

**25th Annual
FAMILY LEARNING WEEKEND for
Families of Blind and Visually Impaired Children
June 13 – 15, 2025**

- What: MSDB 25th Annual Family Learning Weekend for the Blind and Visually Impaired, with keynote from Thriving Blind Academy's own Kristin Smedley.
- Where: MSDB Campus in Great Falls
- When: June 13 - 15, 2025
- Who: Families of Blind and Visually Impaired Children living in Montana!
- Why: It will be fun!

The Learning Weekend is a creative program that provides opportunities for families of blind or visually impaired children to learn about blindness and visual impairment, share their experiences with other families, and learn how to communicate more fully with one another in a warm, caring atmosphere.

The focus of the weekend is to enhance each individual's personal knowledge of blindness and how it relates to the education and development of their child. Informal workshops, group discussions (parent groups, kid groups, sibling groups, etc.) and hands-on activities will be offered. Child care and recreation for the children (siblings included) is available at no charge. Families will be reimbursed for mileage at the current state rate.

Housing is provided on a first come, first serve basis. Each family is generally provided with their own suite of rooms in the cottages and efforts are made to make assignments according to individual needs and preferences. Typically each family has their own bathroom; sometimes two depending on the size of the family. **Participants will need to bring personal items such as soap, shampoo and toothpaste. Don't forget to bring your swimsuit and towel as our pool is up and running!**

Children ages **birth to two** will be in the cottage nursery with staff. *Parents should pick up their children from the nursery prior to lunch and return them to the same location when they are done eating.*

The children are divided into groups based mostly on age. Many factors are taken into consideration including friendships, maturity level and interests when putting together the groups. The children stay with their groups until they join the parents for mealtimes. Some of MSDB's finest residential and school staff will be responsible for supervising your children and making sure they enjoy the weekend as much as you do!

Children ages **three to five** will be involved in a variety of activities throughout the day. These activities will include: snacks, indoor and outdoor activities including a trip to the MSDB playground (weather permitting). The activities for this group will remain flexible depending on the ages and abilities of the participants. Saturday morning during breakfast your children ages **six through eighteen** will be assigned to various teams (groups). These teams are designed to allow for children to be involved with peers their own age. For this session there will be several different activities including: recreation activities, crafts, some Orientation and Mobility experiences, and of course snacks. Sometime during the morning session, MSDB Counselors will also meet with the siblings and provide them the opportunity to discuss their feelings regarding having a blind or visually impaired sibling. *This information (in general terms, while keeping siblings names confidential) will be shared with the parents during the Sunday morning presentation.*

Information from various vendors (serving Blind and Visually Impaired) will be available during the weekend.

***The kids program is intended to provide entertainment and educational activities that will further the participants' understanding of vision loss and its impact on the family. Activities are designed for the youth with vision loss and their siblings. Participants are grouped by age and staff are assigned accordingly depending on the numbers of the participants and their individual needs. If you have unique concerns regarding your child, please let us know and we will work with you to ensure that everyone has a good time.

Presenter Bios

Barbara Peterson is an Outreach Consultant for MSDB in western Montana serving children who are blind and visually impaired. She lives in Missoula. Barb has her Masters in Special Education as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments. She is also a certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist, and a Deafblind Specialist. Barb is the mother of two children. Her daughter Katie is blind with additional challenges. Barb is a committed advocate providing support to children with vision loss and their families.

Heather Hill began in education as a paraprofessional, which she did for six years. She went back to school to get her Bachelors degrees in elementary education and special education at Western Governors University. She was a special education teacher for the last six years. Now, it is her first year as an Outreach Consultant for MSDB, covering northwest Montana. She is working on a Master's degree in Special Education, Visual Impairment. She has four children and enjoys camping, hiking, reading, sewing and art.

Jenn Norlander is an MSDB outreach consultant serving southwest and south central Montana. She holds a Masters degree in Special Education and is a certified Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments. Prior to working at MSDB, Jenn worked as a Special Education teacher for 12 years in Bozeman and Dillon, with prior experience as a paraprofessional and general education teacher. Jenn resides in Dillon with her husband and two active sons.

Kacie Wilmot is a recent addition to MSDB VI Outreach department serving South Central Montana. She has devoted 13 years to the field of special education by serving as a special education teacher, a special education instructional coach, and a teacher of the visually impaired. She holds a master's degree in special education with a concentration in visual impairment from Texas Tech University. Kacie, her husband, and four cats reside in Laurel, Montana.

Kerri Norick serves as an Outreach Vision Consultant for MSDB in southwest and South-Central Montana. She completed her Masters in Special Education with an emphasis in teaching students with visual impairments and is a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist. Prior to MSDB, she worked as a special education teacher in Hamilton & Belgrade. Kerri and her husband reside in Bozeman with their two teenage sons.

Kristin Smedley: When Kristin Smedley's first two babies were born blind, she left her successful teaching career to teach her children how to succeed without sight. Her blind sons, Michael and Mitchell, as well as their sighted sister, Karissa, are thriving beyond all expectations, including Kristin's! Kristin Smedley is the Best Selling author of *Thriving Blind: Stories of Real People Succeeding Without Sight*, and *What I Can Be Is Up To Me* (a Children's Book) A recognized expert in the blindness and rare disease communities, Kristin won the highly regarded Champion of Hope Award and was named an Ambassador for the National Organization of Rare Disorders. Kristin is a popular, in demand speaker who has been invited to share her message internationally. As CEO of a global patient organization, she coordinated legislation (H.R. #625) that became the first in US history to be submitted in Braille. Kristin spoke at the FDA to help achieve the first ever FDA approved gene therapy to treat an inherited retinal disease in the United States. Her TEDx Talk, books and international summit change perceptions of blindness, and sparked a global movement, Thriving Blind Academy, that is solving the unemployment, literacy, and financial crisis in the blind the community.

Michelle Cross is an MSDB Outreach Vision Consultant serving Montana for the past 10 years. Prior to working in Outreach, Michelle was a VI classroom teacher at MSDB since 2006. She began her career in education working as a Paraprofessional in an ED special education program for 5 years. She then went on to get her bachelors in elementary education and special education, graduating in 2005 and 2006 respectively. In 2020, Michelle graduated from TTU with a Masters in Special Education with an emphasis in teacher of students with visual impairment (TSVI). Michelle enjoys her time working in outreach and providing services to students and families in the state of Montana. Michelle has been married to her husband, Terry for 34 years and has 4 children and 12 grandchildren. Michelle enjoys camping, quilting and gardening in her spare time.

Miranda Briggs is the Director of Outreach for the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind (MSDB) supervising Outreach Consultants serving the state of Montana. Miranda has her Masters in Special Education, is certified as a teacher of the visually impaired, and is working toward a degree in Educational Leadership. Miranda started her career working for the Idaho Infant Toddler Program (Part C), then moved to teaching Early Childhood Special Education, working in Pocatello, Idaho, Belgrade and Helena. She also worked for the Helena Public Schools as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) prior to working for the MSDB as an Outreach Consultant and now Director of Outreach. Miranda, her husband and three sons live in Helena, Montana.

Shawn Erickson has worked for MSDB as a VI Outreach Consultant for northeast Montana for about a year. She began her career in education as a paraprofessional, which she did for three years. She went back to school to get her Bachelors degrees in elementary education and special education at the University of Great Falls. She has been a special education teacher for the past ten years. She also holds a Masters degree in special education with an emphasis in neurological visual impairment as well as a Masters degree in curriculum and instruction. She has been married to her husband, Joe, for almost 22 years. She has three children. Shawn enjoys camping, fishing, reading, and going to rock concerts.

Susan Davis has been an MSDB VI Outreach Consultant since 2015, serving children in central and southeastern Montana. She has an Elementary Education degree from MSU-Bozeman and was a classroom teacher for 10 years prior to obtaining her Masters in Special Education with an emphasis in Visual Impairments. She is committed to making sure all students have the same opportunities as their peers and integrating technology in ways that increase student achievement.

Blind/Visually Impaired Family Learning Weekend 2025 Schedule

(subject to change)

Friday, June 13, 2025

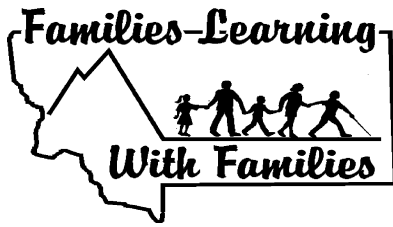
- 4:00-6:00 **Check in and Registration:** Yellowstone Cottage Activity Room.
5:00-6:00 **Tour:** Meet in the lobby of Yellowstone Cottage.
6:00-7:00 **Dinner:** MSDB main dining room.
7:00-8:00 **Kristin Smedley-** Children's Book Activity with Parents, Bitterroot (IMC).
8:00 **Day Complete:** Families tuck in for the night.

Saturday, June 14, 2025

- 7:45-8:45 **Breakfast:** MSDB main dining room.
8:45 **Group Pictures:** All Participants together in front of the big MSDB Map sign- Please wear your FLW T-shirt! (each family will get a "Memory Book" at the end of the weekend to take home).
9:00-10:15 **Kristin Smedley:** Thriving Blind in Montana part 1, Bitterroot (IMC).
10:15-10:30 **Break:** Snacks and Resource Tables in Bitterroot (IMC).
10:30-11:45 **Kristin Smedley:** Thriving Blind in Montana part 2, Bitterroot (IMC).
11:45-1:00 **Lunch:** MSDB main dining room.
1:00-2:15 **Barb Peterson:** Katie's Story, Bitterroot (IMC).
2:15-3:00 **Breakout Sessions:** (Repeated at 3:15 for a chance to attend a different session).
-O&M-Routes with a Cane
-MIVI/CVI-Make and Take Activity
-Tech Time-Experience bag, digital story using JoyPlayer
3:00-3:15 **Break:** Snacks and Resource Tables in Bitterroot (IMC).
3:15-4:00 **Breakout Sessions:**
-O&M-Routes with a Cane
-MIVI/CVI-Make and Take Activity
-Tech Time-Experience bag, digital story using JoyPlayer
4:00-5:00 **Parent Groups:** NEW this year: Combined Mom and Dad groups! Bitterroot (IMC).
5:00-6:15 **Family Free Time:** APH games (beep baseball, webchase, scatter crowns, monopoly, Uno, Showdown, cornhole, etc) AND Swimming or Bowling!
6:15-7:00 **Dinner:** MSDB main dining room.
7:15-8:15 **Parent Panel:** This has always been a favorite of the weekend! Listen to parents as they share their stories about their journey with their child. It is uplifting and empowering to be a part of this presentation, as a participant or a member of the audience.
8:15 **Day Complete:** Please pick up your children and families tuck in for the night.

Sunday, June 15, 2025

- 7:45-8:45 **Breakfast:** MSDB main dining room.
9:00-10:30 **Kristin Smedley:** Smedley Family Share- Zoom meeting with Michael and Mitchell, Bitterroot (IMC).
10:30-11:00 **Blind and Low Vision Sibling Summary:** Listen to what your children have to say about having a blind or visually impaired sibling and what the blind or visually impaired kids think about living in a sighted family! Some surprises and thought provoking information for all parents.
11:00-11:45 **Wrap up and Evaluations:** Contact share time, House cleaning.
12:00 **Lunch and Farewell:** MSDB dining room, and on your way! Have a wonderful Summer and Safe Travels!



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WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID ABOUT MSDB's FAMILY LEARNING WEEKENDS!

"I learned something new every day - even after attending five previous family weekends."

"Coming to MSDB for the Family Learning Weekend is our favorite thing to do every year"

"I was very impressed with MSDB in general. I had no idea that this was such a 'gem'. Montana is very lucky."

"This weekend is worth every mile I drive. MSDB has given our family emotional, physical and a valuable education"

"It was great! A lot of wonderful connections have been made"

"The staff is absolutely incredible."

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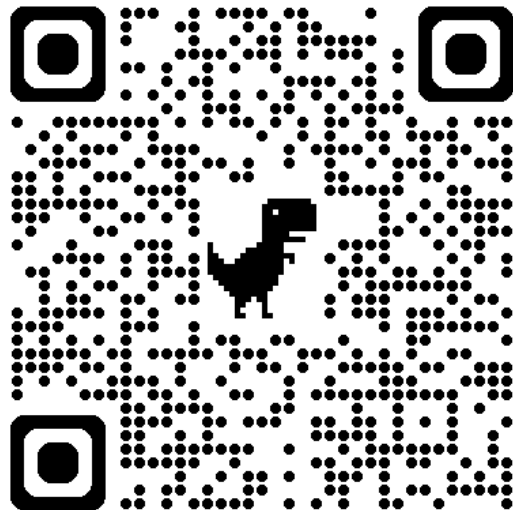
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