



Fact Sheet

Guidelines for Working with Children who Are Deafblind

These guidelines were developed from decades of experience learning from Seattle's adult deafblind community and from working with non-linguistic children who are deafblind. Following these steps, we can avoid teaching cue dependence and tactile defensiveness; unfortunate byproducts of continuously engaging a child's startle reflex and moving too quickly for successful tactile processing.

By Jennifer White

Communication

1. When you **approach** a child who is deafblind, let him know by a tap on the shoulder that you are near.
 - If the child uses **tactile signing** and raises his hand to find you, gently place your hand under his to begin communication.
 - If the child uses **tracking**, put your hand under his and let them hold your hand near the wrist in his field of vision.
 - If the child **visually communicates** in sign language in a small field, step back and wait until he focuses on you, then sign in a small field in the lower face area.

NOTE: If the child is new to deafblind **etiquette**, after tapping, slide your hand from the shoulder, keeping contact with his body, down the back of his arm and place your hand under his. Do this each time you **enter his space** to begin communication. Soon the child, when tapped, will lift his hand to find you. At this point, **stop moving down** his arm and move directly under his hand after the shoulder tap.

2. **Identify yourself** every time. Do not assume that because the child has some sight or because you wear the same ring or smell the same every day, he knows who you are. **Use a name sign** to identify yourself every time. (*Search: ASL name signs to find more information*).

3. **Don't rush** conversation. Even if a child signs fast, receiving information is slower. If he experiences any type of cognitive challenge on top of the dual sensory loss, processing time can take 4-5 times as long. **SLOW DOWN**, our pace is impossible for a child organizing tactually or with limited vision.
4. Tracking more than one speaker **requires information** and a slow pace. As a teacher, you may be distracted by many adults and children needing your attention. When you need to disengage, let your deafblind student know. Use the sign "wait" **to leave briefly** and come back. Reintroduce yourself when you return (unless he has enough vision to identify you clearly). As **often as possible** allow your student to follow your attention to the new speaker. Using your pointer finger, point at the speaker and turn your head slowly to follow the direction of your point. Allow the student to find the new speaker visually or tactually before beginning your conversation. Do not move his head; instead allow him to learn to track visual information, providing the information needed for him to be successful.
5. If you are teaching about an object/toy, use your **hand-under-his-hand**, guide him to the object and put your hand on the object letting the child who is deafblind follow your movement, then gently move your hand away and let the child who is deafblind take time to explore the object. It takes time to get a concept across tactually. Allow time to explore each step and the larger concept.

EXAMPLE: If introducing Legos™, first play with the Legos yourself,

- **Model** how the Legos™ attach and detach, with the child's hands on yours so he can "watch" how it is done.
 - Remember his **knowledge** is limited to his tactile reach and/or visual field; many basic steps and routine items may need modeling.
 - Offer the Legos™ up and **allow the child** to take them when he wants.
 - Keeping your hands under his allows you to notice when **a child** is interested in exploring or taking over with the object.
6. When teaching an action or task requiring steps to completion, first offer a completed model, **then "show" how** to achieve completion by modeling steps with the child's hand on yours, moving at a pace that allows them to take in the process.
 7. When explaining something, talk in the order that events happen. **EXAMPLE: Instead of saying**, "Clean up the toys after you play." **Say**, "First, play. Second, clean up." **Or** "Play finish? Clean up."
 8. Beware of the "Magic Wand" when things appear and disappear from the child's space. Connect the dots as often as possible, from storage to use to clean up and back to storage with the child involved. Once objects are in his reach . . . **DO NOT remove** them without the child's knowledge.
 9. If you need to leave for a few minutes, tell the child who is deafblind that you are leaving and when you will come back. If the child does not have formal language, devise a method

of communicating these concepts. Using the ASL signs, “Hello,” “Goodbye,” and “Wait” are sound ways to communicate these concepts.

10. Individuals who are deafblind communicate in a variety of ways. In general, finger spelling is not as effective as signing concepts.
11. For people who do not have formal language, tactile symbols, gestures, sequence boxes, and consistency can be helpful. It is vital to gather as much history about a child’s life and communication as possible.

Reprinted with permission from: Alaska Dual Sensory Impairment Project, Keeping in Touch Newsletter, Winter 2010/Spring 2011 issue

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Fact Sheets from the Colorado Services to Children and Youth with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss Project are to be used by both families and professionals serving individuals with vision and hearing loss. The information applies to children, birth through 21 years of age. The purpose of the Fact Sheet is to give general information on a specific topic. More specific information for an individual student can be provided through personalized technical assistance available from the project. For more information call (303) 866-6681 or (303) 866-6605. Updated: 9/11