# Vision Australia

# Access to Braille Position Statement

**June 2020**

# Position Statement Summary

Access to braille skills development, braille reading and writing tools and braille materials is a fundamental right of all children and adults who are blind, deafblind, or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. It is integral to maximising opportunities for their participation in all aspects of life. Given the critical importance of braille, government, education institutions, and information content producers must adopt policies and programs that will maximise access to braille skills development, braille reading and writing tools, and braille materials.

If you would like this position statement in an alternative format or wish to discuss it with Vision Australia’s Government Relations and Advocacy team, please contact us:

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## What is braille

Braille is the tactile system of reading and writing used worldwide by people who are blind or deafblind; it is also used by many people whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. Braille can be learnt and used by people of all ages, including people who become blind or people whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively later in life.

Braille is based on a six-dot “cell” arranged in a configuration of two columns and three rows. 64 combinations can be formed using the six braille dots, and these combinations are used to represent letters, numbers, punctuation and symbols.

Braille was invented by Louis Braille while he was a school student in Paris in the 1820’s. Since then, braille codes have been developed for many languages and covering a range of subject areas such as mathematics, music, computing, science, chess and knitting patterns. Various products incorporating braille have been developed, including clocks, watches, timers, games, kitchen scales and maps.

Braille is the primary tool for literacy, numeracy and information access available to people who are blind or people whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. No other medium is able to convey the core elements of literacy such as spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax necessary for writing and for full comprehension when reading. It provides the most direct and immediate access to information, and is analogous to print in allowing a reader to engage with text at a personal level rather than using an intermediary such as human-narrated audio or synthetic speech. Braille users find that it is an essential tool in the workplace and other areas of professional life, for example, when giving presentations, reading agendas of meetings, and taking notes.

For people who are deafblind, braille is the most effective, and in many cases the only, access to literacy, information and knowledge about the world.

Recent technological advances have made it easier than ever to learn and use braille. Technology is now readily available that allows people who are deafblind to communicate in realtime with others by using braille in conjunction with a visual display such as a smartphone.

Braille can be written and produced using manual or electronic methods. In many countries, including Australia, braille is commonly produced using computer-based software and embossing equipment. Developments in technology have also made it possible for individual braille users to read and write braille using electronic “refreshable” braille displays and notetaking devices, and to access computers, smartphones and the internet using braille.

Technological advances in have also made it easier to produce audio books and to access computers using high-quality synthetic speech. While audio can be a useful tool for accessing information, it is not a replacement for braille since it does not provide direct access to the core elements of literacy and numeracy. Braille and audio are complementary, not competing, ways of accessing information. Braille will remain essential for people who are blind, deafblind or people whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively, for as long as print is essential to sighted people, and cannot be easily replaced by other technologies.

## Position Statement Context

This position Statement is founded on principles that are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (“the Convention”). The Convention is the most complete expression of the human rights enjoyed by people with disability. Australia has signed and ratified the Convention, and hence is bound by the obligations that it establishes.

The Convention makes five specific references to braille:

1. In the definition of "communications";
2. In Article 9, in relation to the provision of braille signage;
3. In Article 21, relating to the learning of braille;
4. In Article 24, relating to the importance of braille in the acquisition of life and social development skills and full participation in education;
5. Again in Article 24, relating to the need for employment of teachers of braille (including those with disabilities) who are qualified in braille.

These references, taken together, are a clear recognition that braille literacy is an essential part of upholding and promoting the rights of people who are blind, deafblind, or people whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively.

Literacy is a key factor in determining success in life, including employment. Research has found that blind adults who learnt braille were twice as likely to be employed, were more financially self-sufficient, achieved higher education levels, and spent more time reading.[[1]](#footnote-1) Other research has shown that when taught braille at an early age, the literacy levels of blind high school students is comparable with those of their sighted peers, whereas those who received infrequent or no instruction in braille achieved lower literacy levels than their sighted peers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet, despite the findings of this and other research, there is some evidence that braille literacy has declined significantly in the past few decades, and is now at a critically low level worldwide.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As a consequence of being blind, deafblind, or having vision which is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively, people usually need to develop alternative skills to sighted people for the acquisition of literacy, numeracy, and general information. Such skills include the interpretation of tactile graphics and maps, using structural elements in text to locate key information quickly, and understanding three-dimensional objects on paper when solving mathematical problems. The development and maintenance of these skills is essential regardless of the age of onset of blindness or vision impairment. But it is particularly important for children born blind, deafblind or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively to develop braille skills, as competency in literacy and numeracy is fundamental to a child’s education.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Some older adults who become blind or acquire vision which is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively, mistakenly believe that braille is impossible for them to learn and of little practical value. In fact, many adults find that learning basic braille skills is very helpful in many aspects of everyday life: creating grocery lists, labelling clothing, identifying medications, using household appliances, and many other tasks can be achieved through the use of braille.

## The Position Statement

1. Access to braille skills development, braille reading and writing tools and braille materials is a fundamental right of all children and adults who are blind, deafblind, or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. The use of braille is integral to maximising opportunities for their participation in all aspects of life, including childhood development, education, employment, leisure and recreation, house work and information management.
2. People who are blind, deafblind, or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively, must therefore be provided with:
   * 1. sufficient opportunities to develop braille competency,
     2. convenient and affordable access to equipment that is used for reading, writing and the personal production of braille, including current technology such as electronic braille notetakers, and
     3. equitable access to information in braille that is available to the general community in print formats.

## Skills Development

1. People who are blind, deafblind or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively must be provided with the opportunities, resources and instruction they need in order to develop and maintain alternative skills for the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, and for accessing information in braille.

## Teaching techniques and knowledge of braille in schools

1. Children who are blind, deafblind or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively must be taught braille at the same time, with the same level of thoroughness, and by people with equivalent expertise, as their sighted peers are taught print.

## Access to braille-related equipment

1. The ability to read and write braille on paper remains fundamental to the development of basic literacy and numeracy for children and adults who are blind, deafblind, or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. They must therefore have convenient and affordable access to braille reading and writing tools including braille paper and basic writing equipment.

In order to participate fully in all aspects of life, braille users must have convenient and affordable access to electronic braille equipment. Several types of braille equipment have been developed to provide access to digital technologies, such as computers. These include refreshable braille displays and braille notetaking devices.

## Information access in braille

1. Braille users have a right to receive key government and community information in braille on request, including:
   1. Government documents available to the public, such as discussion papers and reports;
   2. Information brochures and fact sheets about government services and programs;
   3. Personal correspondence from government departments and agencies;
   4. Information about pharmaceutical products, usage instructions, and personal prescription dosages;
   5. Utility bills;
   6. Key financial information, such as bank statements;
   7. Contracts, mortgage documents, insurance policies, and wills;
   8. Information that is printed on supermarket products, such as ingredients lists, allergy information, and preparation instructions.
2. Braille users have a right to read the material of their choice in braille, including books, magazines, appliance instruction manuals etc.
3. Braille users have a right to receive braille material at the same time and at the same cost as printed versions of the same document.
4. Braille users have a right to receive braille material that is accurate and compliant with standards and guidelines covering areas such as braille codes and formatting practices that have been endorsed for use in Australia by the Australian Braille Authority.

## About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia’s most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support,

Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Feelix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and a national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, NSW Spectacles Program and Government Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and including fully exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision as well as they support they require to fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, comprising of people with lived experience who are representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment. Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia, to strengthen the voice of the blind community.

Position statement ends.

1. Ryles, R. (1996): “The Impact of Braille Reading Skills on Employment, Income, Education, and Reading Habits”, J*ournal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, May-June, p.219-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ryles, R. (1999): “Early Braille Education Vital in Establishing Lifelong Literacy”, reported in *Future Reflections*, Spring-Fall 1999; Accessed on 02/09/2014 at: https://nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr18/issue2/f180213.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gale, Gillian (2001): *In Australia: Braille Literacy Matters*, The Educator 13(1), Autumn, PP.13-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National Federation of the Blind (2009) “*The Braille Literacy Crisis in America, Facing the Truth: A report to the nation”* Accessed on 04/04/2014 at: https://nfb.org/images/nfb/documents/word/the\_braille\_literacy\_crisis\_in\_america.doc [↑](#footnote-ref-4)