

OUR BLIND CHILDREN

GROWING AND LEARNING WITH THEM

A Third Edition
Second Printing

BERTHOLD LOWENFELD, Ph.D.

*Former Superintendent
California School for the Blind
Berkeley, California*

The New Third Edition of this book—considered a classic in its field—is applicable to blind children of all age groups. A new chapter dealing with multi-handicapped blind children has been added because their increasing numbers affect many parents. The contents of the text have been completely updated throughout and the list of recommended readings as well as that of organizations serving the blind has been thoroughly revised.

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER • SPRINGFIELD • ILLINOIS

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

IT IS NOT OFTEN that a book can be as timely and meet the peculiar needs of a particular group of parents so precisely as this book does. During the decade from 1945 to 1955, the incidence of blindness among prematurely born infants in the United States and in other countries of the western world increased significantly. Through scientific research, measures have been developed to halt this sudden increase, but there remain the many children of preschool and early school age whose vision was damaged before preventive means were found. In addition, there are, of course, other children whose blindness is not connected with prematurity.

Partly as a result of this special threat and partly because of the widespread movement to meet the needs of all exceptional children, public attention as well as the interest of educators, social workers, psychologists, and many physicians has been focused upon closer and more effective team work with the parents of these handicapped children.

Our Blind Children is a notable contribution to this team work effort. It is written primarily for the parents of blind children but contains a wealth of information which will be useful to social workers, teachers, and others who guide parents or direct programs of education to meet the needs of these children.

Both in form and substance the book is straightforward, realistic, and accurate. Dr. Lowenfeld who loves and understands children knows the emotional problems which confront the mothers and fathers of blind children. He also knows from years of observation how gallantly parents can accept the challenge of guiding the development of such youngsters. From reading this book—and re-reading it—many a person will gain courage and understanding as well as find practical suggestions concerning specific ways in which a blind child may be helped to develop through happy,

wholesome childhood into a self-confident, independent, and useful man or woman.

HERBERT R. STOLZ, M.D.

Deputy Superintendent of Instruction

California State Department of Education

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

THIS NEW REVISION, as the previous one, updates and augments the contents of the book and adds a new chapter dealing more extensively with blind children who have additional handicaps.

It is gratifying to know that the apparent usefulness of the book to parents and to those who need to be informed about blind children and their development makes a third edition necessary.

I want to express my gratitude for her capable assistance in preparing this revision to Mrs. Frances Wilcox. For suggestions concerning improvements of its content I am indebted to professional friends and reviewers, and for their personal interest in the book and its appearance to my publisher and his staff.

BERTHOLD LOWENFELD

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS TO THE FIRST EDITION

I N ATTEMPTING to present the best in current thinking and practice in the education of blind children, the author had to rely on the experience and wisdom of many who crossed his professional path. Foremost among them are my own teachers, my past and present co-workers, and the hundreds of blind children and their parents with whom I was privileged to work. To all of them go my thankful memories.

I am deeply indebted to the American Foundation for the Blind whose staff, then under the great leadership of the late Robert B. Irwin, received me with warm cordiality in 1938 when I came to this our land as a refugee. I spent ten professionally enriching years with this national agency as its Director of Educational Research. The last six years, during the latest of which this book was written, I have been in charge of the California School for the Blind which functions under the wise administration of Dr. Herbert R. Stolz, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction of the California State Department of Education. To him and to his wife, Dr. Lois Meek Stolz, I owe much professionally and as cherished friends.

Miss Mildred L. Schorpp, kindergarten teacher of the California School for the Blind, gave me throughout the preparation of the manuscript her untiring assistance, and her contribution to the book is a most substantial one for which I owe her lasting gratitude. Mrs. Alfred F. Breslauer of San Francisco has read the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions based on her own experience for which I express my sincere thanks. These are also due Messrs. Charles C and Payne E. L. Thomas, my publishers, who took a personal and encouraging interest in the nascence of the book and in its fine manner of publication.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my wife. Her loving under-

standing and patience helped me over many hurdles and strengthened my body and spirit when need arose as it did.

BERTHOLD LOWENFELD

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Foreword to the First Edition</i>	vii
<i>Preface to the Third Edition</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments to the First Edition</i>	xi
 <i>Chapter</i>	
I. TO PARENTS	3
II. SOME FACTS YOU MAY WANT TO KNOW	8
III. YOU AND YOUR BLIND CHILD	16
IV. AS YOUR BABY GROWS	21
V. GROWING TOWARD INDEPENDENCE	26
Learning to Eat	27
Toilet Training	36
Sleeping Habits	43
Learning to Dress	47
Gaining Body Control and Learning to Walk	52
Learning to Talk	65
Play and Experiences	70
Music	87
Emotional Growth	93
VI. ATTITUDES OF PARENTS	106
VII. NURSERY SCHOOL	116
VIII. KINDERGARTEN	123
IX. SCHOOL AGE	133
Readiness	133
Educational Placement	134
Residential School	138
Special Programs in Public Schools	145

	Other Programs	151
	Home-School Relations	154
X.	UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL METHODS OF TEACHING	158
	Special Equipment and Mediums	159
	Special Methods	168
XI.	ADOLESCENCE	182
	Sex Curiosity	184
	Dating	186
	The Lure of the Car	188
	Concern for the Future	189
XII.	BLIND CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL HANDICAPS	193
	Causes	193
	Need for Early Diagnosis, Therapy, and Guidance	194
	The Growing Child	196
	Educational Facilities	198
XIII.	QUESTIONS PARENTS OFTEN ASK	202
	My Baby Was Born Prematurely—How Will This Affect His Development?	203
	My Child Does Not Develop Language	204
	My Child Is Afraid to Touch Things	204
	Should My Child Have a Pet?	205
	My Child Cries When I Leave Him or When He Is Left Alone	206
	My Child Does Not Show His Emotions	207
	Should I Punish My Blind Child?	209
	Are Cut-Out Toys Good for My Child?	210
	Should I Let My Child Use Scissors or Other Tools with Which He May Hurt Himself?	211
	How Can I Explain to My Child Such Visual Experiences as Light, Color and Shadow?	212
	Can My Child Use the Sight He Has?	214
	Should I Learn Braille?	215

What About Other Children in the Family?	216
How Can I Provide Recreational Activities for My Child?	218
How Can I Explain to My Child the Sex Differences?	219
What About Tests for Blind Children?	221
What Is the Purpose of the Cane or the Dog Guide?	224
What Should I Do If My Child's Vision Changes?	225
What About My Child's Future?	228
XIV. APPENDIX	230
Informative Reading	230
Periodicals	234
Educational Facilities	234
Organizations	235
<i>Index</i>	239

*OUR
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Chapter I

TO PARENTS

CHILDREN ARE BORN to their parents to be loved, to be brought up, and to be put on their own so that they may start the circle of life again. It is natural for parents to feel that this is a serious and challenging responsibility. They know that while much depends on their own attitudes and skills, it is also important to recognize their need for help in this task from those who by training and experience are equipped to guide them. Through the ages they have learned from their elders, have relied upon cultural patterns, and have been helped by teachers in preparing themselves for the tasks of parenthood. During the last century or so, science has revealed many facts which have contributed to our knowledge of the processes of growth and learning. But the scientific contribution in this area is such that it can be made practically useful only if it is applied in the right spirit. And the "right spirit" has not been scientifically defined but remains a balanced mixture of understanding and love.

Parents sometimes feel rather inadequate and confused concerning their ability to do a good job in bringing up their child. There is so much they hear from their families, their neighbors, so much they read in newspapers, magazines and books, that they are often unable to digest it with any wholesome effect.

Scientists have recognized this problem and wisely tell the parents that they know more than they think they do. If what they hear and read confuses them, parents should trust their own common sense and rely upon the advice of one or two experts, their doctor and perhaps another specialist in child care in whom they have confidence. They can rest assured that the natural care which they as loving parents provide for their child is much more important than perfection in doing something for the child "just so."

All this is as true for the parents of a blind child as it is for others. It is easy to say this but difficult to make it your own con-

viction if your child is blind. Let me say right here that I well understand the disappointment and unhappiness of those parents who learn that their child cannot see. How could it be otherwise? You have looked forward to your child's arrival and expected your baby to be like others. You have most likely prepared yourself for your task as a parent by gathering information about baby and child care; you have read and have heard about the happiness a child will bring into your life. Now you cannot help but feel that all this may be true for others, but isn't for you. Thousands of parents have gone through this painful stage. Almost all of them came to the point where their natural feelings for their child were strong enough to let them look for advice on how to do their best for the child *as he is*.

At first, parents may feel that they must unlearn and relearn everything. But soon their baby will convince them that he grows up very much like other babies and that his needs can be satisfied like those of all children. When parents recognize this, they will begin to ask reasonable questions about the effects of their child's blindness. They will learn that blindness does not change methods of child care and education, though it modifies some of them. Parents want to know where and when modifications are needed and what the nature of these modifications should be. This book will attempt to give parents and all who are interested in blind children a better understanding of their needs and how they can be successfully met.

As mother or father of a blind child, you have a good many questions to ask in addition to those of general interest to all parents. These questions will vary according to a number of facts and circumstances. It is obvious that the age of your child will influence your questions. If he is a baby, you will be concerned about your own ability to help him to develop normally and to learn to master his environment; you will probably be quite overwhelmed by his blindness and forget that he is a child first; you will wonder whether he will ever be happy; and you will want to know what you can learn in order to help him grow up. When he reaches school age, you will want to know whether he is ready to go to school, to which school or class for blind children he should go; whether a boarding school or a day school would be better for

him. While he attends school, you will want to know how you can help him in his school work; which of his needs you should meet and which ones are taken care of by the school; what are the special methods by which he is taught; and what are his social needs and responsibilities. When the time comes for leaving school, you will want to know what avenues are open for him to gain higher education or to take his place as a working member of our society. I have always used the pronoun "he" but it could also be "she," and the questions will vary somewhat accordingly.

What you will ask will also depend a good deal on yourself—whether you are young or old; happy or unhappy; secure or insecure—surely your questions will be influenced by what you are, what you have been, and how you became what you are. Whether your child is and remains the only child, and whether he is the first child or one of two or more in the family will also influence your questioning. If your blind child has a brother or sister, you will know how they grew up and what you did for and with them. You will have learned by experience successful ways of dealing with your child, and you can probably avoid some trial and error learnings as all parents do who have had experience with previous children. You will compare what you observe in your blind child's development with that of your other child or children, and this will make you ask questions different from those of parents whose blind child is the first or only one.

The community in which you live not only influences you but often determines which problems may arise. Whether you live in a city or in the country, whether the community is a large one with good special and general recreational, medical, educational, and social facilities or a small one with only few or none of them; whether you have been there for a long time and know your neighbors and neighborhood well or have newly arrived and are just becoming acquainted; and whether the community is a friendly and neighborly one or one in which it takes some time to feel at home—all this will influence you and your child.

There are of course many other factors which I need not enumerate here, but the central and most important one is *you*, yourself. Your importance lies not only in the questions which you will ask, but is still greater in the way in which you are able to use the an-

swers to your questions. We recognize more and more that the attitudes of parents toward their child and their understanding of him and his needs are the most important factors in his life. They determine how well and to what extent the parent is able to make use of advice and answers given. In other words, your success in raising your child depends largely on what kind of person *you* are, on the way you feel about your child and how you feel about children in general. For this reason, it is to be hoped that you as the mother or father of your blind child will regard him as *your* child with all the emotional implications and consequences which the parent-child relationship carries.

People who find themselves as parents of a child who is blind cannot help but feel shocked and confused when they are brought to realize this fact. We have all heard so much about blindness, and its assumed effects—mostly negative, if not openly, so at least by implication—that no one can help feeling this way. We hear people talk about someone as being helpless as if he were blind; we remember the blind person with the tin cup; we think of the blind person groping his way; and we have heard all our lives about “blind” in connection with fury, hatred, alley, and chance. No wonder that parents are shocked when they meet blindness as a reality in their child. Of course, later on when they discover the facts about those of our co-citizens who are blind and learn that many of them are highly-respected and well-adjusted individuals, they form different ideas—but that does not help them during the initial stage of their own adjustment to their child’s blindness.

If we try to analyze what parents feel about their blind baby and his future, we find them to be desperate, confused, anxious, and somehow feeling guilty. Desperate because they cannot answer the question “Why did it happen to us?” and because the future looks so uncertain and bleak. Confused because they have no idea how to bring up a blind child and do not see any way to lighten the “darkness” of his life. Anxious because they fear what they do not know and do not trust their own abilities in coping with the unknown. And guilty because they believe they have failed their child since they are the ones who produced him being blind or were unable to do anything to prevent his becoming blind. And