

Making Tactile Books for the ClearVision Library



ClearVision is a postal lending library of over 13,000 mainstream children's books adapted for blind and sighted children and adults to share. We lend books all over the UK to a thousand families, schools and libraries. Since 2000 we have been building up one of the world's largest and finest collections of hand-made books with tactile illustrations to entertain, inspire and inform young blind children, some of whom have additional learning difficulties.

Could you make a tactile book for our library?

The collection includes a variety of formats, but for young children the safest kind of book is a fabric book with sewn pages. Advanced embroidery skills are not needed; you just need to be able to sew stitches which will not come undone! So far we have received some wonderful books from Women's Institutes, Embroiderers' Guild members, craft groups, students at Manchester Metropolitan University, individuals, and from three women's prisons. If you are short of ideas, we may be able to send a book we would like copied, or provide you with a text to work from.

Do get in touch if you want to discuss any aspect of this project.

Making a Tactile Book

What is a tactile book?

Tactile books are used by young children with little or no sight, many of whom have additional physical or learning difficulties.

Tactile books are an excellent introduction to the fun of reading, as well as being an invaluable means of conveying ideas, concepts and vocabulary. They encourage interaction between the young reader and his sighted classmates and family. They are admired and enjoyed by sighted as well as blind children.

The best tactile books use a variety of contrasting textures, not all of them soft and silky. Tactile books need to be robust enough to withstand enthusiastic exploration, have a small amount of text and very simple illustrations, with every aspect accessible by touch. Items which can be moved or manipulated are popular. Many children who cannot see print have enough sight to enjoy bright colours and good contrasts; some especially appreciate the sparkle from reflective materials. If the book contains sounds and smells as well, so much the better.



These sparkling fishes can be moved around the page

How Do I Start?

Why not feel your way through some materials, textures and objects? Notice how some surfaces are colder than others; some make a noise when rubbed or tapped. Some fabrics which look different feel very similar. Scourers and car mats, shower curtains and bubblewrap can all provide interesting textures. Start collecting simple, flattish objects which could be attached to a page.

Inspiration

It is sometimes easier to gather some 'feely' bits together and then think of a story or theme. You may choose, for example, to make a simple one to five counting book with buttons, lolly sticks, artificial flowers, bells and a toy spider if these are what you have to hand. A useful book of opposites could be made from rough and smooth fabric, large and small buttons, long and short braid, narrow and wide ribbon, and hard and soft shapes.

A simple story can be created around a few objects. Any interesting reasonably flat objects can be incorporated into a story along the following lines: Peter was looking for his key. He looked in his pocket and he pulled out a (toy snake). 'That's not my key,' said Peter. He looked on the floor and he found a (sock). 'That's not my key,' said Peter. He looked in his bag and he pulled out a (toothbrush). 'That's not...' etc. The more ridiculous the objects, the funnier the book.

All objects will need to be attached very securely to the page. You may need to make some holes in the object so that it can be sewn on and a drill can come in handy for this.

Design

Making a tactile illustration is rarely just a question of producing a raised version of a print picture. It would be impossibly difficult to decipher by touch – even for a sighted adult who has seen millions of pictures! Approach the subject from a tactile perspective. The whole of McDonalds can be represented by one chip carton; a small ceramic tile or a piece of towelling can represent the entire bathroom. Consider the life experiences of young children with no sight. What will they have felt in everyday life?

Sighted children can match pictures with what they have already seen. They can recognise pictures of houses and zebras and buses and clouds. What will a child with no sight have experienced? Gradually they will learn about the visual way of representing these things, helped by our tactile books. One day they may learn about perspective and symbols and speech bubbles. One day we hope they will be able to decipher a tactile map of France. But in the early stages, tactile illustrations need to be very simple and as easy to recognise as possible. A spoon sewn to the page will be far easier to understand than a collage picture of a family having breakfast.

Suitable Themes

Jokes

Nursery Rhymes & Traditional Verses – e.g. Baa Baa Black Sheep, One Two, Buckle My Shoe.

Traditional Stories, e.g. Little Red Riding Hood, an Aesop's Fable or folk tales from any culture.

Early Learning, e.g. Numbers and Counting, Opposites, Sizes, Shapes, or a single letter of the alphabet such as 'F is for...'

Everyday Life, e.g. My Day, Getting Dressed, or A Trip to the Park.

New stories or rhymes, based on your own original story or poem.

We would especially welcome any of the above, simply illustrated but in a style age-appropriate for older children who have come to touch-reading at an older age, or who have additional learning disabilities, and therefore operate at a "younger" level of understanding. There are sadly very few resources around which cater to older children and teenagers, so we are keen to provide books which are not patronising or babyish as this is demotivating and can put them off reading.

To make your illustrations easy to understand:

Use only a few textures, as different as possible.

Show only a few items on the page and do not 'decorate' the page in any way.

Leave good sized gaps between items so that they are quite separate

Keep things in proportion (avoid having a large squirrel in the foreground and a tiny horse in the distance)

Avoid perspective

Avoid hiding part of one object behind another (don't put the car in front of the house)

Show all the limbs of people and animals quite clearly (two-legged dogs will need some explaining)

Show faces full-on or side on, not three-quarters profile

The important six S's . . .

Make sure your book is:

Safe – make sure everything is securely attached to the page. Avoid anything sharp or toxic. Avoid loose small objects or anything which could crumble, splinter or shred and cause choking. Threads and cords should not be longer than 18cms (7ins).

Simple – it is very hard to decipher things by touch. Keep it simple and keep testing it or getting others to test it whilst wearing a blindfold.

Small – small children, small laps, small hands, small books! Pages should normally not be more than 25cm x 25cm. The book may be quite thick, but make sure the pages will open out flat.

Short – short attention spans. Feeling the pictures will take time. Four or five pages is fine and the book should not be more than about 8-10 pages long, excluding covers.

Sturdy – even careful exploration will involve tugging and rubbing ... and some children will not be careful! Attach all items to the page in some way so they will not get lost.

Stimulating – use varied textures, rough, smooth, hard & hairy, warm and cold. Introduce sounds and smells. Use bold colour contrasts and sparkly bits to stimulate low vision.

Making a Collage Book

The pages of these tactile books are usually made from card. You might be able to get your local printer to give you some unwanted samples of off-cuts, or you may be able to get some from a local scrap project (schools will have details of these). Pages should not have a glossy finish as reflected light may make it difficult for some children with partial sight to focus on the page. Corrugated paper can be used instead of card and it is possible to sew objects on to this fairly easily with a darning needle and thread. Glue guns and double-sided tape are also useful for attaching objects to the page. Cut pages to the size you need, making sure the book is not too big for a small child to hold comfortably.

The easiest way to bind the books is with a comb-binder (your local school might have one you can use) or with a hole punch and treasury tags. For variety, you may like to tie the pages together with metal rings, ribbons or bootlaces. Once the tactile elements have been added, the book will be quite thick. Make sure the binding allows the pages to be opened out flat.

Attach objects, textures and shapes to the pages as securely as possible with glue, double-sided tape or stitches. Children love to manipulate objects in tactile books; items can be hidden under flaps, or put in bags attached to the page, or attached to the book on a short ribbon so that they can move through the pages. Moving objects (e.g. a wheel or a leg) can be attached to the page with split pins – but cover the sharp backs of the pins with tape (book binding tape is good for this).

As you make a tactile illustration, keep feeling the page to make sure you can interpret it by touch; sometimes textures which look quite different can feel very similar (e.g. black suede and pink felt).

Making a Fabric Book

Construction is quite straightforward. For the surface of the pages choose a smooth plain fabric. Sew the fabric over both sides of a rectangle of plastic canvas or other washable, pliable stiffener to make a page, with a layer of felt or fleece between so the canvas can't be felt through the fabric. Make your book by stitching the left-hand edges of the pages together, or by making a couple of holes in each page and tying them together. An unstiffened margin at the edge of the page will make this easier, and help the pages to lie flat. For more details on construction see Marion Ripley's account 'How I Made a Book' below.



An unstiffened margin allows page to lie flat

More Detailed Help – How I Made a Book

Marion Ripley, tactile book maker: I am not a skilled or experienced needlewoman (as you will see from my instructions), but my tactile version of Little Red Riding Hood proves that it is quite possible for someone without advanced sewing skills to produce a satisfactory tactile book which will be enjoyed by young blind children.

What you will need:

Approx. half a metre of plain fabric to make the pages. Bear in mind that lots of small hands will be feeling these pages. Choose a shade which will not get grubby too quickly, and ideally a smooth finish which will repel rather than absorb dirt. The colour should provide a good contrast with the illustrations and the text.

A way of adding the text. Keep the text short and simple. Please make sure the text does not cover more than a third of the page so that we have plenty of room to add the braille text when we receive the book. Please do not attempt to add any braille by hand; this is best done with a specialist machine as it needs to be absolutely precise to be legible.



The text (in good clear print) can be added to the book in several ways.

- Write it neatly on the page with laundry marker;
- Write it on a rectangle of fabric and sew that to the page;
- Write or print it onto paper then sew a rectangle of clear plastic over the paper;
- Print it onto an A4 sheet of printable fabric such as 'Pabric' from (for example) www.craftycomputerpaper.co.uk;
- Print it onto paper, then laminate it and sew the laminated panel to the page;
- Embroider the text – only suitable if there are very few words!

Something to stiffen the pages. Plastic canvas is ideal for this, as it is washable. Plastic canvas is available from some sewing or craft shops; John Lewis or £1 shops sometimes have it in stock. It can also be bought by post from craft suppliers, including www.minervacraftsandfabrics.co.uk. Alternatively, you can cut up some cheap plastic folders and use them – anything lightweight which will stiffen the pages and not disintegrate when sponged is fine, especially if you can sew through it (see below).

Some padding so that the plastic canvas cannot be felt through the pages. I used a layer of fleece fabric for this but other padding – perhaps a bit thinner than fleece - would be just as good.

Bits and pieces to sew into the book. Consider some of the following:

velvet, fur fabric, pvc, net, lace, fake leather, kite fabric, quilting, gold lame; scourers, sponges, non-slip matting, rubber car mats, garden netting, carpet; objects made from Fimo or other clay; balsa wood; spoons, lids, lolly sticks, baby socks, hair 'bobbles'/ties; Christmas tree decorations, stocking fillers, dolls' house items, joke shop insects; squeakers, sound buttons, bells, lavender bags, crinkly materials; artificial flowers and leaves, dismantled plastic Christmas wreaths; buttons, beads, pompoms, feathers (shop-bought for hygiene reasons), braid.

Putting it together

This is how I did mine. You may well have better ideas.

My book has seven pages, including the front and back covers. The covers and the inside pages are all made in the same way. The format is portrait rather than landscape (taller than it is wide) – but landscape is just as good.

The story is written on the left hand pages and the illustrations are on the right-hand pages, but you may choose to do it the other way round, or to have text and illustrations on all the pages if the illustrations are small and very simple, and the words very few. First I measured and cut seven rectangles of plastic canvas, each 18 by 23cms. Then I cut seven rectangles of fleece 36 by 23cms, folded them around the plastic canvas and tacked them roughly in place as padding. I put all these padded rectangles aside for later.

Then I cut thirteen rectangles of plain fabric 26cms by 28cms to form the pages. I had decided to make the front cover out of a different fabric, so the fourteenth rectangle was cut from this. These measurements allowed 2cms for each seam, plus 4cms for the unstiffened binding margin, designed to make the pages lie flat (see sketches). I turned over the four edges of each rectangle and tacked them down to form rectangles 22 by 24cms.

First I gathered together and prepared the bits and pieces for the illustrations. Then I arranged them on the pages, leaving 4cms blank at the left-hand-side of each page for binding (you may like to mark this margin with pins or tacking stitches to give you a better idea of the space available). Then I sewed them in place. The health and safety label went on the back cover; on some fabrics you can iron it on but sewing is more secure.

For the text pages, I left a 4cm margin on the right-hand-side of the page and wrote the text as clearly as I could with an indelible pen so that it would not smudge if sponged. If you have a printer you can print the text onto 'Fabric' and sew it to the page.

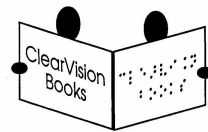
I pinned each illustration page onto the padded canvas, leaving the binding margin loose on the left. I then reinforced the sewing of some of the objects by sewing them to the plastic canvas. This is especially necessary for buttons, beads and anything which can be grasped and pulled at and/or swallowed. This reinforcement can only be done for the first of the two pages to be attached to the padded canvas – so you will need to plan your book accordingly.

I pinned the text page to the other side of the padded canvas (leaving the binding margin loose on the right). Then I sewed round all four edges to complete the page. I did this by hand but it would, obviously, be quicker by machine although you may need to make the pages slightly larger in this case.

Lastly I put the pages together and sewed the spine edges of the binding margins together. The book was too thick for me to push the needle through all the pages at once, so I did half at a time. An alternative would be to make the binding margin wider and make button holes, or eyelets, then tie the pages together with ribbon, string, keyrings, shoelaces, shower curtain rings, or whatever.

It took me about 17 hours altogether to make my version of Little Red Riding Hood and I greatly enjoyed it. It would probably have taken less time if I had used a sewing machine – but then I would not have been able to do so much of it on train trips!

I hope all this is some help. Good luck with your book! Marion Ripley.



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ClearVision, Linden Lodge School, 61 Princes Way, London SW19 6JB
020 8789 9575 info@clearvisionproject.org