

## COMMON TERMS YOU WILL HEAR

Like any other specialty, the field that works with people who have visual impairments has its own vocabulary. It's important to become familiar with the terms that professionals you come into contact will use, both so you can be sure you understand what they have to say about your child and to make yourself clearly understood. The following are some of the common terms used to discuss blindness and visual impairment. (The Glossary at the back of this book is a quick reference for these and other unfamiliar terms you might encounter.)

- *Visual disability* is a broad term used to refer to vision loss that affects an individual's daily life and activities in a significant way.
- *Blindness* is a total loss of vision—no awareness of light or the source from which the light is coming. Most people who are visually impaired are not totally blind, without any light perception at all; those who are blind are most likely braille readers.
- The term *visual impairment* refers to a range of vision loss, from moderate to severe, and is the term used by schools in reference to children with a visual disability.
- The term *low vision* is used to refer to visual impairment that interferes with someone's ability to perform the activities of daily living and covers a range of visual abilities, from being capable of reading newspaper print to having only light perception (that is, an awareness of light), and everything in between. The vision of people with low vision cannot be corrected to normal, even with the use of prescribed eyeglasses or contact lenses.
- *Visual acuity* is another term that you will hear frequently when vision is being discussed. It relates to the eye's ability to see fine detail and can be thought of as how sharply the eyes focus. It is usually measured during an

eye examination by the use of a chart, called the Snellen chart, on which letters of different sizes appear. (There are different ways of measuring visual acuity in infants and preschoolers, discussed later in this chapter.)

- *Visual field* refers to the amount of space a person can see in front and to the sides when looking straight ahead, without turning his head or moving the eyes—nearly 180 degrees horizontally and 60 degrees vertically for someone with typical vision.
- A *visual field loss* describes parts of a typical visual field that an individual cannot perceive, sometimes affecting the upper or lower fields of vision and sometimes affecting the left or right field.
- You may also hear the term *legal blindness*. This term encompasses both blindness and low vision, but it does not refer to a particular level of visual ability or skill. It is usually used for legal or administrative purposes, and it refers to a measurement of vision used as a minimum criterion for being able to receive government and other services. The term "legal blindness" specifically refers to a measured visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the best eye, with correction (that is, with eyeglasses on), or a decreased visual field of 20 degrees or less (sometimes called *tunnel vision*). In turn, the measurement "20/200" means that someone can see at 20 feet away what a person with normal vision can see at 200 feet away. Being familiar with the meaning of legal blindness may be important for you, since it may determine whether your child is eligible for certain benefits (such as Supplemental Security Income or books and curriculum materials provided by your local school district). However, it doesn't tell you much about what your child is able to see, since legal blindness refers only to visual acuity for seeing at a distance. Many legally blind persons are still able to read regular size print, particularly with the use of *low vision devices*, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Yet another term is *functional vision*, which is used to describe how an individual *uses* vision. This term is not based on a measurement like 20/20 or 20/200. But it refers to a very important concept—how an individual uses whatever vision he has in real-life situations. A description of your child's functional vision may tell you more about how your child sees than a measurement made with an eye chart because it indicates how and what your child sees under different circumstances when doing different activities. And, in fact, the visual abilities of a person with visual impairment often vary greatly,

depending on a wide range of factors: fatigue, time of day, weather conditions, lighting (even whether incandescent or fluorescent bulbs are being used), the demands of a task, or what the person is trying to accomplish (for example, reading, writing, copying from a book, watching a video, using a computer, cooking, sewing, woodworking). Two children with the same eye condition and the same visual acuity may *function* entirely differently, regardless of what they are doing! As your child approaches school age, you will find that his functional vision will be discussed, along with any eye condition, by the professionals who may provide special education services.

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