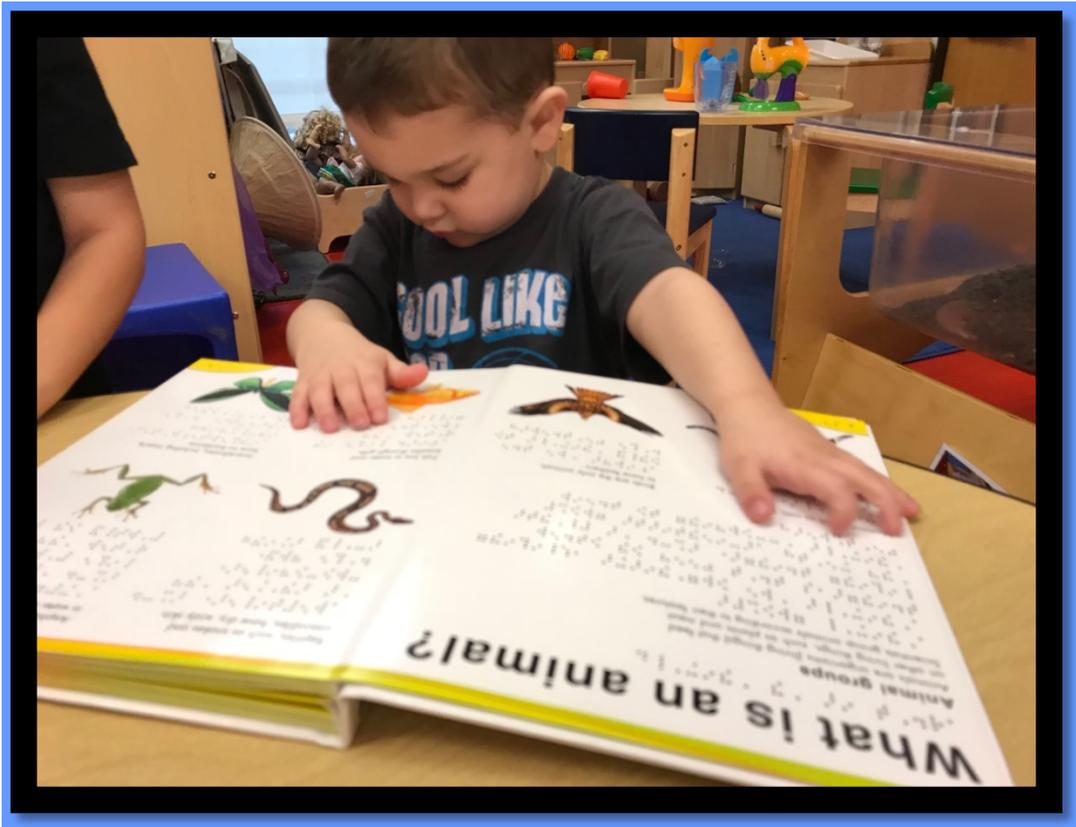


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The Voice and Vision of Special Education



Visually Impaired Preschool Services: 35 Years and Growing

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Our Mission:

Visually Impaired Preschool Services (VIPS) empowers families by providing educational excellence to young children with visual impairments in order to build a strong foundation for reaching their highest potential.

Before 1985, young children who were blind or visually impaired living in Kentucky and Indiana had no access to early intervention services for their vision-specific needs. That all changed when a group of concerned citizens, led by an employee of the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) Research Department, joined together to begin offering the same early childhood services identified during visits to APH field work sites across the country.

With \$20,000 in startup grants from Louisville's Metro United Way and the WHAS Crusade for Children, a local philanthropic organization

providing educational and medical services for children with special needs,



Visually Impaired Preschool Services, better known as VIPS, was born!

Researchers and therapists who work with children who are visually impaired have demonstrated there is a direct correlation between early

intervention and future academic

Image 1. Aubrey loves to explore the braille riddles on the playground at Kids Town Preschool at VIPS.

success. It was this bit of knowledge

that formed the charge of VIPS: To enhance learning opportunities by providing early intervention services to young children with blindness or low vision and their families in the Louisville (Kentucky) area. VIPS started modestly with one person, Sharon Bensinger, the original employee from APH, providing eight families with home-based early intervention services. Bensinger served as the founding Executive Director of VIPS for 25 years.

Since that time, VIPS has grown into an impactful agency, serving over 600 families across two states during the last fiscal year. Today, VIPS

supports three office locations in Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky and Indianapolis, Indiana.

As an infant organization, VIPS shared space with other non-profits with the shared mission of serving young children. As awareness of VIPS grew, so



Image 2. Camilo receives a little help from his friend, Anthony, to move about the Kids Town Preschool at VIPS playground.

did the demand for services. VIPS

moved into its current location in December of 2004 with space for office and support services as well as a classroom wing for center-based preschool services. In the summer of 2008, with the generous support of Kosair Charities and the Kentucky School for the Blind Charitable Foundation, Kids Town Preschool was completed. Young children who were blind, visually impaired or deaf-blind from across the region were now able to come to VIPS for preschool. Today, Kids Town Preschool at VIPS is Kentucky's only full-time preschool for children with visual impairments. It is nationally accredited through AdvanceED and is Jefferson County, Kentucky's first five-star rated preschool/childcare facility.

The VIPS Central Kentucky office opened in Lexington in October 1990. In 2015 VIPS entered into a partnership and relocated the VIPS Central Kentucky office at the Lexington Hearing & Speech Center. Little Learners, a playgroup for two-year-olds who are blind or visually impaired,



Image 3. Judah LOVES Kids Town Preschool at VIPS!

opened its doors to the Lexington community. Likewise, Lexington Hearing & Speech Centered began welcoming VIPS children into their inclusive preschool program, originally established to serve children with language delays

and/or hearing loss.

Because the VIPS mission knows no borders, in 2011 a satellite location with two employees was launched in Bloomington, Indiana. Driven by a mother of a blind child and a dedicated Teacher of the Blind/Low Vision, VIPS Indiana was a grassroots effort charged to change the landscape for Indiana's youngest children who are blind or visually impaired. With the backing of the VIPS Board of Directors, this mother and teacher began providing early intervention services in 2011.

VIPS moved the Bloomington office to Indianapolis in May 2014 to expand its reach from a more centrally-located address. VIPS Indiana started with eight children in 2011; during the last fiscal year, over 200 young children received VIPS Indiana services. Eager to establish roots in a space of their own, VIPS Indiana is excited to announce a new partnership with TWG Development to build a VIPS Family Resource Center in Indianapolis with an estimated completion date of June 2020.

VIPS services and programming are provided by highly qualified teachers, many of whom are dually certified as Teachers of the Visually Impaired



Image 4. Visually Impaired Preschool Services Building.

and Interdisciplinary Early

Childhood Educators, as well as Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists. These services include:

Birth through age 2 – Early intervention services are provided through Kentucky and Indiana First Steps systems. Children and families are served in their home, childcare center, preschool, and/or community.

Parent Empowerment Program – VIPS parents are invited to VIPS for an opportunity to network and troubleshoot strategies for raising a young child who is visually impaired. There is typically an educational component for parents and caregivers with VIPS staff and volunteers providing childcare support as needed.

2 Day Two's/First Steps Playgroup and Little Learners – Upon their second birthday, VIPS children are invited to join the two-day preschool program and/or First Steps Playgroup at Kids Town Preschool on the VIPS Louisville campus or the Little Learners playgroup on the VIPS Central Kentucky campus. Two-year-olds are also served in their community and homes through First Steps.

3-5-year-olds – VIPS children are served in our preschool program at Kids Town Preschool on the VIPS Louisville campus. VIPS also provides consultation and direct services in preschool classrooms of public school systems and private schools.

Sighted Peer Program – VIPS has long recognized, and is supported through research, that children learn best in the company of same-age peers who are developing typically. Kids Town Preschool reserves slots for the inclusion of sighted peers. Sighted peers are welcomed in the Little Learners playgroups as well.

Orientation and Mobility Services – According to the needs of the child, Orientation and Mobility services are provided as directed on the child’s IFSP or IEP, or as requested by the child’s parent.

Consultation/Advocacy Services – Parent(s)/guardian(s) may request that a VIPS representative accompany them to planning meetings for the child’s educational services, including IFSP and Admissions and Release Committee (ARC/IEP) meetings.

Family Supports – VIPS hosts family social events throughout the year. Parent and caregiver educational sessions are held regularly. VIPS also hosts an annual Family Retreat and Parent Conference weekend.

Over the years, VIPS has been visited by families from far and wide who are seeking high quality services for their child(ren) who are visually impaired. Some families have relocated to Louisville in order for their child(ren) to attend Kids Town Preschool at VIPS. Professionals from around the globe have come to the Louisville campus eager to hone the services they provide to young children with visual impairments by spending a day in Kids Town Preschool. VIPS provides ongoing consultation to agencies within many states eager to replicate Kids Town Preschool programming. Collaborations with universities and colleges, as

well as public and private school systems, are key to the mission undertaken by VIPS.

Parents can be devastated when they learn that their child is blind or visually impaired. The Can Do! Video Library from VIPS is another avenue of support and services provided. The DVDs offer parents of young children who are visually impaired practical and proven techniques that foster skill development and achieve independence. The Can Do! Video Library is sold nationally and internationally to enhance services provided in homes and preschools.

In the summer of 2018, VIPS introduced its newest video, "Every Child Can," offering a preschool-level perspective on the Expanded Core Curriculum for Students Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired (ECC). The ECC addresses nine critical skill areas of instruction for a student who is blind or visually impaired. These nine areas are in addition to and in support of the standard core curriculum adopted by statewide departments of education. The skills included in the ECC are the foundation of what must be learned in order to find success in school and in life. The objective of the video is to demystify the ECC for parents and teachers of young children who are visually impaired. The video encourages parents and

professionals to advocate for use of the ECC and to implement it at home, in the classroom, and in the community.

Today VIPS is a statewide agency in Kentucky and Indiana with a total annual budget of \$2.8 million. During the 2017-18 fiscal year, VIPS served 600 children and their families, providing 5,496 home- and community-visits. VIPS teachers and interventionists drove 251,254 miles to provide direct services to young children with blindness or low vision. VIPS was the first and continues to be the only nonprofit agency in Kentucky and Indiana providing vision-specific services to this population of children.