pass along the way. The guide should always explain what the purpose and destination are.

- Always choose the same route and the same landmarks (for example sounds, light and scents as well as objects that can be reached from the wheelchair) to a given destination. The guide should always attempt to make right angle turns; that facilitates orientation. She should avoid pulling the chair backwards, as this is very unpleasant for a visually impaired person. (It is unavoidable when getting over kerbs, however.)
- The guide should explain what is happening along the way and pause when there are changes in level or other major changes to avoid startling the visually impaired person or making him feel unsafe.
- Guiding takes time; the guide should concentrate on the visually impaired person and avoid chatting with others at the same time.
- The guide should inform the visually impaired person if another guide takes over.
- The footrests on the wheelchair should not be used for opening doors. If possible, the visually impaired person can drive the chair through the door himself while the guide holds it open. Otherwise the guide can push the chair through.
The basic grip

The main point is that the guide should walk slightly ahead of the visually impaired person to act as a sort of shield.

- It is the visually impaired person who grips the guide, not the other way around. The guide can let the visually impaired person know where she is by lightly touching the back of his hand.

- The visually impaired person grips the guide’s arm just above the elbow in a pincer grip or C-grip, i.e. with his thumb on the outside of the guide’s arm and the four other fingers towards the guide’s body.

His wrist should be stretched. The arm that the visually impaired person grips is referred to as the “grip arm”; the hand on this side is referred to as the “grip hand”.

- The grip arm may be stretched or bent, but you should both hold your upper arm close to your body – this makes it easier to sense movements.

Car doors

The main point is to show the visually impaired person the door handle; then he handles the rest.

When the visually impaired person wants to get into a car, the guide places her grip hand on the car door handle. The visually impaired person then trails the guide’s arm downwards with his free hand and opens the door.

The guide then shows the visually impaired person the car roof. He puts one hand on the roof of the car and the other on top of the car door and gets in.

The visually impaired person should not open or close the door until the guide says it is safe (when there are no bicyclists or other cars to worry about or fingers that may get jammed). This is important both when getting into and out of cars.
Unfamiliar rooms

If you are in a room that the visually impaired person is not familiar with, the guide may describe it to him, if he is interested. It supports his orientation and may be helpful. For example, describe the size of the room, the location of the windows and general setup of furniture. The visually impaired person may want to walk around the room on his own to get a feel for it.

Lavatories

Before using an unfamiliar lavatory the visually impaired person may need a brief description of the layout of the room, where the toilet paper is located, how to operate the flush mechanism, and where to find the sink, soap and towels. If the toilet or towel is dirty, the guide should tell the visually impaired person and let him take his own precautions.

Outdoor areas

When walking on a pavement or sidewalk it is important that the visually impaired person is allowed to walk on an even surface. Walking on an uneven surface, such as a row of cobble stones or smaller tiles is unpleasant. If the street is busy, it is more pleasant for the visually impaired person to walk on the side facing away from oncoming pedestrians.

• The guide walks a short step ahead of the visually impaired person. This enables the guide to signal what is happening through motions and words.

It also enables the visually impaired person to play an active part, for example in modifying the walking speed, closing doors and to decide when to end a guided walk.

• The guide should always attempt to take straight lines and angles – that facilitates the visually impaired person’s orientation. Remember that you are two persons wide when you walk together.

If there is a considerable height difference, the visually impaired person may want to place his hand on the guide’s shoulder or use the C-grip around the guide’s wrist.
**Taking a seat**

If the visually impaired person wants to sit down, the guide shows him the chair by placing her guide hand on the back of the chair from behind, if possible, or on the arm rest or seat. The visually impaired person trails the guide's arm to touch the chair. The guide explains how the chair is situated in the room and leaves the rest to the visually impaired person.

- In rows of chairs, as in theatres or aeroplanes, you go sideways, the guide first. The visually impaired person trails the row of seats in front of him with his free hand.

**Additional support**

The visually impaired person stands in front of the chair, touching it with the back of both his knees. He is shown an armrest or a table to lean on as he gets seated.

The guide may either

- Face the visually impaired person and hold on to his hands or upper arms for support as he gets seated,

or

- Stand behind the chair when the visually impaired person has located it in order to prevent it from sliding backwards as he gets seated.

**Additional support**

If the person being guided has a walking impairment or feels insecure, the guide may provide additional support by using a support grip: The guide puts her arm under the visually impaired person's arm and grips his hand, if the arm length fits, or his wrist or arm.

In addition to the support grip, the guide may also reach over and hold his other hand.
Ascending stairs

Additional support

- If additional support is required, the guide may use the support grip and walk on the same step as the visually impaired person, leading with the same foot as he does.

- Or she may walk backwards on the stairs in front of the visually impaired person, maintaining the grip. In this case, both hold on to the banister.

- Persons using the white cane usually prefer to be guided to the stairs and then ascend or descend on their own.

- Particularly anxious persons descending stairs may walk backwards, using the banister for support, while the guide stands a few steps down for reassurance.

Getting through a narrow space

The best way to get through a narrow or crowded space is if the visually impaired person steps in behind the guide, without letting go of her arm, so that the you are walking single file.

The guide can signal an upcoming narrow space by pulling her stretched-out grip arm behind her back. This virtually pulls the visually impaired person in behind the guide, and you walk through in single file. The guide may also verbally mention the narrow space coming up.

The visually impaired person steps in behind the guide and stretches out his arm to avoid stepping on her heels. The guide should not turn around or twist her body, as this may be confusing. In some situations, for example when walking between rows of seats in a theatre, you may walk sideways.

When you are out of the narrow space, the guide pulls her grip arm back to the start position, and you continue as before.

Additional support

If additional support is required the guide may turn and walk backwards while providing additional support by gripping both the visually impaired person's forearms.
**Ascending or descending stairs**

The main point in handling stairs is that the guide should walk one step ahead of the visually impaired person and always let him know whether the steps lead up or down.

- When you get to a set of stairs, the guide positions herself right up against the bottom step and tells the visually impaired person whether the steps lead up or down. The guide should not announce the stairs until you have actually reached them.
- The guide steps onto the first step and waits until the visually impaired person has stepped up to the step. The guide still stays one step ahead.
- Together you ascend or descend the stairs. When the visually impaired person has done all the steps, the guide pauses.
  - If there is a banister the guide may show the visually impaired person where it is, so that he can grab it with his free hand. To find the banister, he simply trails the guide’s arm down to reach the banister.
  - If the width of the steps varies, as on a spiral staircase, the visually impaired person should walk in the side where the steps are the widest.

Thus, the guide pauses three times:
- Once when she first reaches the foot or the top of the stairs.
- Once when she has stepped onto the first step and the visually impaired person has stepped up to the stairs.
- Once when she has seen that the visually impaired person has completed the steps.

**Changing direction (about-face)**

- If you wish to turn and walk in the opposite direction in a relatively narrow space, for example in a lift or a shop, you pause and turn to face each other. The visually impaired person should not let go of the guide.

- The visually impaired person now uses his free hand to grip the guide’s other arm; he does not release his grip until the new grip has been established.

- Now you turn and both face in the direction you came from.
Going through a door

The best way to get through a door is for the guide to open the door and walk through first; then the visually impaired person goes through (single file) and closes the door behind him without letting go of the guide.

- It is easier if the visually impaired person is in the same side as the door hinges, so you may have to switch sides before going through (see page 8).

- The guide opens the door with her free hand and places her grip hand on the door handle.

- The visually impaired person trails the guide's hand down to the door handle. If the door opens outward, he does not grip the door handle until you have both gone through the door.

- Now you go through in single file, first the guide and then the visually impaired person, who closes the door.

At no time must the visually impaired person let go of the guide.

Additional support

- The guide walks backwards (in front) while gripping the visually impaired person's hands or forearms.

or

- The guide maintains the support grip, but stands sideways in the door and walks through sideways. The guide handles the door with her free hand. If the door is too narrow, the guide walks backwards.
Shopping

In supermarkets it is a good idea to have the visually impaired person push the cart while the guide walks in front and steers the cart.

The guide should not allow conversations between the visually impaired person and staff in shops (or at the post office, for example) to go through her, but let the visually impaired person speak for himself. The same goes for waiters in restaurants.

Escalators

When you are at an escalator, the guide explains whether the stair goes up or down. Then she shows where the hand rail is, and the visually impaired person lets go of the guide. Once the visually impaired person has oriented himself in relation to the steps, you both get on the escalator, the guide first.

The visually impaired person may put his feet on two steps in order to sense when the escalator ends. He may lift the toes on the front foot slightly. When you reach the top of the escalator (signalled by the hand rail and the steps levelling out), the guide should receive the visually impaired person and walk on immediately, so that you are not blocking the way for the next people coming off the escalator.

• In addition to introducing themselves, staff and professionals in hospitals or nursing homes should also state what their business is when they enter.
• Never leave a totally blind person standing in free space with nothing to hold on to. Instead, guide him to a chair, a wall or other familiar location.
• If you are not sure whether a visually impaired person wants help – ask him! Never just grab him or do things for him; often he may prefer to get by on his own.

Advice for the visually impaired person

• Speak up! Let people know if you would like help – or if you’d rather not.
• Explain what sort of help you would like. Most people are happy to assist, but many are insecure and afraid of doing something wrong.
• If a sighted person simply grabs you in order to guide you somewhere, tell her that you prefer to grip her arm instead.
Switching sides

When you want to switch sides the visually impaired person walks around the guide's back and switches to the other side.

In some cases it may be convenient to switch sides, so that the visually impaired person grips the guide’s other arm, for example to get through a door, to grip a banister, to navigate busy places or if one of you is carrying a heavy bag.

Both parties may suggest a switch. You can make the switch while walking, or you may choose to pause. The visually impaired person must not let go of the guide at any time.

• To make the switch the visually impaired person slides his free hand across the guide’s back to grip her other arm before releasing his original grip. Now you continue as before, only in your new positions.

• To facilitate the visually impaired person’s orientation and sense of direction, the guide should maintain her direction and avoid turning her upper body.

All steps or drop-offs (for example kerbs or potholes) and major changes in the surface (for example from tiles to grass, or if the ground begins to slant) are handled in the same way as stairs.

Descending stairs