

# The importance of peer support for children and youth with visual impairments

A group of young people, including a girl with glasses and a yellow vest, are smiling and interacting in a social setting. The background is blurred, showing other people and warm lighting.

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Consulting teacher for the visually impaired in  
Valteri, Finland

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# About us



**Anu Pakkanen**

Consulting teacher for the visually impaired, Valteri

- Master of Education
- Special education teacher
- Specialist in visual impairment skills



**Stina Nygård**

Synrådgivare, Förbundet Finlands Svenska Synskadade

- Arbetsterapeut
- Specialist in visual impairment skills





# What does Valteri have to offer to support the social skills and peer group inclusion of a child with visual impairment?

# A few things about Valteri

Valteri is a national Centre for Learning Support that operates under the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI)



Valteri, Jyväskylä

- **Valteri supports local, neighborhood schools by providing multiprofessional support for early childhood education and basic education across Finland**
- **The municipality is charged for our services and the decision to purchase the service is also made by the municipality**
- **Additional professional training for teachers, special education assistants, principals etc.**
- **Materials and publications to support education and rehabilitation.**



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# Consulting teachers for the visually impaired (VI) in Valteri



- Tervaväylä, Oulu ★
- Onerva, Jyväskylä ★
- Ruskis & Skilla, Helsinki ★ ★
- Mäntykangas, Kuopio
- Mikael, Mikkeli ★
- Tampere (counselling services)
- Turku (counselling services)
- Vaasa (counselling services)

-10 Finnish speaking consulting teachers ★

-2 Swedish speaking consulting teachers ★

488 VI children and young people under the scope of our services across Finland



Valteri's services for the VI children and youth are **counselling visits** and **support periods**.

## Counselling visits

- Visits to the child's own learning environment (daycare, pre-primary unit or school)
- Consulting teacher alone or accompanied with rehabilitation specialist from Valteri
- Counselling visit usually takes 4-6 hours and includes a meeting with the guardians
- Cooperation with hospitals' rehabilitation workers is important

## Support period

- A support period can be arranged in group format at a Valteri service unit or individually in the child's own learning environment



# Valteri's services for the visually impaired

1/2

## A support period in Valteri unit (group format)

- A multiprofessional team is responsible for the implementation of the period
- Support period lasts for one school week
- Support period includes: education, functional vision, ICT and mobility assessments, rehabilitation, leisure time activities with peers and accommodation in Valteri
- There are 3-7 children or young people/group. The students of the group are mainly of the same age and have similar needs
- Annually about 120 VI children & young people come to Valteri for group support period



# Reaching VI children into the scope of services

- In each wellbeing county has a hospital's rehabilitation worker for VI children
- When a child is diagnosed with visual impairment, the rehabilitation worker tells family about Valteri's services
- Each child gets a named consulting teacher from Valteri
- Valteri has a connection to most of the children with VI in Finland
- Consulting teachers begin their work when the children are approximately 4 to 5 years old
- Valteri's support for visually impaired covers the whole education path from early childhood education until the end of the basic education (9<sup>th</sup> grade)
- Consulting teachers work in active cooperation with the hospital's rehabilitation workers as well as the families



# The beginning of the educational path

In Finland every child has a right

- to attend an early childhood education and care (i.e. daycare), pre-primary education and school near his/her home
- to be supported in growth, learning, personal development and welfare

The education of a child in need of support is planned and implemented based on their individual needs and situations.

This also applies to children with visual impairments, most of whom begin daycare, pre-primary education, and school in nearby daycare centers and neighborhood schools.

Support for special needs is provided in each daycare center, pre-primary unit and school.



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# Consulting teacher for VI student...

- Is a member of the child's multiprofessional team
- Understands what vision impairment means to children and youth
  - functional vision assessment and the impact of the results
- Understands the support needs related to the visual impairments in learning and in teaching
  - need of help, assistance, materials and aids for learning
  - accessibility of environment and materials
  - consulting teacher has a deep understanding of special education
- Understands the support needs related to the visual impairments in growth, personal development and welfare
  - social skills, communication and interaction, the importance of peer support, and so on



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# Social skills and belonging to a peer group 1/2

- The development of VI child's social skills requires special attention and support
- In the early years, the rehabilitation worker plays a key role in guiding and modeling communication and interaction for the whole family
- When a child begins early childhood education, they join a peer group
- Adults should initially guide the play of all children, but significantly more effort is needed to support the play and social integration of a VI child.
- When pre-primary education and school starts, adults still need to be alert to help and to guide children and young people with VI; how to find friends during the breaks, how to keep up with friends and maintain friendships, how to learn more complex social skills, etc.



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# Social skills and belonging to a peer group 2/2

- Every child wants to have friends and belong to a group and to be accepted. In a group, children learn self-awareness, social skills, and general behavioral norms.
- When joining new group observing others plays important role, yet this is extremely difficult for children with VI.
- Groups might change and adults change often during the early childhood education and care, pre-primary education, and school.
- All young people sometimes face challenges in social relationships, and it is important to remember that every young person is an individual. Not all challenges should be attributed to visual impairment either.

# During counselling visits...

- Main focus is to support pre-primary education and school attendances
- Amongst that we often model activities and provide tips for implementing peer support and supporting social skills
- The goal is to make teachers understand how to adapt familiar plays, games or learning situations to suit everyone
- On every visit we talk about the importance of verbalizing and explaining the social situations and environment around the child
- Through discussions and modeling, we also make it easier for peers to approach the visually impaired children, invite them to join the group, and build friendships
- By openly talking about visual impairment and introducing assistive devices, we break down barriers between children; when you know you don't have to assume.



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# During group support periods...

- Again the main focus is to support pre-primary education and school attendances but...
- Child might meet another VI child for the first time ever
- Another, different kind of peer group is formed: “We all have VI in common!”
- Working and living for a week in a peer group with other visually impaired children can be truly empowering
- The older the children are, group discussions intend to be highly enriching; others may share similar challenges, and sometimes even offer solutions
- Self-acceptance is also a frequent topic of our discussions.
- An adult with a visual impairment often pays visit to youth support period. The example they set might be crucial for someone in finding their own path.



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# Cooperation with different parties

Neighborhood school, rehabilitation worker and consulting teacher working together enables the student's support to be timely and information flows.

**Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired** organizes leisure activities for children and young people. Sometimes, for example, in accepting one's own visual impairment or an assistive device, peer support can be more effective than the support offered by Valteri or the neighborhood school.



Read more by visiting our website:

[www.valteri.fi/en/](http://www.valteri.fi/en/)

You can also find us (in Finnish) on

[Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#):



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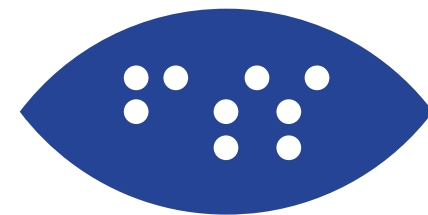
**Thank you!**

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# Synligan



Synrådgivare Stina Nygård/Förbundet Finlands Svenska Synskadade



FSS

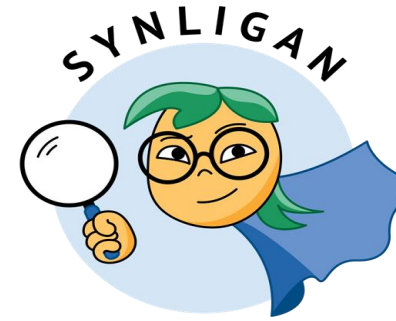
# People with visual impairments in Finland

- In Finland, there are about 60,000 people with visual impairments. Approximately 3,000 of them have Swedish as their mother tongue.
- Most are seniors over the age of 65.
- Children and young people with a visual impairment and Swedish as their mother tongue are a minority within a minority.

# The Federation of Swedish-Speaking Visually Impaired in Finland (FSS).

- FSS's target group is Swedish-speaking people with visual impairments, their relatives, and close ones.
- FSS's services complement the public service offering; rehabilitation, information technology, Braille, accessible publications, individual support.
- FSS advocates for the interests of its target group, organizes courses, and disseminates information.

# Project Synligan



- In 2021, a four-year project was launched with the goal of supporting well-being and education, and establishing meaningful activities for Swedish-speaking children and youth under 18 with visual impairments.
- In 2025, the project became part of FSS's activities for children and youth.

# The Goals of Synligan

- Create meeting places for families.
- Provide support and information about services and resources for children and youth.
- Peer support for children, siblings, and parents.
- Activities are built around current topics and visual impairment skills.

# The number of participants in Synligan today

- 6 children aged 1–12
- 10 young people aged 12–18
- We believe there are more children and young people who belong to our target group, so our outreach work continues...

# Meeting places, weekend courses and theme days

- **Guided activities** based on the needs and wishes of the children and young people, separate program for siblings.
- **Lectures** on current topics for parents, young people, and children.
- **Joint activities** for the whole family.
- **Peer support:** children, young people, and siblings get to socialize and do things together, and parents are given opportunities for open discussion and interaction.



# Other activities within Synligan: Information visits to schools

- Discussion with experienced speakers about how to manage everyday life with visual impairment
  - Braille
  - The brochure Children and Vision, magnifying cards
  - Information about eye health!
- > increased knowledge and understanding of visual impairments



# Information for Grade 1:

- Annually, a flyer about Synligan is sent to every home where a child with Swedish as their native language starts school in the autumn.
- In autumn 2025, 2768 flyers were sent out. The envelopes also contained a small magnifying card.



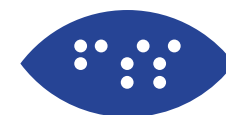
# Safety glasses for the New year

- Synligan distribute safety glasses before the New year to a grade/middle school class in grades 7-9.
- Includes an information session where we talk about eye health and the importance of protecting the eyes.
- Flyer: "Take care of your eyes" is distributed.



# Individual support in all matters, big and small:

- Assistance with applications, for example for assistive devices, training in IT skills to support participation in school, aids for hobby activities.
- Participation in collaboration meetings and we have lectures to professionals who work with children and young people.
- We participate in events aimed at children and young people to spread information.
- Provides support and advice to staff on vision impairment issues, e.g., assistive devices, lighting, and contrasts.



# What have we accomplished?

- Today, Synligan is an important platform and community for children, youth, and families.
- Synligan has given children with visual impairments the opportunity to try, explore, and socialize.
- Parents have expressed a clear need to meet, talk, receive information, and support.
- For siblings, it has been important to meet other siblings and establish new contacts.
- Synligan has offered knowledge and practical support in everyday life.
- Synligan has increased knowledge and understanding of visual impairment among students, teachers, and professionals.
- Synligan has spread information about eye health.

# Thank you!

