

Let's Walk Together—Safe Guiding Techniques for Individuals with Intellectual Disability and Vision Loss

Narrator: Human Guide, also known as Sighted Guide, is a technique whereby a person with vision loss holds onto the arm of, and safely walks with, another person. Proper use of the technique by both parties ensures that individuals with vision loss know where they are, where they are going, and what they are passing by when walking. Statistics show that one out of every four people with intellectual disability experiences vision impairment or blindness. Because vision loss is so prevalent, it is important to know the Human Guide technique and to realize that not everyone is always able to use it in the same way. Variations, modeled after the standard technique, are influenced by individual needs, travel environments, and the height of the guide. Modifications can be subtle with just a variation in the use of the grip, while others can be more obvious with the use of equipment for balance stability. In this video you will learn what Human Guide is, how to use it in everyday situations, and variations of the technique.

When using a standard Human Guide technique a person with vision loss holds onto his guide's arm and walks ½-step behind and to the side of his guide. When offering assistance it is critical for the guide to always communicate who she is...

Female Guide: It's Lisa, how are you?

Male Student: Hi Lisa.

Narrator: ...where her arm is, where they are going and to continue to describe the environment while traveling.

Female Guide: Want to go for a walk in the park?

Male Student: Let's go!

Female Guide: Let's go!

Narrator: In the standard Human Guide technique the individual grasps the guide's arm just above the elbow with four fingers on one side and the thumb on the other. The individual's arm should maintain a comfortable bend at the elbow while grasping the guide. The guide's arm could also be bent at the elbow or remain straight by her side. The technique is helpful to people with vision loss because by design it provides 4 critical components:

Safety: The safest position for the individual is beside and a half step behind the guide--allowing time and space to react if the guide suddenly stops. The guide's body also provides forward protection for the individual. When walking, the guide must assume responsibility for safe travel around all obstacles.

Control: By holding onto the guide's arm, the individual controls the grip, the pace, and can stop walking if he chooses.

The grip is also a non-verbal method of communication. For example, a very tight grip may indicate that the person being guided is anxious or nervous. The guide must respond to the individual's grip, or change in grip, by checking in with the individual, slowing the walking pace, and offering encouragement.

Information: By contacting the guide, the individual receives directional information through the guide's body movement.

Female Guide: We are heading towards the Common.

Narrator: The guide communicates who he or she is, where his or her arm is, and where they are going. The individual holds his guide's arm just above the elbow and walks ½ - step behind and to the side of the guide.

The technique offers safety, control, non-verbal communication, and information.

Narrator: Physical, cognitive, and/or sensory challenges may affect someone's ability to use a standard human guide technique. It is important to remember that with any variation in technique some element of safety or information exchange is compromised. As a result the guide must slow the walking pace and respond to individual needs.

Sometimes it can be too challenging to grasp the arm of the guide. Instead an individual may only be able to rest her hand, wrist, or forearm on the bend of the guide's arm. This results in less secure contact and compromises reaction time. The guide must slow the walking pace and reposition the individual's hand for contact and safety.

For another person it may be too challenging to maintain thumb and finger separation to hold her guide's arm. Instead she is able to hold with fingers and thumb together. This change puts the individual closer behind the guide and compromises reaction time. Here again, the guide must slow the walking pace to maintain safety.

Female Guide: Hi Sylvia.

Narrator: Grip placement can be altered to accommodate height differences.

When an individual with vision loss is much shorter she can grip above her guide's wrist so she maintains a comfortable bend at the elbow. The guide's lower arm, wrist, and hand must remain close to the body.

If the situation is reversed and the individual is much taller, he can grip at the top of the guide's upper arm to maintain a comfortable bend at the elbow.

Sometimes individuals let go of the guide frequently as they walk.

Male Guide: Come on Vin. Let's finish our walk to the gym.

Narrator: When guiding an individual who has an inconsistent grip, the guide must be prepared to stop and make sure that the individual stays safe while encouraging him to continue walking.

Individuals with vision loss who use gait belts or walkers present unique challenges to the guide who is no longer in the lead.

Male Physical Therapist: From a physical therapy point of view, gait belts or walkers are used to assist balance and sometimes these devices can put the person in the lead or a half step ahead of the caregiver.

Male Orientation and Mobility Specialist: Right, and that information is very important to me as an Orientation and Mobility Specialist because it then becomes my responsibility to train staff about what the short comings may be for an individual with vision loss when they use a device like a walker or gait belt because it does put them in the lead as opposed to being behind their guide.

Female Guide: David, I am going to go to the fitness center and check to make sure the treadmill is ready for you. I'll be right back.

Narrator: When walking with an individual who uses a gait belt, the guide must be sure that all needed doors along the route are open, either by opening them ahead of time or asking for assistance.

Female Guide: Hi! Could you help me hold the door?

Female Bystander: I certainly can.

Female Guide: Thank you!

Ok David, looks like the fitness center is ready for us. Ready to go walk on the treadmill? You need to stand up. Ready? One, two, three!

Narrator: The guide assumes responsibility for the individual's safety while being mindful that his body is not in the lead and does not offer forward protection.

Male Guide: Hold my arm and I'll guide you. Nice job, Raul.

Narrator: Incorporating use of the human guide grasp whenever possible when using equipment is helpful. It also facilitates person to person contact.

Male Guide: Let's get your feet. Ok, now hold my arm and I'll guide you. Good. Good job! Let's keep going.

Male Guide: Ok Charles, we're going to head to the gym. I'll guide your walker while you set the pace. Ok?

Narrator: Care must be taken by the guide when walking with an individual who uses a walker to ensure good posture and a safe, comfortable pace.

Male Guide: Slow it down a little bit so we can have you walk a little more upright. Ok? Here you go.

Narrator: Guides must always be mindful of individual needs, and slow the walking pace. The individual holds the guide according to ability. Variations in technique compromise safety, control, non-verbal communication, and information.

When approaching a doorway, the guide must determine if the individual with vision loss can safely hold and control the door. If he can, the guide should make sure the door hinges are on the same side as the individual.

Female Guide: I'm going to open the door. Can you take it with your right hand and hold the door open while we pass through?

Male Student: Yes!

Female Guide: Hold it open. Thank you!

Narrator: Sometimes it is not possible for an individual to support the weight of a door or hold it open. The best and safest option would be to ask someone to hold it for you.

Female Guide: We're going to go outside.

Narrator: If no one is available to help, the guide can keep the door hinges on the same side of her body and hold the door open with her body and foot.

Female Guide: You don't have to worry about the door just keep stepping through, I've got it.

Narrator: The guide must go slowly and monitor for safety when walking through the doorway.

When approaching a narrow area the guide must describe the situation and move her guiding arm behind her body so that the individual with vision loss follows single file.

Female Guide: All right, because it's a tight space Maria, hold onto my arm. We're going to come through.

Narrator: The guide may also help the individual to follow single file by grasping her wrist.

Some individuals need more support to follow along behind the guide in narrow spaces. One option is for the guide to sidestep in front of the individual and gently hold the individual's free hand for protection.

Female Guide: Step down. There you go. You are going to take my arm and I'm going to side step through.

Narrator: When sidestepping through a narrow space, the guide must walk slowly, look back at the individual to monitor for safety and also check ahead to make sure the travel path is clear.

Good communication is essential when walking through busy or crowded areas.

Female Guide: I'm going to push the button so we can get the walk signal.
All right, then we are going to go straight.
There is going to be a lot of people around. We've got to wait, everybody's in our way.
How are you doing?
Ok, we're just going to go nice and slow and then we are going to wait.
We're just going to walk straight across. All right, there are some dips I'm just taking you around. We're in the crosswalk. We're almost across the street, good job.
Good job. All right, now we are on the sidewalk and we can continue walking straight.

Narrator: The guide should always assess the doorway or area upon approach, be mindful of individual needs, choose the safest technique so the individual with vision loss can travel with ease, and describe the area while walking through.
Stair travel requires caution and extreme care. When approaching, the guide identifies the direction of the staircase. The guide stops at the edge of the first step, directs the individual to locate the handrail and to align his feet as straight as possible. The guide goes up with the individual one step behind.

Female Guide: Nice job, we are at the top. No more stairs.

Narrator: Ideally, the individual with vision loss is on the right side for ease of travel.

Female Guide: Here we are. We're at the top of the staircase that goes down. Ok, there's your handrail. Ready?

Narrator: Aligning feet as straight as possible helps to maintain sure footing on each step. When walking down a staircase the guide should remain to the side and one step ahead. It is the guide's responsibility to choose the walking path and describe upcoming elevation changes. Depending upon an individual's needs, a ramp may be the safest option.

Male Guide: Margaret, let's head into the building. I think we should take the ramp.
Let's head up the ramp.

Female Guide: Oh look, there's John and Margaret on the ramp. We're going to have to take the stairs. Ok? So we need to switch sides.

Narrator: Walking down a few steps must be treated with the same caution as travel on a staircase. Always use handrails when available. Switch sides as necessary.

Female Guide: Very good. Ok, now we're on the patio so we're going to go for our walk.

Female Guide: It's Lisa. How are you? Want to go for a walk in the park?

Narrator: While walking the guide must inform the individual with vision loss of any upcoming surface changes.

Female Guide: We're going to walk right on the grass here for a second. And we're going to step from the grass right onto the pavement. Good job.

Narrator: The guide must walk at the individual's pace.

Female Guide: We're going to step onto the grass now. Great job.

Narrator: The guide should always choose the safest option for travel, pause and describe the elevation or surface change, encourage the use of handrails when available, and remain a step ahead.

When guiding someone who needs physical assistance, it is important to describe the location of the table and the chair.

Female Guide: Can you hold the table while I pull out your chair?
Hold onto the table. Good job. Ok, take a step sideways so the chair's behind you.
Good. Ok, the chair is going to touch the back of your legs. Sit down. Very good! Ok, I'm going to push you in and then I'm going to go get the drink. I'll be right back.

Narrator: For some individuals it is much safer to sit in a chair with arms.
When less physical assistance is needed, it is helpful to guide the individual to the side of the chair so he has room to pull it away from the table and seat himself.

Female Guide: Can you reach out and find the table? I'm going to lead your hand to the back of the chair. You're going to pull that chair out, have a seat. Very good.

Male Student: Very good.

Female Guide: Ok, pull yourself in towards the table.

Female Guide: Ok Punch, we're going to go have a seat on the couch.

Narrator: When guiding someone with vision loss to a couch the guide must describe the location of the seat and assist him to find it so he can turn and seat himself.

Female Guide: We're at the couch. Can you reach down for the seat?

Male Student: Sit?

Female Guide: There you go. I'm going to sit beside you.

Narrator: Some individuals are not easily able to touch the seat and turn before sitting.

Female Guide: Turn around. We're going to let the back of your legs touch the couch.
Ok. So, can you sit down?

Narrator: In this situation it is safest to encourage sitting only when the seat is directly behind the individual.

The guide must describe the type of chair or couch and assist the individual as needed to locate the seat, turn, and sit.

Female Guide: We'll go for a ride.

Narrator: When guiding someone into a car providing information about the roof, door, handle, and seat is important so that the individual can be as independent as possible.

Female Guide: I'm going to help you find the handle. Pull it open. Here's the roof of the car, reach up and feel it so you don't bump your head. Turn and feel for the seat. Very good. Once you get your legs in I'm going to put your seatbelt on. Ok, here's the seatbelt. I'm going to close the door; you're the first one in.

Narrator: For some people additional assistance is needed to get into a car.

Female Guide: I'm going to help you get in the car. Let me open the door for you, I'm going to place your hand on the car door. I'm going to have you turn around, the seats behind you and you can sit down. There you go, good job. I'm going to put your seatbelt on you. And then we're going to go for a ride.

Narrator: When getting out of a car the guide should be ready at the door to describe the car's location, including the presence of any curbs, and to provide assistance as needed.

Female Guide: Ok Punch we're here, I'm opening the door.

Male Student: I'm opening the door?

Female Guide: Yes, we're going to take your seatbelt off.

Male Student: Yes.

Female Guide: Can you step out of the car?

Male Student: Yes.

Female Guide: Great. Let's stand up. Ok?

Male Student: Let's stand up?

Female Guide: Yup. We're going to close the door. Step back. Very good. Ok, here we go.

Female Guide: Ok Margaret here we are. I'm going to undo your seatbelt. All right? Can you swing your legs around? Hold the back of the seat. We're going to come out of the

car now. Very good. Ok, take my arm I'm going to shut the door. Ok, we're going to step up a curb.

Narrator: There are many makes and models of vans, each with different configurations of doorways, steps, grab bars, and handrails. It is necessary to plan the safest approach based on the unique features of each van and the individual's needs.

Male Guide: Come on Margaret, here we go. We're going to head onto the van and take a trip.

Narrator: Because van doorways and steps are often narrow, human guide can not be easily used. Having two guides is necessary for safety. One can assist from outside the van and one from inside.

Male Guide: Grab the rail. Follow the rail up the stairs.

Narrator: Helping the individual to reach for the railing is important for safety, balance, and information about the direction of the steps.

Female Guide: I'm going to help you up the stairs. Step up.

Narrator: If there are not two handrails present, or if an individual cannot hold onto two handrails, assistance can be offered to the person's free hand when going up the stairs.

Female Guide: Last step. Ok, take my arm I'm going to guide you to the seat. Ok, here's your chair. Feel the seat. Turn around and sit down. Good. I'm going to put your seatbelt on and we're going to get ready to go for a ride.

Male Guide: Ok, Maria, I want you to grab the handrail and step up. Follow the rail up the stairs.

Narrator: Whenever possible it is safest to use 2 handrails.

Female Guide: Last step, can you take my arm? Nice job. All right? We're going to go back to your seat over here. Ok, here's your seat. Sit down and I'll buckle you up. Good job. Maria, I'm going to buckle your seatbelt now. Thank you.

Narrator: Exiting a van is another instance when extreme caution must be taken. Guide position and communication are critical for safe transition out of a van. The guide inside the van must wait for the guide outside to be in a protective stance before leading the individual to the steps.

Female Guide: Ok, Maria, we're here. I'm going to undo your seatbelt. Can you stand up? Ok, take my arm we're going to go to the top of the stairs. Place your hands on the railings. Ok, John's going to be at the bottom.

Male Guide: There you go, nice. Step down. Ok, one more step. All right, you're finished Maria.

Female Guide: Ok, Margaret, we're here. I'm going to unbuckle you. Can you take my arm? Ok? We're going to go to the stairs so you can get off the bus.

Narrator: When descending, if an individual is not able to hold onto two handrails, or if there is only one handrail, for safety the guide may support the individual's free hand as she exits the van.

Male Guide: Step down. Excellent. Here you go, last step. All right, you're finished. Let's go for a walk.

Narrator: The guide should provide information about the doorway area as an individual enters or exits a car or van, be mindful of individual needs, encourage use of handrails when available, and always monitor for safety.

Human Guide is a technique whereby a person with vision loss holds onto the arm of, and safely walks with, another person. Statistics show that one out of every four people with intellectual disability experiences vision impairment or blindness. Because vision loss is so prevalent, it is important to know the Human Guide technique and to realize that not everyone is always able to use it in the same way. As you have just seen variations can be influenced by individual needs, travel environments, and height of the guide. If you are working with someone whose needs were not addressed in this video, a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist can develop an individualized plan. To find an Orientation and Mobility Specialist who can also provide training on additional safety and travel techniques please contact your local or state agency that offers services to individuals with vision impairment or blindness. Thank you for taking the time to learn about the important and empowering technique of Human Guide.