



NASET's Educating Children with Severe Disabilities Series

Travel Training

Part IX-B

Beyond the Basics: The Role of Travel Training Programs

Travel training programs offer travel training beyond the basic training that parents or guardians give to growing children with physical disabilities. These programs are customized to fit the needs of each student's unique abilities and disabilities. When a professional travel training instructor designs a travel training program for a young student, she or he will assess the physical and cognitive abilities and disabilities of the student.

The travel skills that students must learn: Students will need to move through indoor and outdoor environments. Skills such as opening doors and negotiating hills, ramps, curbs, curb cuts, and steps are important, and a student's capacity to accomplish these tasks should be assessed at the start of the training program. Endurance is also very important to a child's ability to travel independently. Is the student physically able to leave her or his home, travel to a transportation stop, wait for a bus or subway, board and then reach and disembark at the final destination? Another important consideration is the student's standing and ambulatory balance. Will wind, rain, snow, ice, or crowds cause the student to fall easily? Can the student maneuver in tight spaces, as during rush hours when subway platforms and cars are packed? A student who has poor balance or poor endurance can still be expected to travel independently, but modifications should be made to the training program to accommodate his or her needs. The student might be instructed to use a less crowded route or to travel only during non-rush hours. Bus stops near places to sit down might be suggested if the student cannot stand for long periods. If a bus stop is at the top of a hill and the student cannot climb the hill, then another route should be planned. A student who cannot use the steps to enter the bus will need to be taught how to use a bus lift. Students who are ambulatory will need to practice walking forward, backward, and sideways, going up and down steps (including curbs, ramps, and curb cuts); and opening doors, sitting down and getting up, and operating a traffic signal.

Using a wheelchair: Many of the students who enter travel training programs use wheelchairs for mobility. Students who use wheelchairs will need to acquire the skills described above and must be able to propel the wheelchair forward and backward, and make turns in tight spaces. A student who uses a manual wheelchair should be taught (if possible) how to do a wheelie to jump small ledges. Students using motorized wheelchairs, however, cannot do wheelies, because a motorized chair is too heavy. Because of this, their wheelchairs might not be able to go over the difference in height between a train and the platform level. In these cases -- and in the case of students who cannot propel a manual wheelchair but who do not have a motorized wheelchair -- it is necessary to teach students how to verbally direct someone to assist them. When a student can verbally direct a helper, then independent travel is an attainable goal.

Often, people with physical disabilities travel by private car or van, an ambulate service, or an accessible school bus. When riding a bus, students who use a wheelchair are instructed to enter the bus lift backward, engage their brakes, and tell the bus operator when they are ready. Having boarded the bus, the student is instructed to use the tie down and the seat belt and to lock the wheelchair brakes. The student must then inform the bus operator of his or her stop in advance and also signal for the stop. The student is taught to exit the bus by entering the lift facing forward or out of the bus, and locking the brakes.

The present tie-down system for wheelchairs on most buses cannot accommodate most motorized wheelchairs. Students in a motorized wheelchair should be instructed to position the wheelchair so that the front casters are facing the inside wall of the bus, and to ensure that the motor is turned off and that the brakes are engaged. Students using manual wheelchairs should also be instructed to turn their front casters to face the side of the bus and to engage the brakes, as the tie downs sometimes will pop open.

Teaching Travel Skills to Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired

What are some key travel issues that people with a visual impairment face?

Gathering information, whether from physical surroundings, posted signs, or other passengers, is an important concern for travelers who are blind or visually impaired. When traveling by bus, rail, or paratransit vehicle, individuals with a visual impairment require information to plan their travel; to establish and maintain orientation or sense of direction; to find their way when traveling to or within transit facilities and vehicles; and to protect themselves from potential hazards in their environment. When they use mass transit, travelers who are blind or visually impaired must consider their entire journey -- from their point of origin to their final destination -- when gathering information for travel.

Print signs and other displayed information in mass transit environments are usually inaccessible to persons with visual impairments, thus limiting the information that is readily available for effective and efficient travel. Travelers with visual impairments are specifically concerned about access to the following features of mass transit facilities:

- route, timetable, and fare information
- print or graphic messages on displayed signs, monitors, and maps
- information about the layout of transit stations, bus stops and depots, and transit vehicles, and
- information about the location of fare gates, token booths, vending machines, information kiosks, stairs, elevators, escalators, and boarding platforms.

Once travelers with visual impairments have boarded a transit vehicle, it's very important for them to know each stop the vehicle arrives at, and to have access to information displayed on monitors, signs, and system maps within the vehicle itself.

Safety during travel in transit environments, as in all environments, is another serious concern for persons who are blind or visually impaired. Common hazards that people with visual impairments encounter in transit environments include parcels left haphazardly on narrow rail boarding platforms; crowds that jostle and push; and unprotected platform edges that precipitate into an open track bed -- which travelers with visual impairments often refer to as "the pit." Effective use of specialized travel techniques, known as orientation and mobility (O&M) techniques, and certain environmental design features required by the Americans with Disabilities Act, such as tactile warning strips installed along the edges of train platforms and information in Braille, enable travelers to secure the information and protection they need for safe and effective travel.

How can children and youth with visual impairments enter a travel training program?

Children and youth who have a visual impairment are eligible to receive travel training their special education program. These services can be provided starting in early intervention programs for infants and toddlers and should be written into a student's Individual Family Service Plan. School-aged students need to have these services specifically included in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Transition Program.

O&M instruction is provided by licensed or certified professionals of the visually impaired who have received specialized training in orientation and mobility. O&M instruction provided through a school program is individualized to address a student's needs during the school years and focuses on teaching the skills required for daily travel. Instruction often takes place in both school and community settings and is provided on a one-to-one basis, with the student's family and entire educational team assuming integral roles in the O&M program.

Young adults who have completed their public or private school education and who have entered the vocational rehabilitation system may require O&M services to successfully complete the transition to an adult lifestyle. These services can be provided directly by O&M instructors on the staff of a state vocational rehabilitation agency, by private rehabilitation agencies for the blind working under contract with a state agency, or by private instructors retained on a fee basis by either a state agency or a private rehabilitation service provider. These services may be delivered using a center-based program model, a field-based program model, or a combination of the two. For example, a young adult learning to travel from home to a job site may receive O&M instruction at a rehabilitation center to develop specific travel skills and then receive field-based O&M services to learn the travel route from home to work.

Who are the service providers that teach travel skills to persons with visual impairments?

O&M services in schools and rehabilitation settings are provided by O&M instructors, who are also known as O&M therapists, O&M specialists, or peripatologists. O&M instructors in schools are professionals of the visually impaired who have certification in O&M from the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind or Visually Impaired (AER). They can be assisted by O&M Assistants (OMAs), who are paraprofessional instructors trained, by O&M specialists to perform certain teaching and monitoring tasks. There are 17 university professional training programs in the United States at which O&M specialists can receive training at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Some of these universities offer certificate programs that allow individuals with bachelors or masters degrees to complete a concentration in O&M course work without completing the requirements for a masters degree.

When is the best time for children and youth with a visual impairment to learn travel skills?

Children and youth should begin learning travel skills as soon as possible -- that is, as soon as a child's visual impairment is identified by the family physician or immediately after a vision loss occurs later in childhood. Early instruction in moving safely and purposefully through the daily living environment will enhance a student's capacity for effective independent travel. Early intervention programs for infants and toddlers who have a visual impairment include instruction in basic indoor and outdoor O&M skills and techniques, while focusing on the child's development of conceptual, social, and environmental awareness as well as the sensorimotor skills related to travel. O&M instruction for toddlers may also include an introduction to the use of mobility tools such as small travel canes or modified cane devices, depending on the individual needs of the student.

What are some methods of teaching orientation and mobility?

It is important that students with visual impairments learn travel skills in their natural daily travel environments, preferably in the actual settings where they will use their mobility skills. For example, when students learn to use their arms and hands to trail along a wall or similar surface or learn to use a cane to follow along a grass line, this instruction should take place at home and at school to facilitate daily living activities, such as traveling from the classroom to the cafeteria or leaving the school building to go to the playground. Similarly, students need to learn to cross streets by developing auditory, motor control, judgment, and cane skills at intersections in their home and school communities or at locations that are characteristic of intersections found in the communities where they will be traveling.

Instruction in the use of mass transit -- trains and buses -- should also be community-based. Often a transit system will make a bus or a train available to O&M instructors to use for initial lessons in familiarizing students with the layout of the vehicle and for introducing methods of boarding, paying a fare, locating a seat, maintaining orientation en route, and disembarking at the desired destination.

Students who have other impairments besides their visual impairment can and do learn to travel safely and efficiently. O&M and communication techniques and instructional approaches are modified to accommodate these students' unique learning needs. O&M instructors collaborate with occupational and physical therapists to teach students with sensorimotor or orthopedic impairments to use mobility devices and adapted techniques, to install electronic probes or curb feelers on wheelchairs and walkers, to coordinate the use of a support cane with the use of a mobility cane, and to develop exercises to facilitate maximum motor use for travel.

O&M instructors work with communication specialists to teach students with cognitive, speech, or hearing impairments to develop effective communication skills for use when traveling. Instructors also work with students' families and educational teams to assure repetitive and consistent opportunities for students to use mobility skills throughout the day. When teaching travel skills to students with multiple impairments, it is crucial to adopt a team approach in which the responsibility for the student's education is shared among team members.

What can children and youth with a visual impairment and their families expect from O&M services?

O&M services will teach purposeful, graceful, safe, and effective travel skills that will allow children and youth to carry out their daily living needs and keep pace with the increasingly complex environments they will encounter as they mature. Families and students can expect to be involved in all aspects of assessment, goal setting, planning, and implementation of O&M instruction.

Evaluating the quality of programs that teach travel skills

Three important elements should be considered when reviewing the quality of an orientation and mobility (O&M) program provided by an educational system: the program's structure, the instructional process, and outcomes of instruction. With respect to each element, the following needs to be considered:

Program Structure: How extensive is the instructor's case load, and how often is service provided? Service that is provided sporadically is likely to be of little impact. Is an OMA available to assist the O&M instructor and to practice selected travel skills with the student? Does the O&M instructor receive adequate supervision and support from the school or agency where he or she is employed? Does the instructor have access to professional journals, in-service training, and professional mentoring? Have the O&M instructors graduated from a recognized university personnel preparation program in orientation and mobility? Are instructors in rehabilitation programs and professionals in educational settings, certified by AER in orientation and mobility?

Instructional Process: Are the student and family involved in all critical aspects of assessment, goal setting, program planning, and implementation? Does the O&M instructor provide adequate in-service education and support to the educational team, including the student's family? Are student records maintained in a professional and confidential manner, and in conformity with IEP requirements? Are families satisfied with the frequency and quality of the communication between the O&M instructor and home? Are services provided in environments in which the student will need to travel, and in accordance with the family's preferences and values?

Instructional Outcomes: Do the student and family believe that the student is working toward realistic goals -- that is, goals that are neither too ambitious nor too modest? Is the student acquiring travel skills during the school years to carry out age appropriate school and daily living activities? Are the student and family comfortable with the student's knowledge of travel and safety skills and the student's level of independence? After the student completes the program, is he or she able to comfortably and safely carry out travel for personal, social, and vocational activities?

Visual impairment, including blindness, brings with it a host of special needs and concerns when an individual with such a disability travels. Gathering information from and about one's environment is a certain challenge to the traveler who is visually impaired, and safety is always a concern. Yet, with the help of a properly trained and certified orientation and mobility instructor and with training that begins early in the individual's life and continues to evolve in terms of skill development, individuals who have visual impairments can learn the skills they need to travel safely on public transportation.

Public Transportation and the ADA

An Introduction to the ADA

The Americans with Disabilities Act (the ADA) of 1990 is a comprehensive civil rights law that sets forth provisions for full societal access for individuals with disabilities. As a result of this legislation, people with disabilities have gained sweeping protection against discrimination in public and private establishments and when using public services such as public transportation. This section of this NICHCY Transition Summary provides an overview of the ADA's requirements for accessible transportation, the varieties of accessible transportation that are utilized in this country, and the steps that still need to be taken to bring about full accessibility and compliance with the ADA.

The effect of the ADA is to make unlawful any discrimination against people who have disabilities. The purpose of the ADA is:

- (1) to provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities;
- (2) to provide clear, strong, consistent, enforceable standards addressing discrimination against individuals with disabilities;
- (3) to ensure that the Federal Government plays a central role in enforcing the standards established in this Act on behalf of individuals with disabilities; and
- (4) to invoke the sweep of Congressional authority, in order to address the major areas of discrimination faced day-to-day by people with disabilities.

People with disabilities, according to the ADA, include individuals who have physical or mental impairments that substantially limit one or more major life functions, such as seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, breathing, learning, and performing manual tasks. This definition applies to about 49 million Americans -- a conservative estimate, given the increasing numbers of elderly people and other people with conditions that are covered by the ADA.

The ADA mandates full accessibility to transportation services and basically changes the manner in which public and private transportation is provided in the United States. The ADA has far-reaching implications

for the transportation industry. Its requirements for accessibility affect all modes of transportation except air travel, which is regulated by the Air Carriers Access Act of 1986 and related U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) regulations. The ADA also affects federal highways, transit systems, private transportation systems, airports, and water transportation systems. What follows is a summary description of the ADA requirements for providers of public fixed route transportation; local and state governments; federal highways; paratransit services; transportation stations, stops, and facilities; making communication services available; private providers of transportation; and providers of water transportation.

Requirements for Providers of Public Fixed Route Transportation

The ADA requires providers of public, fixed route transportation services (public transportation that follows an established route, such as a bus or subway system) to phase in accessibility as new public transportation vehicles are purchased or leased and as public transportation facilities are constructed or refurbished. Providers must furnish paratransit services to persons with disabilities who cannot use fixed route transportation services.

The ADA does not require providers to replace non-accessible vehicles with new, accessible vehicles or to retrofit non-accessible vehicles to make them accessible. However, since August 26, 1990, the ADA requires public transportation providers, when they acquire new vehicles, to purchase or lease only accessible vehicles.

New or leased rail and commuter trains must have at least one car per train that is accessible, as of August 26, 1995. Providers of rail and commuter train transportation must make "good faith" efforts to locate accessible train cars before purchasing or leasing inaccessible used ones. Train cars that are remanufactured to extend their use by five years or more must also be made accessible.

Requirements for State and Local Governments

State and local governments that are responsible for maintaining public streets, roads, and walkways must provide curb ramps at existing pedestrian crosswalks. As accommodations are installed in existing walkways to comply with the ADA, governments must give priority to walkways that service government offices, transportation depots, public places such as parks and theaters, and places of employment. Curb ramps must be provided at any intersection that has curbs or other barriers. New construction must be designed to accommodate people with disabilities.

Requirements for Federal Highways

The Federal Highway Act of 1973, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Surface Transportation Act of 1978 mandate accessibility to walkways, roads, highways, overpasses, underpasses, rest areas, and emergency roadside communication systems constructed with federal funds. While some existing facilities are exempt from this mandate, all plans for new construction must comply. Facilities must be accessible to persons with either physical or sensory disabilities.

Paratransit Requirements

This is one of the more sweeping changes that the ADA requires -- fixed route public transportation operators must provide paratransit services (transportation services that do not follow a fixed route) to people with disabilities who cannot use fixed route transportation. The service area, days and hours of service, fares, response time, and passenger capacity of paratransit services must be comparable to those of fixed route public transportation services. The U.S. DOT has established three categories of riders who are eligible to use paratransit services:

1. Riders who cannot independently ride, board, or disembark from a fixed route vehicle.
2. Riders who can independently use the fixed route service but for whom a fixed route vehicle is not available at the rider's time or place of travel.
3. Riders who, due to the combination of a disability-related condition and environmental barriers, cannot reach the bus or rail stop.

All fixed route public transportation providers operated by municipal, state, and federal governments must submit to the Federal Transit Authority (FTA) an initial ADA Paratransit Plan, along with annual updates describing progress toward compliance. Full compliance with all service criteria is required by January 26, 1997. Only those providers who can show that compliance will cause an undue financial burden will be granted a time extension from compliance.

Requirements for Transportation Stations, Stops, and Facilities

After January 26, 1992, any facility that is constructed or modified to provide fixed route or paratransit public transportation must be accessible to people with disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs. Intercity train and commuter rail stations must be accessible, unless the FTA grants a time extension to the provider. Time extensions for intercity rail systems can extend to 30 years, provided that two-thirds of the provider's key stations are accessible within 20 years; the FTA may give key commuter rail stations extensions of up to 20 years. New commuter and Amtrak rail systems must be constructed so that they are accessible, unless a waiver is granted.

Requirements for Making Communication Services Accessible

The ADA requires public transportation providers to afford persons with disabilities, including persons with sensory or cognitive impairments, an effective means of communicating with transportation system personnel, while these travelers are within or utilizing transportation facilities. This regulation applies to a public facility's vehicle operation, print materials, and public address system. For example, information about transportation services must be available in accessible formats such as Braille, large print, or audiotapes. Teletypewriters (TTYs), interpreters, or qualified readers must be available to supplement public telephones. To facilitate onboard announcements and other communication, public address systems are required in new buses longer than 22 feet. Vehicle operators are required to announce major stops, intersections, and transfer points. At vehicle transfer points, operators are required to assist persons with a visual impairment in identifying specific buses or trains. Public address systems within transportation facilities must have a means of conveying the same or equivalent information to people with hearing loss.

Requirements for Private Providers of Transportation

The ADA prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities who use privately-operated transportation services. The law, however, distinguishes private providers of transportation into primary and secondary providers. Primary private providers are those whose main business is providing transportation to a specific clientele or to the public. An example of a primary private provider is an airport shuttle. Secondary private providers are those who provide transportation to a specific clientele or to the public, but whose vehicles are used for other purposes as well. An example of a secondary private provider is a hotel service. As in the domain of public transportation, discrimination by primary and secondary private providers on the basis of disability is illegal under the ADA.

Discriminatory practices include maintaining inaccessible facilities, refusing to provide auxiliary aids and services, and refusing to remove barriers.

Although taxi companies are subject to the ADA requirements for private providers, they do not have to purchase accessible automobiles. Taxi companies that choose to purchase accessible vehicles must ensure that the vehicles are truly accessible. Taxi companies may not refuse assistance to persons with disabilities in stowing wheelchairs or mobility aids during a ride or charge such people higher fares.

The Debate over Accessible Transportation

The ADA resolves a long-standing debate over accessible transportation services between the disability community, which has argued that people with disabilities have a basic right to accessible fixed route transportation, and the transportation industry, which has argued that the cost of making transit systems fully accessible was excessive. For more than two decades, federal policy vacillated between these opposing views, creating confusion among state and local governments, transit systems, and the disability community. But in passing the ADA, the federal government issued a clear mandate that supports full accessibility, standardizes accessible transportation services, and establishes requirements for both public and private operators of transportation services.

Some of the Complications Associated with Implementing the ADA

A law as fundamental and sweeping as the ADA is inevitably accompanied by complications. There are valid and serious problems associated with fully complying with the ADA, which are discussed below.

Senior Displacement: The ADA may well be the only civil rights legislation that may cause a loss of services to certain consumers. According to a recent study completed by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), many paratransit users who are senior citizens may be displaced by people with disabilities. According to the AARP study, one in five paratransit systems have indicated that, given their limited financial resources, they may have to deny service to senior customers who, because they have no disability, are not eligible for ADA protection, so that the transportation provider can transport customers who fall within ADA eligibility standards.

Operating Costs of Paratransit Transportation Systems: State and municipal governments have expressed grave concerns about the costs of operating or hiring the paratransit systems that are required under the ADA. The uncertainty of obtaining funds, coupled with increasing demand for services, has made it difficult for many paratransit systems to meet ADA requirements. Some paratransit systems have requested waivers to delay compliance. These requests have been refused so far, but as the compliance deadline draws near, waiver requests are likely to be submitted and accepted more frequently. One way to lessen the number of people who use paratransit services is to train people with disabilities to use fixed route public transportation.

Detectable Warnings: The U.S. DOT regulations requiring detectable warnings along rail platform edges sparked controversy in the disability community and the transit industry. These detectable warnings are placed to warn people who have visual impairments of the proximity of the rail tracks. While transit systems did not argue directly against the need for detectable warnings, they have raised concerns about the maintenance requirements and safety of detectable warnings. Transit systems voiced concerns about the large monetary investment that installing detectable warnings would require, and noted that detectable warnings have had limited testing in actual use. At the center of this issue are the safety of passengers with a visual impairment and the high cost of installing detectable warnings. Despite these concerns U.S. DOT and the U.S. Access Board ruled in favor of detectable warning strips. Installation along key station platform edges was required by July 26, 1994.

Conclusion

While many transportation options for individuals with disabilities exist in certain areas, there is still work to be done in making all public transportation accessible. The availability of these options must be coordinated with the skills required to use such services. These skills begin early in one's life and must be reinforced continuously if one is to move toward a world of independence.