

What is Essential is Invisible to the Eye – Intimate Relationships of Adolescents with and Without Visual Impairment

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Introduction

- Dating and forming romantic attachments as integral part of social development in adolescence.



Do Adolescents with Visual Impairment Have more Problems with Forming Romantic Relations than Sighted Peers?


1. Fewer dating opportunities (more time spent alone; Hurre & Aro, 1998)
2. More parental overprotection (Bezerra & Pagliuca, 2010)
3. Limited access to information about potential social partners (Hicks, 1980)
4. Possible negative reactions from peers with regard to physical attractiveness and their suitability as a mate (Gordon et al., 2004; Kef & Bos, 2006)
5. Higher levels of depressive symptoms (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2011) as barrier for forming contacts

Adolescents with visual impairment have fewer dating experiences than sighted peers

- Huurre & Aro (1998): 68.5% of those with visual impairment and 46.5% of their sighted peers said that they had never dated.
- Dutch adolescents who were blind had their first courtship at the age of 16.3 as compared to 15.2 years in sighted peers (Kef & Bos, 2006)
- Two-year or four-year delay of the age at first sexual intercourse (Kef & Tielen; Glass, 1984)
- However: Adolescents with (lower levels of) visual impairment reported a significantly **higher** rate of sexual debut than adolescents with no disabilities (Brunnberg et al., 2009)

Gender Differences

- Men are the typical initiators of sexual activity.
- Visual impairment may be a stronger barrier for building intimate relations in male than in female adolescents.
- Available research on this question is inconclusive.

- Less is known about the timing of other intimate behaviors. 
- **1. goal of present study:** Comparison of timing of four aspects of development of romantic relations in German adolescents with and without visual impairment
 - falling in love
 - dating
 - forming a romantic relationship
 - having sexual intercourse.

Criteria for Mate Selection

Most important criteria (e.g., Buss, 1989):

- material resourcefulness (e.g., high income)
- emotional maturity (e.g., dependability)
- physical attractiveness (e.g., good figure)

- Gender differences in importance of these criteria.



Criteria for Mate Selection

Most important criteria for women (e.g., Buss, 1989):

- material resourcefulness (e.g., high income)
- psychological maturity (e.g., dependability)

reliable
character
genuine
trustworthy
integrity
dependability
support
honesty
listen



Criteria for Mate Selection

Most important criterion for men (e.g., Buss, 1989):

- physical attractiveness (e.g., good figure)



Do these Criteria differ for Adolescents with and without Visual Impairment?

- Individuals who are blind are not able to see whether another person is physically attractive.
- Physical attractiveness of a mate was more important for sighted male adults than for male adults who are blind (Hasenkamp et al., 2005)
- Material resources were also less important for blind respondents of that study.
- Psychological maturity was not assessed in that study.

Second Goal of the Present Study:

- To compare the importance of the three criteria of mate selection in adolescents with and without visual impairment.

Third Goal of the Present Study:

- To compare the quality of the intimate relationship of adolescents with and without visual impairment.
- Comparative studies with older adults found lower relationship quality (Strawbridge et al., 2007) and higher divorce rates (Byrne et al., 1995) in individuals with visual impairment.



Methods

- Marburg Study of Vision Loss (MARVIL)
- Data from wave 3
- 180 adolescents with visual impairment (from special schools for people with visual impairment)
 - Highest school track
 - M=17.2 years (8th to 13th graders)
 - 35% blind, 65% low vision according to ICD-10
 - 42% female gender
- 532 sighted adolescents

Methods

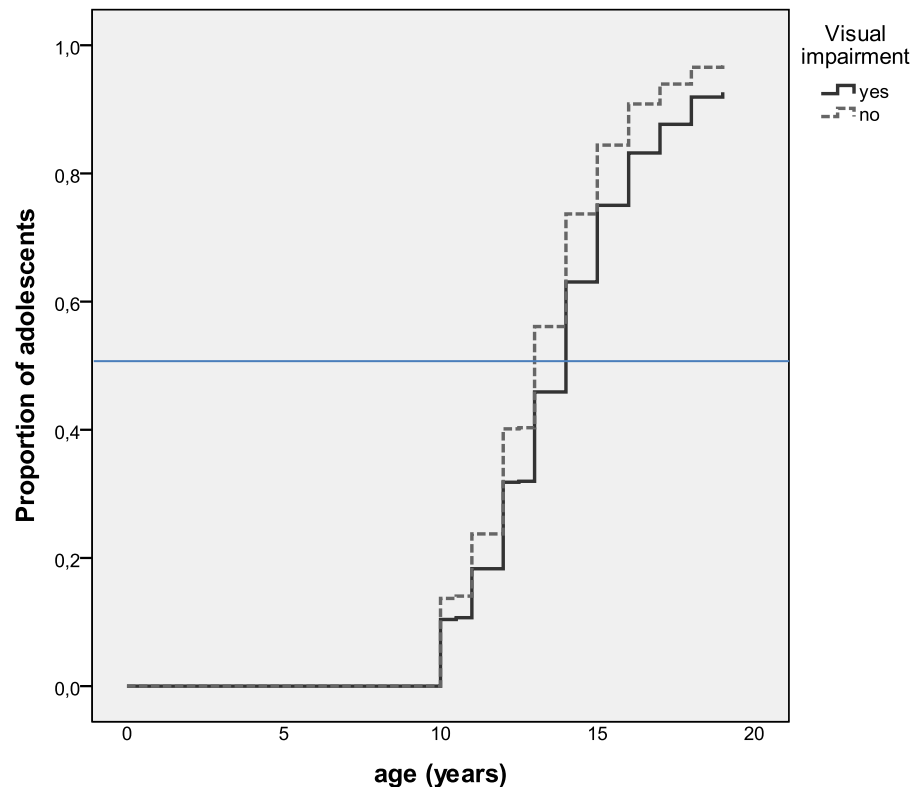
- **Timing of steps of intimate relationship development:** Have you already fallen in love, dated, formed a romantic relationship, and had sexual intercourse (2=yes, 1=no). If yes, at which age?
- **Mate selection:** modified item list by Hill (1945) E.g., “He/she is good looking” (1 = unimportant, 4 = important).
- **Relationship quality:** German version of the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988; Sander & Böcker, 1993)

Methods

- Cox regression analysis (1972) for predicting the timing of the events.
- Visual impairment (yes vs. no), gender, and interaction effect of visual impairment and gender as independent variables.
- ANCOVAs were used for the other analyses.

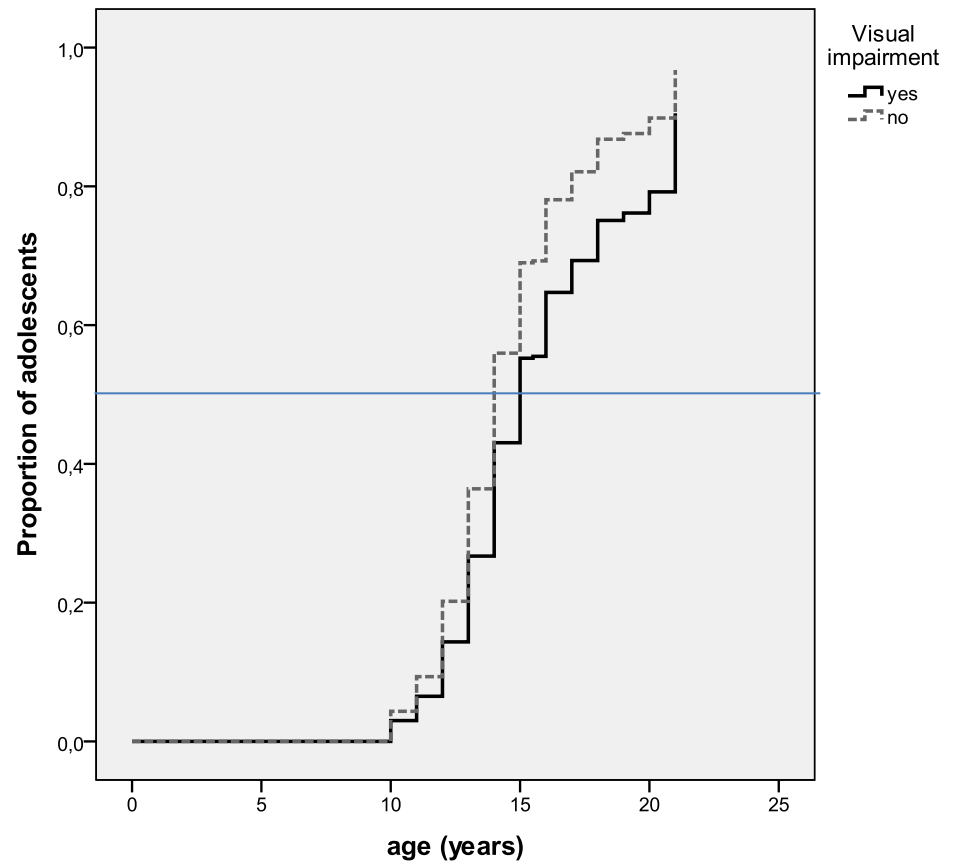
Results

- Later timing of falling in love for the first time in individuals with visual impairment ($\text{Exp}(B) = .74, p < .01$)
- One-year delay (Md 13 vs. 14 years)



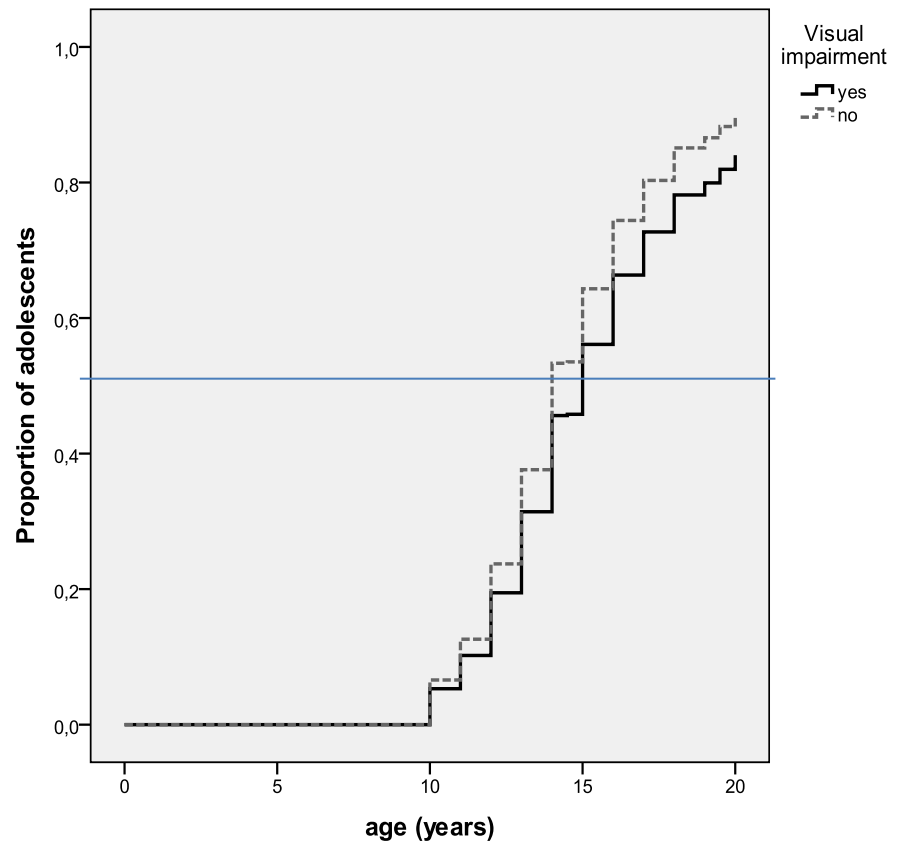
Results

- Later timing of first dating ($\text{Exp}(B) = .70, p < .001$)
- One-year delay
(*Md* 14 vs. 15 years)



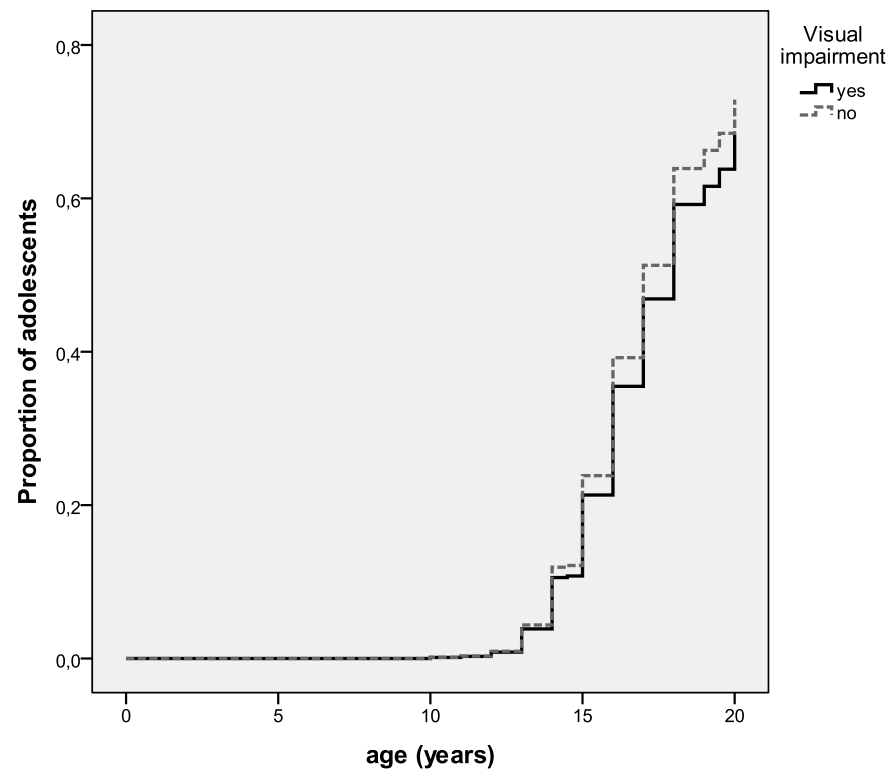
Results

- Later timing of first romantic relationship in individuals with visual impairment ($\text{Exp}(B) = .80, p < .05$)
- One-year delay
(*Med* 14 vs. 15 years)



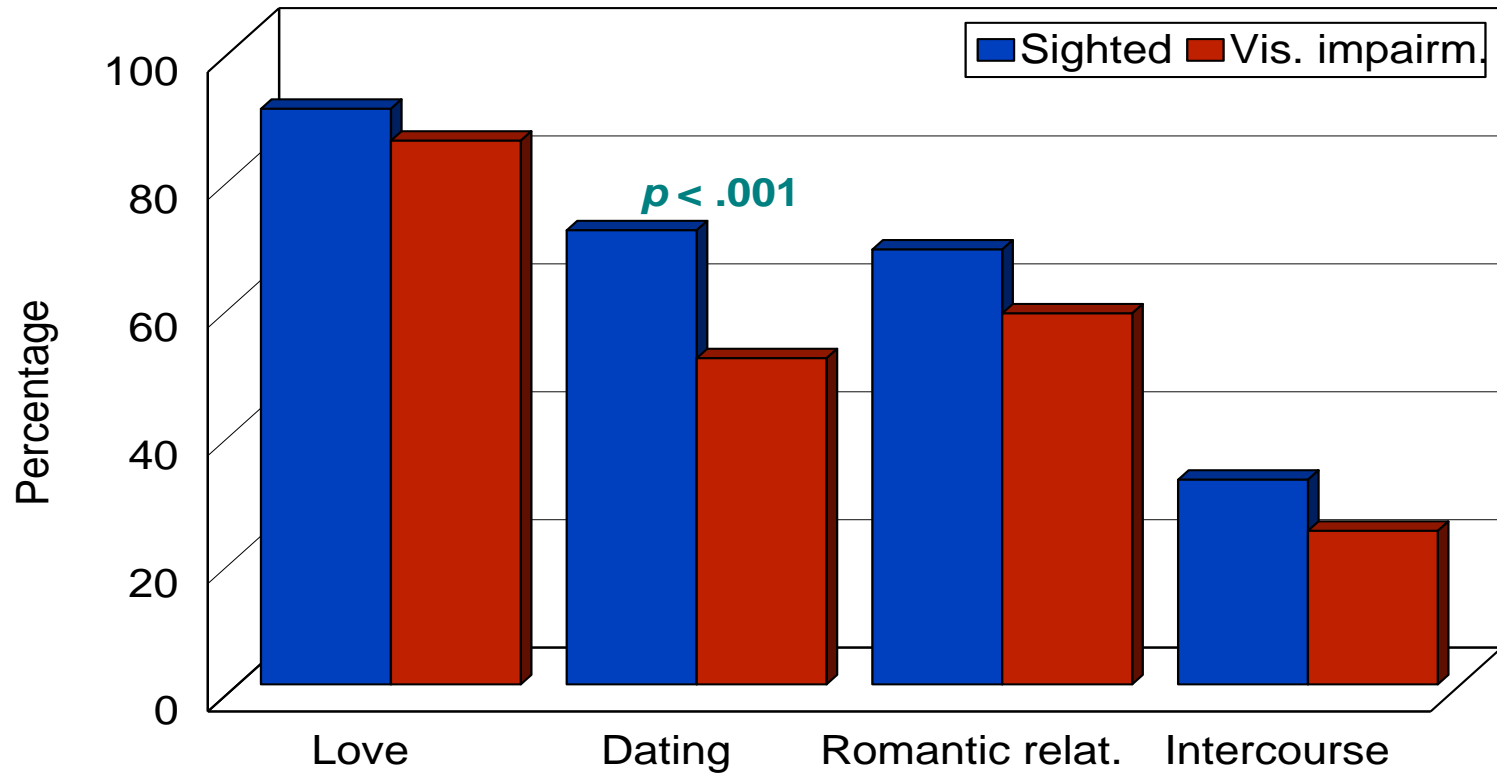
Results

- No significant effect of visual impairment on the time of first sexual intercourse ($\text{Exp}(B) = .91$)



Results

Percentage of respondents who had already experienced the 4 events



Results

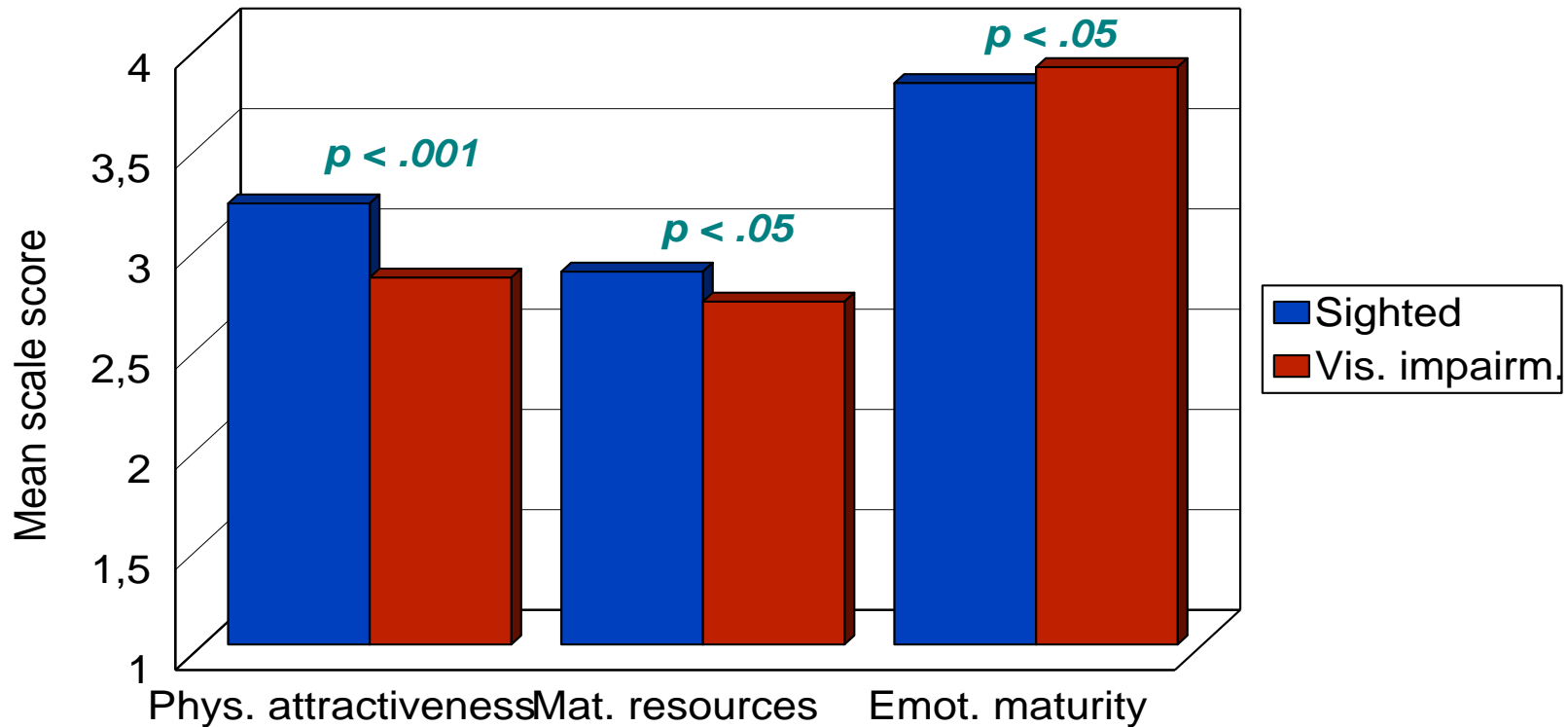
- Only one marginally significant interaction effect of visual impairment and gender ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.67, p < .06$):
 - Male adolescents with visual impairment showed a delay in forming the first romantic relationship ($\text{Exp}(B) = .68, p < .01$)
 - No gender differences in female adolescents ($\text{Exp}(B) = .95$).

Results

- The timing of the 4 events did not differ significantly between individuals who are blind and those with low vision.
- But lower test power!

Results

Importance of the criteria for mate selection

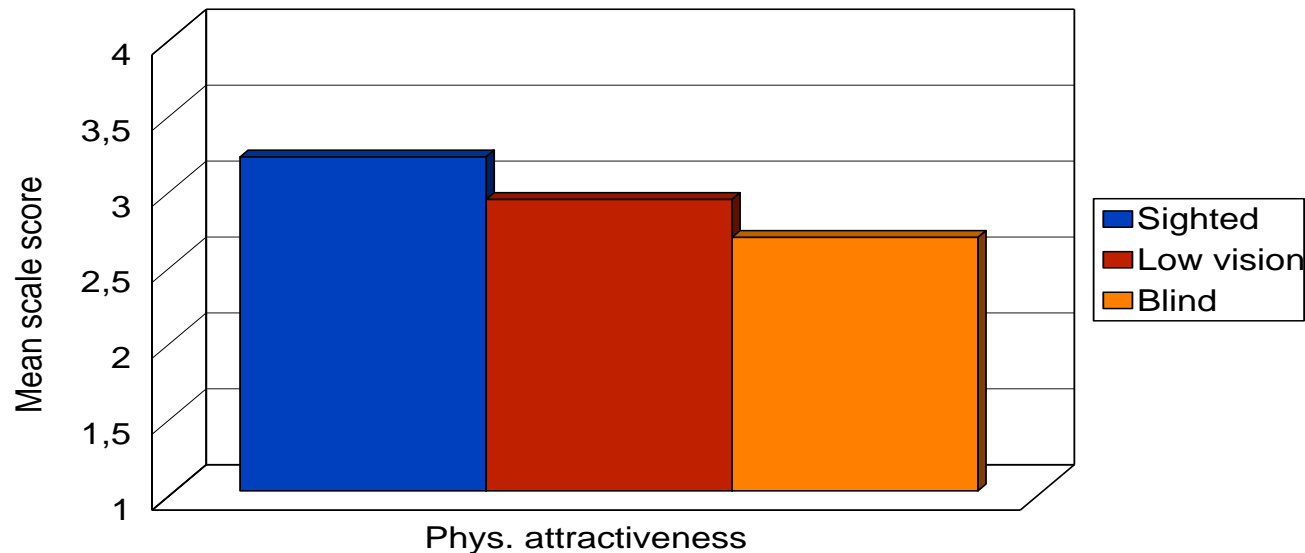


1 = unimportant, 4 = very important

Results

- No interaction effect of visual impairment and gender on the importance of the three criteria of mate selection.
- Physical attractiveness was less important for blind adolescents than for those with low vision.

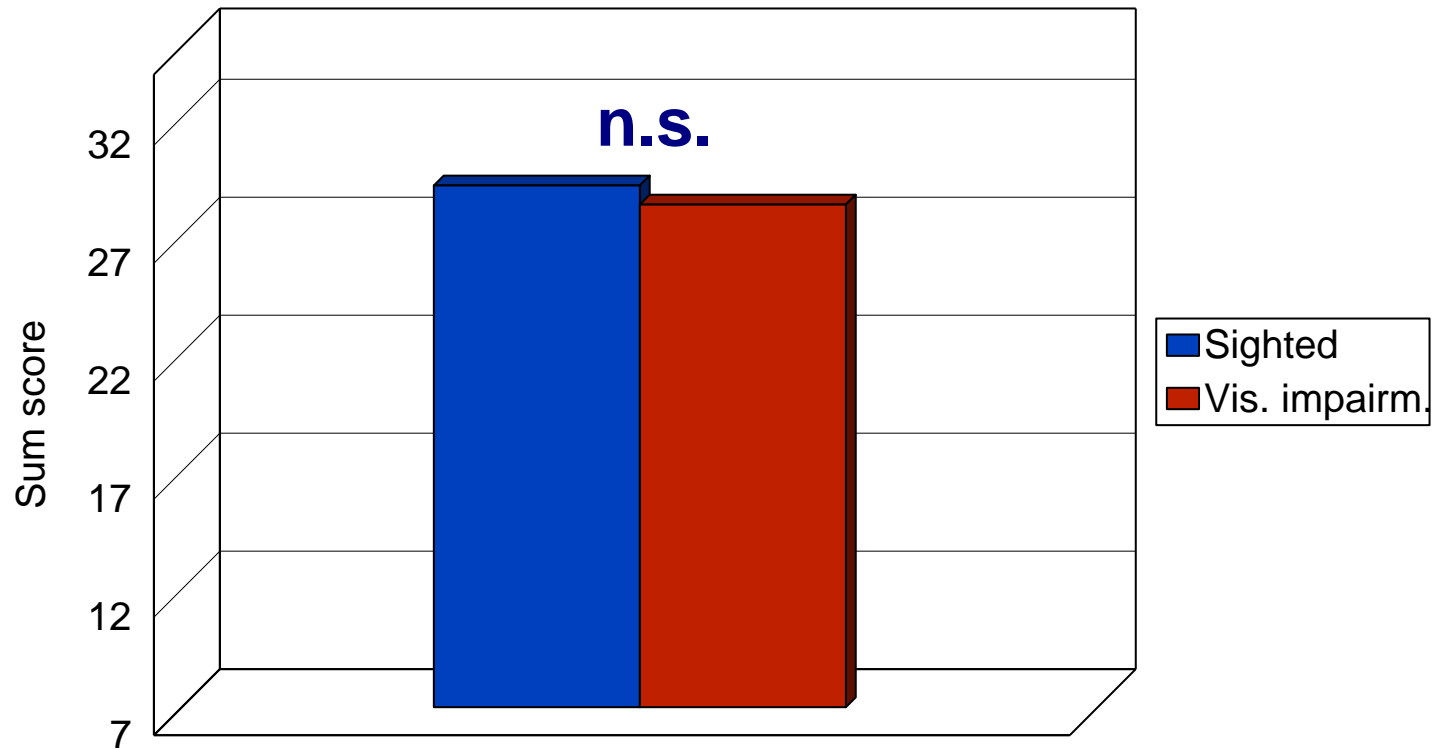
Importance of physical attractiveness for mate selection



1 = unimportant, 4 = very important

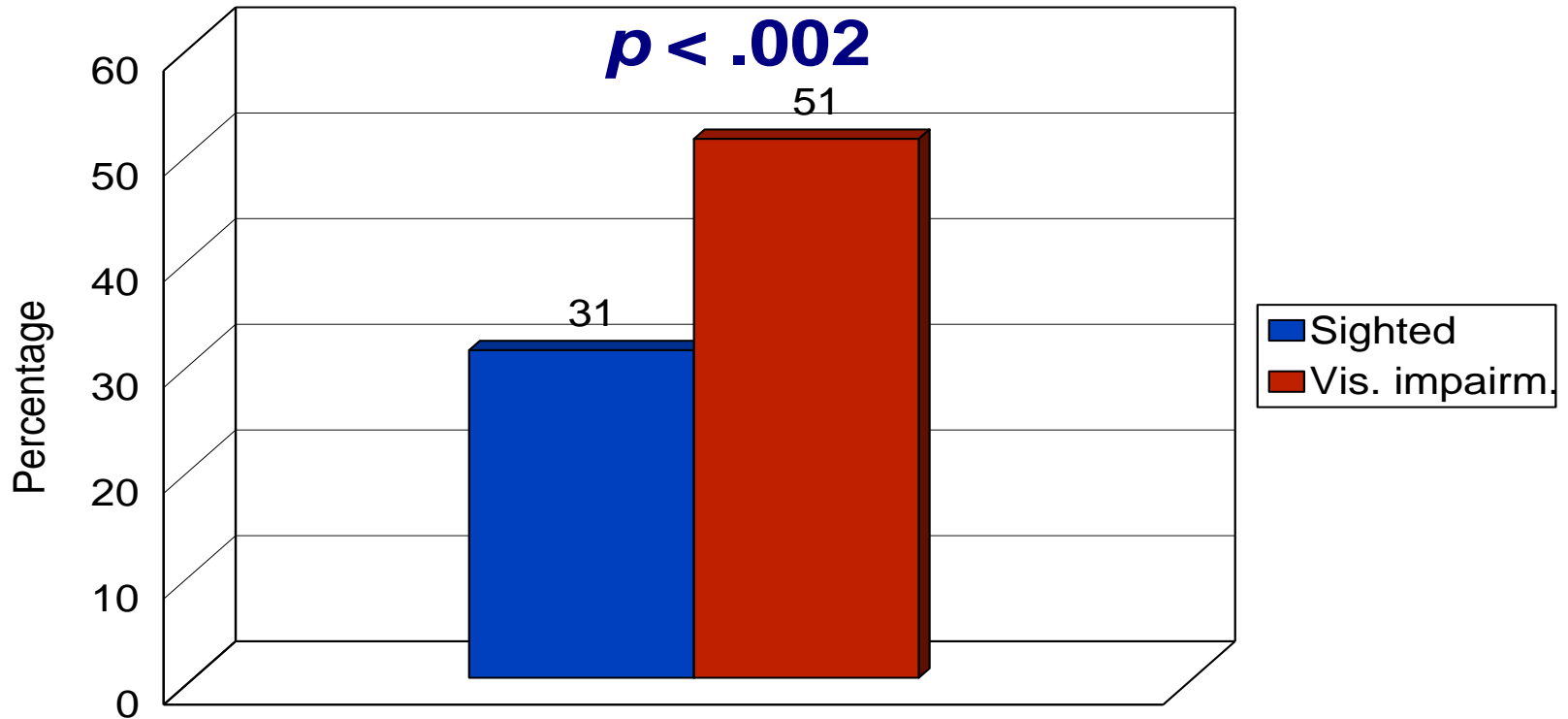
Results

Relationship quality



Results

Who had a romantic partner from his/her school



Discussion

- Adolescents with visual impairment showed a small delay with forming romantic relationships.
- Some of them skipped dating. Visual impairment reduces the use of some places for dating.
- Adolescents with visual impairment do not have, in general, lower aspirations with regard to the romantic partner – but somewhat different priorities.
E.g., emotionally mature partners as better source of support.



Discussion

- Most of adolescents with visual impairment form romantic relationships with other young people with visual impairment.
 - Schools for students with visual impairment are a good place for forming romantic relations.
 - Limited availability of sighted partners.
- Most effects of visual impairment are rather small.

Limitations

- Only students from the highest school track were assessed.
- All students with visual impairment came from special schools for this group.
- We were not able to collect data from the romantic partners.

Conclusions

- The average catch-up leaves the question of whether some young people might remain unsuccessful. These individuals may benefit from psychological interventions.
- Sex education for students with visual impairment should start as early as for their sighted peers.
- Comparative research with students from integrated school settings would be interesting.

Thanks for your attention!

