

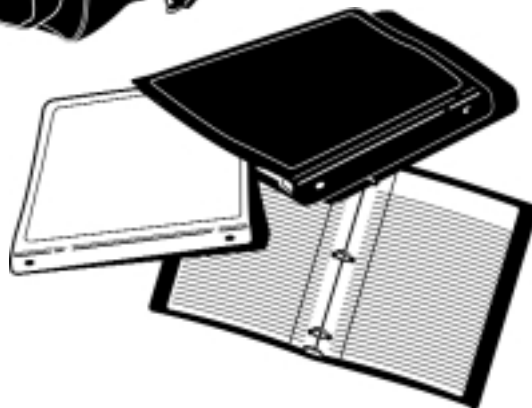


# THE LITTLE ROCK FOUNDATION

## GETTING IT ALL TOGETHER



### ORGANIZING STRATEGIES FOR ELEMENTARY BRAILLE READERS



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## ORGANIZING STRATEGIES FOR ELEMENTARY BRAILLE READERS

By Joan McCann, M.A.

Your child will need to learn organized work strategies if he is to achieve independence and efficiency as he grows up. An employer will have understandable reluctance to hire a worker who takes twice as long as others to complete tasks, and there will be no one-to-one assistants to help out in the workplace. Teaching your child to work effectively begins in the pre-school years; even very young children can learn to be responsible for simple family chores, and to do them efficiently. In addition to accomplishing the task, your child will also learn self-worth and confidence. Once he begins school, he will have a good background to help him cope with the tasks that will take him longer to complete, and the greater number of educational aids he will use as a braille reader.

Some children are, by nature, very organized and systematic. However, as parents, most of us are raising "the Others", and we need to help our children learn to work efficiently. The ideas listed in this booklet are some that can be used to help blind children develop efficient work habits and environments, and there are many more options that are not listed. You and your child need to decide what is best for your family. Keep in mind that there is no one best way; the measure of any idea is whether it works for your child.

**Here are some general guidelines:**

### **KEEP LIFE SIMPLE**

Kids today have STUFF. Lots of it, both in school and at home. The amount of stuff that kids have to manage is often not something that parents can reduce. However, when choosing adaptive aids to meet your child's needs, consider the "use-ability" of each item. A young child can become overwhelmed with the demands and pieces of many sophisticated adaptive devices, and wind up struggling to keep up with the pace of the school day. The goal in providing adaptive aids is to find the simplest and most efficient tool for him to complete tasks independently.

### **PLACE FOR EVERYTHING...**

Grandmother's old saying, "A place for everything, and everything in its place," is a golden oldie for students with visual impairments. Searching tactilely is much more time-consuming than searching visually, and time spent searching for objects

is time not spent learning and working. Knowing where things are is the only way a blind child can become fully independent and productive. You are teaching this essential skill your pre-schooler when you teach him to always put his toys in specific locations, how to sort the silverware, and where his socks are kept. Teaching your elementary child is only an extension of this skill of sorting and locating. Pure common sense!

## **SAVING TIME**

Always look for ways for your child to save time when completing tasks. If there is a functional problem, work with your child to come up with a functional solution. If your child is unaware of normal time spans for completing tasks, give him needed feedback. But, be aware of people who "do for" your child to help him save time; not learning how to work efficiently will actually cost more time in the long run.

## **SET LIMITED GOALS**

If your child is just beginning to work independently, set up limited responsibilities at first. You can add more later as he becomes capable. For example, if your child loses track of his books and homework and educational aids, you might start with the requirement that he must place his backpack in the homework area as soon as he arrives home from school; when he finishes his homework, he must then immediately put the backpack with his coat, ready to go to school the next day. When this habit is established, you might then work on managing homework items efficiently.

## **REHEARSE**

Kids learn best by doing. Once you and your child have decided on the skill you want to establish, practice it several times together. This often works best if the "rehearsal" can be done during vacation or on a weekend, when there is plenty of time to talk and practice, without the pressures of the school day. Make it fun!

## **CHECK IT OUT**

Teaching your child HOW to organize a task is one thing; getting him to do it regularly is quite another! You may have to check things quite frequently at first to help establish the new habit. Reward your child with your praise and your pride as he becomes more independent.

## ORGANIZING THE BACKPACK

### CHOOSING A BACKPACK



- ✓ Choose a backpack large and sturdy enough to easily accommodate the educational aids and over-sized (11" x 11") braille books your child will have to carry. Avoid small packs that will become "filled to the gills", making it hard for your child to fit, and find items.
- ✓ Rectangular shaped packs are more useful than the tear-drop shaped packs, as they better fit the large braille books.
- ✓ A double zipper that allows a large opening helps your child "load up" more quickly than a pack that opens only across the top.
- ✓ If your child has some vision, encourage him to choose a brightly colored pack which is visible to him. If he has no vision, look for one that has a distinctive feel, such as decorative trim on the pouch or a suede patch.
- ✓ A pack that offers some tactile clue at the top, such as a loop or different textured fabric, may help your child to easily orient his pack right-side up.
- ✓ Choose a pack that has exterior pockets and separated compartments inside. This will allow your child to designate specific "parking spaces" to keep individual items.
- ✓ In addition to functional considerations when selecting a backpack, help your child also to find one that fits in with the styles used by his friends. Your child may love his Winnie the Pooh backpack from kindergarten, and not realize that the other kids' styles have changed.

## SETTING UP THE BACKPACK

- ✓ Sit down with your child and develop a plan of what would best be kept in each area of the backpack. When possible, group together those things that will be used together, to minimize the number of places he must search at one time. Talk with him about how he needs to use his supplies and pack in school. Help him to figure out the best ways of managing materials during the school day.
- ✓ Attach a keychain fob, tag or other age-appropriate item to the main zipper pull to help your child locate it quickly, as well as to give one more clue so that your child can easily identify his pack from those of his friends.
- ✓ Many braille readers use fragile and expensive electronic aids, such as talking dictionaries, electronic notetakers, calculators, and tape recorders; these need extra protection. Assign these aids to specific individual pockets where they will not be crushed, or likely to fall out inadvertently. You can add extra protection by placing a thin lining of foam inside the equipment pockets. The importance of taking extra care of his backpack when he is carrying these aids should be emphasized to your child.
- ✓ Instead of keeping his backpack in a locker or coatroom, it may be more efficient for your child to hang it on the back of his chair. When each individual class is over, he can then place any needed homework items immediately into his pack. At the end of the day, only minimal packing up will be needed.
- ✓ The end of the day scramble to get ready for the bus can be overwhelming for a young blind child. Many times, a teacher or aide may take over packing your child's backpack for him for the sake of efficiency. Unfortunately, this short-term solution is damaging in the long-term, because the child does not learn to manage his own needs. If this is the case with your child, talk to the teacher to set up increasing goals to help your child assume his own responsibilities. If necessary, this area can be addressed in the IEP. Time constraints and demands will only increase in the years to come, so your child needs to learn to manage now.
- ✓ Encourage your child to clean out his backpack at least once a week. Packs can become the repositories for the most amazing clutter that will get in the way when your child needs to find specific items.
- ✓ If your child's backpack is overloaded with needed school supplies and adaptive aids, talk with your vision teacher-consultant and the classroom teacher to see if duplicates of some items can be provided for home use.

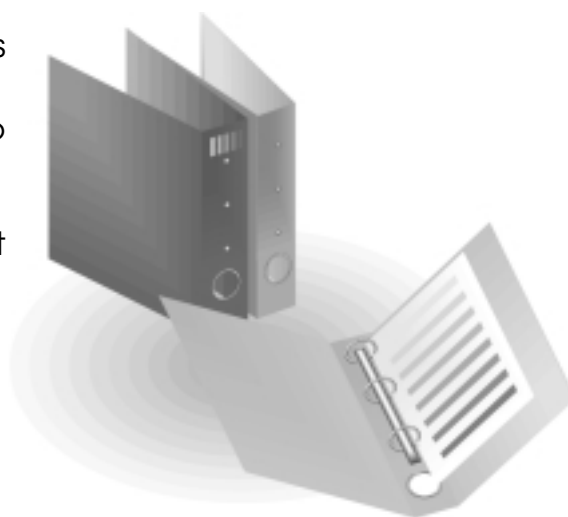


## ORGANIZING NOTEBOOKS AND FOLDERS

Some classroom teachers have definite requirements regarding the types of notebook and folder systems they want students to use in their classes. Often, this has to do with the way they are structuring the workload, so it is important to find out what is required before your child sets up his notebook system. If the classroom system is problematic for a braille reader, help your child think of a more workable alternative and have him discuss it with his teacher. Your child may wish to discuss his problem and solutions with his vision teacher.

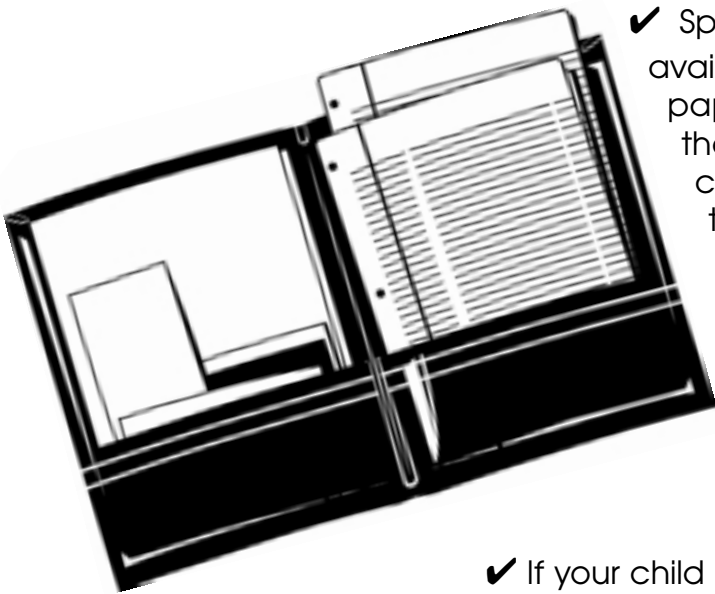
### NOTEBOOK:

- ✓ Choose a binder that is wide enough to hold folders, papers, dividers, etc. without squashing the braille dots.
- ✓ Braille paper comes in two sizes, the traditional notebook size (8 1/2" x 11") and braille page size (11" x 11"). Special notebooks for the large braille paper are available through your vision teacher-consultant. Although the traditional size notebook is easier to handle, your child may need to use the larger notebook if he needs it to hold prepared braille pages and work sheets, which will be 11" x 11", or if he routinely uses the larger paper for writing.
- ✓ Use pocket folders as subject dividers instead of the usual tab dividers. This provides a place to keep worksheets and handouts in the proper category. Plastic folders are available that fit the large braille paper. You may want to cut them in half and use just one pocket per subject to keep the notebook from becoming too bulky.
- ✓ Braille labels for each divider can be made by brailleing on laminating plastic. Some students prefer to simply attach raised shape stickers for each subject, such as a circle for reading, square for math, etc. Make sure have your child place his labels in a place that is tactually convenient, such as the bottom right corner of the folder.
- ✓ A specific location/folder for keeping notes for home, school announcements, and graded work that is home is helpful to keep the notebook from becoming cluttered. Braille readers encounter particular difficulty trying to manage print papers that must be taken home.



- ✓ Is your child using taped books? A zippered pouch page in the front of the notebook is a good way to keep the cassettes secure while carrying them back and forth to school.
- ✓ Disk storage pages are helpful if your child is using computers in home and school. If your child is using multiple disks, each one should be labeled, or else stored in separate locations.
- ✓ Supplies of braille notebook paper must be ordered for your child. He should learn to request additional paper before reaching the end of his pack, so there is adequate time for delivery. To help young children anticipate this need, place a rubber band around the bottom quarter of his pack of paper. When your child uses enough paper to reach the rubber band, this should signal him to ask for more.

## FOLDERS

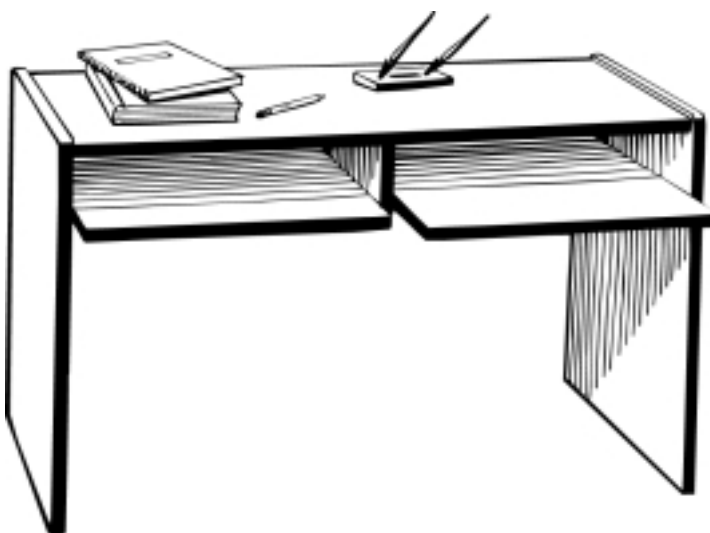


- ✓ Special double-pocket plastic folders are available to accommodate the larger braille paper. If your child has some color vision, they can be ordered in several bright colors. Although they are extremely sturdy, the folders are somewhat slick, and your child will need to hang on to them.
- ✓ Make sure your child labels each folder. (See comments above about using folders as notebooks dividers.)
- ✓ If your child is using regular 8"11" folders, available from local stores, try to find ones that have different textures, so that your child has an instantaneous clue as to which folder he has in hand.
- ✓ If your child's teacher requires a folder for each subject, and your child is having difficulty keeping things in order, soft plastic, narrow notebooks are available. Your child can use a separate notebook for each subject.

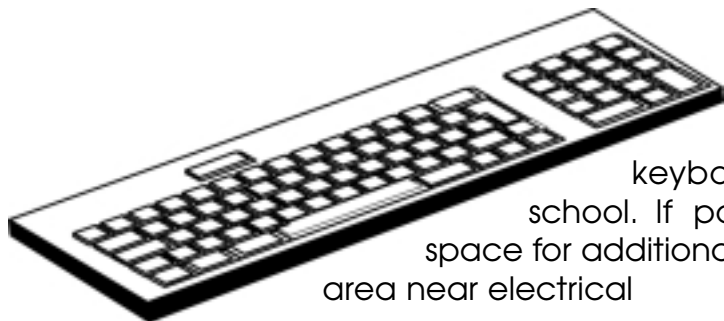
## SETTING UP A WORK SPACE

It is usually best to establish one specific place in the home where your child can do his homework. While having a large desk with ample drawers and shelving is great, it is not essential. Students can be successful in many different situations if they are thoughtfully planned and maintained. Working at the kitchen table, where materials must be set up and removed daily, can be efficient if it is organized. The goal is to arrange a work area in which your child can get to work and readily find needed materials without asking for assistance.

- ✓ Look for a desk or work area large enough to accommodate the space needed by braille books, writing equipment and adaptive aids.
- ✓ Talk with your child and his teachers to determine what standard educational supplies will be needed on a regular basis. Make sure these basics are readily at hand, but try to keep the numbers of items limited to those which will truly be needed on a frequent basis. Keep items used more occasionally in a separate space.
- ✓ Arrange a compartmentalized storage system for your child's supplies so that he can quickly find pencils, scissors, Post-its, paper, etc. Storage systems can be purchased in office supply stores, but they can also be inexpensively made from boxes, plastic containers, divided silverware trays, hanging shoebags, shower caddies, etc. Have your child decide, or help decide, where to place items.
- ✓ If your child needs to keep his supplies in a separate place from his work area, look for plastic tote caddies that have handles on the top and compartments inside for easy moving.
- ✓ Encourage your child to keep his desktop clear of supplies he is not currently using. If there are not enough drawers or shelves, materials can be kept in plastic cartons or tubs which can be easily slid in and out under the desk.



- ✓ Keep in mind that braille books and braillewriters are much larger than print materials, and your child will need more space to work and store his materials. One inexpensive way to organize braille books is to use stackable plastic milk cartons. These "compartments" help to keep multivolume books organized and in order.

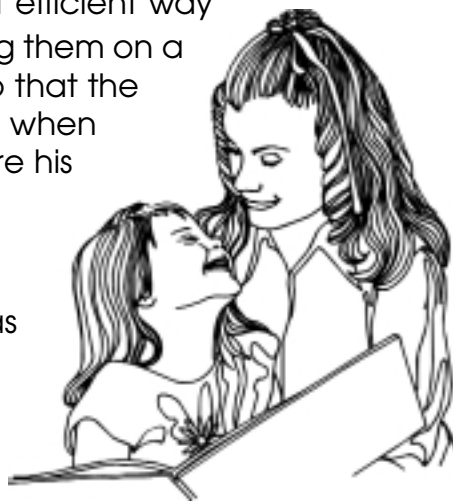


- ✓ Most braille readers learn to touch-type and begin using typewriters and computer keyboards in early to mid-elementary school. If possible, try to allow sufficient space for additional electronic aids, and locate the work area near electrical
- ✓ If you have enough space to create a work area for your child, an efficient design that meets many needs is an L-shaped desk. One arm of the desk can be used for reading and braillewriting activities, with the related items located there. The other arm can be used for a computer, typewriter, or other electronic aids.
- ✓ An official, expensive desk is not necessary if you have the space to build a work area of any design. Many families have found that pre-made laminate countertops (available at home centers), simple tables, or other inexpensive materials can be combined to build a good work area. Just make sure that the desk is sturdy and strong.
- ✓ If your child has some residual vision, arrange to have lighting that will give him the maximum amount of visual cues. Choose materials that offer high contrast to help him locate items more quickly.

## WORK STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTIVE MATERIALS

### BRILLE BOOKS

- ✓ As you may have discovered, a single print textbook may require up to twenty volumes when brailled. As a student matures, he should learn to get each needed volume, rather than relying on an aide or parent. Teach your child to arrange the volumes of each textbook in order, in a specific place. As your child completes each volume, it should be returned to that location. If the volumes of the book are to be used in numerical order, some students like to place the completed volume at the end of the row of books, so that the next volume is always at the "head" of the row and easily located.
- ✓ Young readers often have difficulty remembering to get the next volume ready before actually coming to the end of the current one. This can lead to a minor crisis if his volume runs out in the middle of a lesson, or a home work assignment. To help your child learn to plan ahead, place a rubber band several pages before the end of the book as a signal. When your child reaches this point, he can either get the next book or ask for it. As time goes on, try to phase out the use of the signal. You may wish to ask your child each evening whether he is coming to the end of any of his volumes, and whether he has taken care of getting the next one. In time, he should take over this task on his own.
- ✓ Finding the right page in a braille text can be time-consuming. Encourage your child to use page markers to assist him. Some braille books have attached ribbon markers; if not, Post-It notes or paper clips can be used. Make sure your child learns to place the marker on the next page he will be reading, not on the one he just finished.
- ✓ Teach your child to orient books in the most efficient way when putting his books away. If he is putting them on a shelf or in his desk, they should be placed so that the braille titles or labels will be most easily read when he looks for that book later on. Think of where his hands will be for reading.
- ✓ For quick IDs, some children prefer to label braille books using geometric shapes, such as circles for reading (one for text, two for work book), squares for math, etc. This can be faster than having to read braille titles on routinely used books.



- ✓ Teach your child to hold a book by the open sides instead of the spine, keeping it firmly closed, when putting it away. Braille pages have an annoying tendency to splay out and engulf everything in the way if the child holds the book only by the spine while pushing it into the desk or back pack. It's hard to find your calculator if it's been eaten by your reading book!

## ASSIGNMENTS LISTS/CALENDARS

It is important that blind children learn the skills of keeping track of daily work assignments, in a medium that is accessible to them. If you find that your child's aide or classmate is doing this for your child, talk with the teacher and vision consultant, and come up with a plan to teach your child an efficient way for him to manage this task. There are many different ways that braille readers can keep their assignments organized, just as there are for print readers. Help your child choose a workable system based on the needs of his class. Here are some ideas:

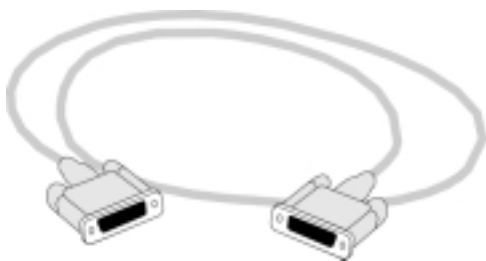
- ✓ Place a stack of 5"x8" cards in a pocket in the front of the notebook, or keep them in an easily accessible place in the desk. As daily assignments are announced, your child can write them on the top card. At night, after he has completed the homework on the card, he can re-write any long-term assignments onto the next card, and discard the original. Or, keep longterm assignments on a separate card in a different location.
- ✓ If the assignment list is usually brief, some students prefer to use a memo recorder (a small tape recorder about the size of a pager) This allows the student to simply speak into the recorder to list the assignment ("Math work book, page 59"). Some have several channels so that the work list can be sorted, such as into daily and long-term tasks. Recording time is limited, however.
- ✓ Is your child using an electronic braille device? A Homework file can be set up for assignments, and most have some calendar functions your child can learn to use.
- ✓ Whatever system your child selects, once he begins to receive assignments that extend beyond one day, make sure your child learns to label entries with dates given and dates due.
- ✓ If you need to see your child's assignment list, ask the teacher or aide to prepare a print one for you in addition to the one your child makes for himself.

## ELECTRONIC AND ADAPTIVE COMPUTER AIDS

There are many helpful electronic and adaptive computer aids available for braille readers. The trick is to find those aids which truly increase his educational functioning, but cause the least amount of demand and clutter. Be careful not to overwhelm your child with too many pieces of equipment for him to learn and manage in short periods of time.



- ✓ To keep some of the smaller aids (such as talking calculators and dictionaries) in an accessible, safe harbor, attach a plastic shower caddy with suction cups to the side of your child's desk. Keeping these small items out of the main crush of the desk will help to keep them from falling out on the floor, being buried by books, etc. A foam lining can be added to the caddy to further protect the aids. (This technique works best for students who remain in one classroom.)
- ✓ If your child uses a braille translator with a printer at home or school, use Velcro to attach a small stapler or paper clip caddy on the side. Your child can then easily attach the print and braille copies together.
- ✓ If your child is using aids that must be plugged into wall outlets, talk with the teacher and vision consultant to see how your child's inclusion into classroom groups will be arranged. A blind child should not be "exiled" to an individual workstation for large parts of the day, unless the other students are also working independently.
- ✓ Many adaptive electronic devices can operate on battery charge. Make sure that you and your child understand the procedures for maintaining the charge, and set up a routine schedule for re-charging as needed. Not only do uncharged devices stop functioning at critical times, but some devices become de-programmed if they run down entirely. Whenever possible, encourage your child to plug in his device to preserve the charge for other situations.
- ✓ Keeping computer disks sorted and identified can be quite a task for a blind child. Make sure he knows how to label his disks, and has needed supplies at hand. Durable labels can be produced using self-stick laminating paper or a braille labeler. Using a disk-holder page or box, with specific locations for individual disks, is also helpful.



- ✓ Label the various cords that accompany your child's electronic aids, so that he doesn't get them confused. It's easy to break the pins and prongs of the receptacles if the wrong type of cord is pushed into them. It is sometimes possible to purchase or borrow extra earphones, chargers and electric cords if your child

becomes overwhelmed by keeping these attachments properly matched going from home to school.

- ✓ Practice with your child to make sure that he can easily and quickly carry out all the ancillary tasks that accompany computer use, such as putting paper in the printer, getting the devices in and out of their carrying cases, assembling system components, inserting batteries, etc.
- ✓ Classmates of blind students are often intrigued by adaptive technology, and their attempts to "try it out" can end up breaking devices your child needs. Encourage your child to demonstrate and explain his special equipment to others to defuse such curiosity.
- ✓ If your child leaves his equipment in school overnight, you may wish to discuss safe storage with your child and his teacher. Adaptive technology items can be curiosities to others, and an ounce of prevention may be advisable.
- ✓ Teach your child to be considerate of others working in his area when he is using voice output devices, by modulating the volume or using headphones.
- ✓ If your child is working with an adaptive technology specialist/instructor, encourage your child to keep a list of questions or problems that may crop up between sessions. Your child should also know how to access technical support when needed.
- ✓ Your child should be aware of the expense and fragility of his electronic aids, and of the importance of taking good care of them. If he is too young to do so, it might be best to postpone independent use of such aids. In addition to the difficulty of replacement, it will be a real problem if your child depends on an aid that is not consistently available.

## TAPED BOOKS

Audio-reading is a vital communication medium for blind students, in addition to the use of braille. Taped books provide access to many materials that may not be available in braille, and in some situations can be more efficient than braille books. Students should begin to develop listening skills in the pre-school years. They should be given experiences in listening to oral stories, either read aloud, on tape or disk. (At the early reader level, choose books that do not rely heavily on picture information.)

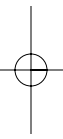
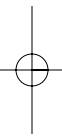
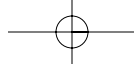
Taped textbooks generally become appropriate in the fourth grade and above for literature and content area subjects. Taped textbooks require numerous, four-track cassettes to record an entire book. Organization of these multiple tapes is critical for successful use.

- ✓ Keep tapes for each text together in the box in which it was shipped, along with the card index. (Each set of tapes is shipped with a set of index cards that list the chapters and pages of the print book that are included on each track of each tape.) Have your child carry only the tape that he is using, and return it to the box when he finishes it.
- ✓ Taped textbooks often arrive at homes over the summer, when time is more available. When they come, take the time with your child to braille the card index if it is not already done. Without this, your child will have to rely on a print reader to select the tapes for him.
- ✓ Each cassette arrives labeled only with its number in that series of tapes, not with the name of the text. If your child is using several books on tape, make sure to label each set individually so that he does not sit down to do his social studies homework, only to find he has the science tape. Labels can be either brailled, or your child can devise a system using tactile stickers; mark the tapes and the boxes.
- ✓ Teach your child the habit of forwarding his tape to the beginning of the next lesson after he completes his assignment.
- ✓ If your child taking notes from the taped text, encourage him to list the tape and track numbers at the top of his notes to help him find his place easily later on



- ✓ Does your child's teacher assign the questions at the end of the chapter? Ask if the questions can be provided in braille, and teach your child to read them prior to listening to the section. This way, when he reaches the section that answers a question, he can stop and answer it immediately, saving much "find and re-wind time".
- ✓ Tapes MUST be returned to lending libraries to retain your child's eligibility. Your child can learn this important responsibility.
- ✓ Your child should learn to call the **Library for the Blind and Recordings for the Blind** to order his own materials when he is old enough to make phone calls appropriately. Staff at these libraries are used to student phone calls, and are quite helpful. If he needs to order several books, he may find it helpful to braille a list of titles and authors ahead of time. At times, copy right and edition information is needed.
- ✓ You and your child may wish to visit the school and town libraries to check out their selections of taped books. If it seems meager, talk with the librarians to let them know of your child's needs.





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