Orientation and Mobility

Introduction
‘The ability to move independently, safely, and purposefully through the environment is a skill of primary importance in the development of each individual.’ P1. Foundations of Orientation and Mobility. Ed. Richard Welsh and Bruce Blasch 1980.
While this is true for everyone it is vitally important for the child who may have a complex combination of impairments involving reduced vision or perhaps total blindness. No matter what other skills you may possess the ability to move where you want, when you want, is a basic human right and value. Independent movement and the ability to know where you are, where you are going and where you have been is assumed for most of us but sensory and neurological losses can make these physical and spatial skills difficult to master.

History of Orientation and Mobility
Orientation and Mobility as a profession can trace its ‘formal roots back to Veterans’ Hospitals in the United States during and after WW11. Developed to restore independent travel skills to often able bodies yet blinded veterans. These veterans had developed as fully functioning young men with well developed spatial concepts prior to becoming wounded. In the more than 50 years since the war Orientation and Mobility as a relatively young profession has undergone tremendous growth and changes. Most importantly the basic skills and curriculums have been and continue to be adapted to incorporate a much wider and diverse range of vision based disability. Individuals adventitiously blinded through to children with congenital losses, plus those with additional disabilities and neurological damage are now all acknowledged as users of Orientation and Mobility training.
As the range and complexity of users of Orientation and Mobility training has increased in diversity and complexity, so has the expectations upon the instructor/teacher and as a result the training of instructional personnel has moved into Universities worldwide. DECS was the first State Education Department in Australia to employ University trained Orientation and Mobility teachers in the early 1970’s. Kilparrin Teaching and Assessment School and Services has had it’s own Orientation and Mobility teacher permanently on staff since 1996.

Orientation and Mobility at Kilparrin
Orientation and Mobility aims to assist the learner to develop the complexity of skills necessary to travel through any environment. Due to the complexity of student needs at Kilparrin the goals for many learners are often far more modest than fully independent travel along a city or suburban street however to the learners they are integral to their wellbeing and development and vital to them becoming as independent as they possibly can.
The inability to see and hear clearly can inhibit natural curiosity and the desire to move to an object to investigate it. Movement provides important opportunities to gather sensory information as the child comes into contact with a variety of objects that makes up their environment. One of the main goals for Kilparrin learners who receive Orientation and Mobility input is to provide them with the ability to move and move safely so that interaction with the environment can happen far more readily.

Infants who are vision impaired have difficulty in visually tracking their mother to and from the cot, knowing where she is coming from and when she is coming back. The child who is vision and hearing impaired can also not hear mother enter the room or leave and know where they have gone. For Kilparrin learners developing concepts of their own body, how it moves and how it interacts with other objects in space is where orientation begins. As we understand concepts of front and back, left and right and up and down we can begin to move in a meaningful way, towards objects in space that we are confident exist and know where they are, we can put our bag in a locker that we know is ours and know how to find again and again.

Kilparrin learners often need to concentrate on the base-line concepts necessary for independent movement, this is a whole school function and not merely confined to specific Orientation and Mobility lessons. Input is ‘real-life’ dealing with movement in and out of rooms and built around the school day as the learner moves from place to place and task to task.

Of course some individuals do gain the necessary skills to move in far more dynamic environments and learn to cross roads and use public transport, they learn to access a range of environments always focussing upon being safe and knowing where they are. All training is age-appropriate with the ultimate goal of being able to do what the child’s chronological peers can do.

Orientation and Mobility provides the child with complex sensory needs a set or foundational skills so they can use their residual vision and auditory skills plus other senses to understand their environment.

Orientation and Mobility will be different for everyone. All instruction is based upon a thorough appreciation of the individuals strengths and weakness’s and their implications. Not all instruction would involve the use of an aid such as a cane. All instruction aims to maximise potential and maximise individual independence. Wherever necessary instruction would be part of a multi-disciplinary approach involving input from physiotherapists and/or occupational therapists as students begin to learn how to use and control their bodies.

Orientation and Mobility gives the individual the skills to understand their environment and move safely through it.

Who should be considered for Orientation and Mobility?
Those individuals who have significant vision impairment that impacts upon their ability to move confidently and with safety. Those individuals who seem to possess the intellectual capacity to move independently even over limited or short distances. Those individuals who possess the physical skills to move independently, either on foot or in a wheelchair.