**Communication With Children Who Are Deafblind**

**Lesson 1 Part 1 Descriptive Transcript**

**Narrator:** Teaching Children Who Are Deafblind: Professional Development for Educators

Communicating With Children Who Are Deafblind

Lesson 1: Communication Essentials

**[Visual Description]** A series of images - Children of varying ages, ethnicities, and etiologies of deafblindness interact with their teachers, parents, and friends.

**Narrator:** Children who are deafblind are remarkable communicators! In this module, you’ll learn about the many ways they express and receive information, and how establishing and documenting a communication system tailored to their specific abilities and characteristics is absolutely critical.

But before we begin, let’s check what you know…

True or False?

1. A child who is deafblind always communicates receptively and expressively in the same way.
2. The best way to assess the communication of a child who is deafblind is by using typical assessment tools and standardized tests.
3. A well-documented communication plan helps ensure that everyone who interacts with a child has access to information about how the child currently communicates.

We’ll revisit these questions at the end of this lesson.

Lesson 1 has three learning objectives. After completing the lesson, participants should be able to

1. Describe the variety of ways children who are deafblind expressively and receptively communicate
2. Identify key features of communication assessment for children who are deafblind
3. Explain the importance of a having a formal communication plan for a child who is deafblind and what should be included

Part 1: Foundations for Supporting a Child’s Communication

**[On-Screen Text]**

Tracy Evans Luiselli, Ed.D.

Director, New England Consortium on Deafblindness

**Tracy Evans Luiselli:** I think that communication development is the window to all understanding and learning. And I think that that's where you have to start first, that, that should be your primary focus when we're talking about these children who have combined vision and hearing loss.

**[Visual Description]** A toddler sits on the floor in his nurse’s lap. A specialist sits on the floor across from him. He is playing with a colorful plastic toy and balls. The specialist signs “again?,” “ball,” and “okay!”

**Narrator:** This is Tayen. He is almost two years old. Tayen has vision and hearing loss due to CHARGE syndrome. He is just beginning to learn sign language.

**Early Intervention Specialist:** “Again?” Again?” “Ball! Okay!”

**[Visual Description]** A young girl looks closely at a speech generating device screen. She presses the device’s buttons, which have various picture symbols.

**Narrator:** Maryn is 16 and has cerebral palsy, hearing loss, and vision loss, including cortical visual impairment. She communicates using assistive technology, such as a speech generating device and picture symbols.

**Computer:** “Take a bath”

**[Visual Description]** A baby boy sits in a highchair and watches his mother’s hands, which are moving around in front of his face and above his head. He tries to move his little fingers like his mother’s. She tickles him and he giggles.

**Narrator:** This is Jaxson at 15 months old. As a result of CHARGE syndrome, he was born deaf and with colobomas in both eyes. He wears cochlear implants.

Jaxson lets his mom know he loves what she’s doing using facial expressions and body language.

**[Visual Description]** A young boy sits on a couch with a book on his lap. His mother sits across from him. He feels the book and signs to his mother. She responds by signing into his hands.

**Narrator:** And this is Liam at six years old. He was born with typical hearing and vision but lost his hearing and sight at age two after contracting meningitis. He communicates fluently using American Sign Language. He receives signs tactilely, and can read braille.

**[Visual Description]** Images of Tayen, Maryn, Jaxson, and Liam.

All of these children are deafblind. And all communicate in ways that reflect their unique combination of vision and hearing loss.

Any child who is deafblind can improve their communication—no matter their current level and skills. But it requires that you begin your support by

* Understanding how a child communicates and experiences the world
* And then connecting with them in a way that acknowledges their perspective and is meaningful

**[Visual Description]** A teenage boy sits in a wheelchair smiling broadly at his teacher, who is kneeling beside him. They are holding a plastic toy chain.

If you work in special education, you might be familiar with the “Communication Bill of Rights,” created by the National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons With Severe Disabilities.

It says that people with a disability have a basic right to, for example,

* Interact and build relationships
* Communicate their preferences, feelings, and ideas
* And be treated with dignity and respect

**[On-Screen Text]**

Susan Bruce, Ph.D.

Professor and Coordinator, Program in Extensive Support Needs

Boston College

Deafblind Consultant

**Susan Bruce:** I think at the most basic level, all human beings are of value, and sometimes we find that individuals who are deafblind, or individuals with multiple disabilities, aren't treated as respectfully or as contributors to society as much as some other people are. So to me dignity means that they are of equal value and that they have important things to say, and that we ought to listen, paying attention and responding to however they communicate, whether it's through body language, changes in breathing, or something more formal, like signs or sign language. And include being inclusive, you know, making sure they're part of a conversation that's occurring.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl sits in a wheelchair and looks at a book that her teacher next to her is holding.

**Narrator:** Collectively, these rights form a shared belief system that’s foundational for working with a child who is deafblind.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl and an adult sit at a table facing each other and smiling. The adult is making a sign with her hand and the girl rests her hands on the adult’s hands.

Let’s examine some basics about how people communicate. To do so effectively, you need both receptive and expressive communication.

**[Visual Description]** A mom sits on a couch with her toddler on her lap. An adult sits next to them and makes the “I love you” sign to the toddler. The mom smiles and the child looks at the adult’s fingers.

Receptive communication is the ability to receive and understand messages from others.

For example, a child who is deafblind might receive information through

* Object symbols (such as a spoon to represent eating).
* Touch cues (like touching a child twice on the shoulder before picking them up)
* Or by someone signing in their hand
* By reading braille, and so on.

If they have any usable vision or hearing, they might also receive information through

* Speech
* Sign language
* Gestures
* or photos or line drawings

**[Visual Description]** A young girl gestures to an adult who is sitting next to her.

**Narrator:** In contrast, expressive communication is the ability to communicate what you feel, need, think, and know. A child who’s deafblind might express themselves through, for example,

* Body language
* Gestures
* Vocalizations or
* Symbols, such as a small pencil glued to a square of cardboard that’s used to represent writing

They might also use sign language or speech.

**[Visual Description]** A young boy sits at a table in a classroom with two specialists on either side of him. The boy rests his hands on an adult’s hands as she signs. He touches a tactile symbol in a book of symbols that lies open in front of him and smiles.

It’s common for a child who is deafblind to use a variety of communication modes. And often they’ll communicate in different ways expressively and receptively.

**[Visual Description]** Two brothers walk down a sidewalk. One uses a white cane and signs to the other. The other responds by signing into his brother’s hand.

The modes, or forms, of communication a child uses are highly individualized; that is, they depend on a child’s individual sensory learning channels–or how they use their senses–as well as their social, physical, perceptual, and cognitive skills.

**[Visual Description]** A series of images - A child sits at his desk in a classroom and looks at the computer screen in front of him. A child leans forward to look at his laptop screen, where a person is signing. A teenager, who is wearing headphones and holding an electronic tablet, looks at the camera and smiles. The screen of an electronic device that has rows of picture symbols.

You also might hear their communication method described as an Augmentative and Alternative Communication System (or AAC).

AAC can involve using things like photos and line drawings, speech-generating devices, object symbols, switches, and apps on a phone or tablet.

**[Visual Description]** Two images - A boy types on a brailler machine. Another child types on his laptop.

Whatever modes, or forms, of communication a child uses is their unique system of communication—one that will change as the child has new experiences, abilities, and needs.

**[Visual Description]** Two teenage girls sit outside next to each other and smile while making a toasting motion with their water bottles.

“Communication” should never be thought of as a skill that’s worked on only at a certain time of day. It must be embedded naturally into routines and activities throughout the day—both at home and at school.

**[Visual Description]** A teacher and a young boy are sitting next to each other in a classroom. She looks closely at his face while she signs. He signs back to her.

**Teacher:** Helping, yes! Nice signing! Kelton’s name.

**Narrator:** An effective communication system for a child who is deafblind allows them not only to ask and answer questions but also to make comments on topics of conversation and share their thoughts about things that are important and of interest to them.

**[Visual Description]** A young boy concentrates as he holds a measuring spoon over a funnel in front of him. An adult watches closely while holding the bottom of the funnel steady.

An effective communication system is also essential for

* Developing concepts
* Gathering information
* Building self-regulating skills—those critical strategies that help a child manage their emotions, deal with anxiety, and focus their attention
* And accessing the general education curriculum

**[On-Screen Text]**

Susan Weigert, Ph.D.

Education Program Specialist

**Susan Weigert:** All students with disabilities, like all students in general, must be provided the opportunity to fully participate in our public schools. So a critical aspect of participation is communication with others. And it's a responsibility of all public schools to ensure the communication with a student who has any hearing, vision, or speech disability is as effective as communication with all other students.

**[Visual Description]** A young girl sits on a chair in a classroom next to her teacher. She and the teacher laugh. The girl makes a gesture to indicate “shoot.” The teacher then signs to the class.

**Teacher: Shoot!**

**Narrator:** Having an effective communication system and conversation partners who know and use a child's unique modes of communication, are vital for developing trusting relationships with others.

Let’s take a break and check what we’ve learned...

True or false? Most children who are deafblind communicate expressively using sign language and receptively using object symbols.

Pause the video if you need time to think.

False! Remember that the modes of communication a child uses are highly individualized, depending on their unique sensory learning channels as well as their social, physical, perceptual, and cognitive skills.

This ends Part 1 of Lesson 1. In Part 2, we’ll discuss how to assess communication of a child who is deafblind.

**[On-Screen Text]** National Center on Deafblindness

Developed and produced by NCDB

Narrated by Shelby Morgan

Written by Ann Biswas

Edited by Brian Daigle

Content Expert: MaryAnn Demchak

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