

Does your child avoid playing with new toys or hesitate to join in a new activity? Does your child frequently startle or cry in reaction to an unfamiliar sound, toy or event?

“Novelty” refers to a strong human response to visually investigate something that is unlike something they have experienced before. Young infants respond to “novel stimuli” in order to help them **explore their environment, and gain new information about their world** (Jaegle, Mehrpour, & Rust, 2019). Something unfamiliar may attract a child’s visual attention and encourage them to look closer. In children diagnosed with cortical visual impairment (CVI), it often appears that familiarity, not novelty, is more likely to attract a child’s visual attention. The child may prefer to look at the same toys or objects that they have looked at over and over again. The child may demonstrate behaviors such as ignoring objects or toys that are new. Strategies to work on building visual comfort with novelty will require that your child has some **beginning “looking behaviors”**. **If you think your child is just beginning to establish looking behaviors, you will want to avoid bombarding them with new things to look at** (Roman-Lantzy, 2019). The first time you try something new, the neurons may not connect or connect very briefly.

- Identify your child’s favorite objects.
- Continue to use these same objects, over and over again.
- Depending on the child’s age, talk about **specific features of objects** that will help them to recognize the object. (Elmo has big eyes, Big Bird has feathers!)

Your child will not get bored! The more practice you can allow your child to establish connections and strengthening the pathways, the stronger their visual skills will become. **Neuroplasticity** is the capacity for our brain cells to change in response to behaviors and is most available to very young children. The more brain networks are used, the stronger and more connected they become (Jaegle et al., 2019).

Alayna’s son, Trey, is 3 years old and diagnosed with cortical visual impairment. He has twin older brothers, Jimmi and Peyton, who are 6 and always eager to start a new project. Trey has a favorite red snack container, that she uses every day. Alayna would sit Trey in his high chair at the table facing his brothers but she noticed that Trey would turn his head, almost completely around to watch her as she prepared his snack in the kitchen. He can find his favorite snack container, almost anywhere we go! It’s amazing, she reports. It’s as though he can “find a needle in a haystack”. She noticed that he would follow her as she carried the snack pack into the kitchen.

One day she bought new snack sets for all of the boys. The twins were thrilled to have “new” snack sets; they talked about the characters on each of the cups and trays. They pointed out the differences between their old snack sets and what was better about the new ones. But when Alayna put Trey’s snack on his new snack plate, he didn’t even seem to see his food, it was as though he was looking right through it. When the twins brought it closer to him, Trey started to cry. He did not calm down until Alayna put Trey’s snack in the old red snack set, when he began to eat happily.

Alayna spoke about this with her teacher of students with visual impairment on their next TeleHealth visit, they decided that the transition to the new snack set many have been too quick and that Trey may have been visually fatigued. Alayna will try to introduce just one part of the snack set at a time (starting

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with the small bowl) and look for Trey to establish visual comfort in looking at the new items before introducing another.

IDEAS FOR ROUTINES:

Play/Floor Time

- ___ Start playtime routine with favorite, familiar item for visual warm-up, then introduce a new toy
- ___ Choose a consistent play area
- ___ Present one toy at a time
- ___ Use wait time for visual attention when presenting any new toy
- ___ Leave the toy in your child's space and wait for them to "find" it or become interested

Dressing/Diapering

- ___ Provide consistency in caregiver for time of day or tasks
- ___ Use familiar products as visual cues, movements, routines
- ___ Make slow transitions between seasonal clothes or new brands

Meal Time

- ___ Have several of the same plates, spoons, cups for daily use
- ___ Make changes to one feature of the food at a time (texture or color or smell)
- ___ Always have a safe food
- ___ Use a familiar tool, or a favorite spatula or spoon, for your child to hold or interact with

Lap Time/Literacy

- ___ Read favored books over and over
- ___ Find a series that has the same character on each page, such as Clifford the Big Red Dog
- ___ Choose one chair or space for reading area
- ___ Talk about obvious visual features (Large eyes, wild hair, etc).

Outdoors

- ___ Make outdoor spaces familiar (bring along the same curtain, tray or blanket, etc.)
- ___ Bring familiar indoor toys outside
- ___ Hold your child in a secure and safe position and allow them to observe the new activity first or bring one part of the activity to them
- ___ Sing a favorite song to help your child relax your child if they seem uneasy trying something new. A song that uses their hands is great, such as singing the Itsy Bitsy Spider

Bed/BathTime

- ___ Use familiar products as visual cues, movements, routines
- ___ Provide consistency in caregiver for time of day or tasks
- ___ Use familiar transition toy, book, or object

Jaegle, A., Mehrpour, V., & Rust, N. (2019). Visual novelty, curiosity, and intrinsic reward in machine learning and the brain. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, 58, 167-174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conb.2019.08.004>

Roman-Lantzy, C. (2019). *Cortical vision impairment: An approach to assessment and intervention* (2nd.ed). APH Press.