

Communication Methods Used with Individuals Who Are Deafblind

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This document provides brief descriptions of a variety of nonverbal and verbal communication methods that may be used by individuals who are deafblind. No particular combination is appropriate for every person. Because of the wide variations within the population with regard to visual abilities, hearing abilities, cognitive abilities, motor abilities, and overall learning style, communication needs must be addressed on an individual basis. It's also important to think clearly about receptive and expressive communication needs—each may need to be addressed differently.

NONVERBAL METHODS

Nonverbal communication is communication without the use of words. We all use these throughout our lives. Likewise, children who are deafblind and move into a verbal language system, will continue to use nonverbal expressions to supplement and support language.

Body Language and Signals.

Various body movements communicate feelings, ideas, responses, and desires. They may be intentional or unintentional. They may be directed to another person or a reaction to a situation. They can involve any part of the body and be quite specific and clear, or very subtle. Often, understanding this type of communication is dependent on the interpretation of the receiver. Examples:

- Smiling
- Tensing muscles or grimacing to indicate discomfort

Natural Gestures and Pantomime.

These are more easily recognized body language and signals and require less interpretation on the part of the receiver than nonconventional movements. They also depend more on imitation of how others communicate and the ability to copy movements. Examples:

- Shaking head for “no,” nodding for “yes”
- Beckoning for “come”

Vocalizations.

Vocalizations are the use of the voice, without words or formal language, for communication. They may be unintentional—cries, laughs, or screams—but still communicate reactions and feelings (the same vocalizations can also be intentional and directed toward a specific person). Other examples:

- Babbling play intended to get an adult to join in and imitate
- Imitation of the sound a toy makes as a way of asking for it

Picture Communication.

Pictures may be drawn, printed, or photographed. They can be drawn by a child to communicate ideas or selected from a set to indicate a choice.

Object Communication.

The use of objects is a natural part of the interactions of most children and their parents or friends. For example, a child with deafblindness might hand a toy to someone as a way to ask for help activating it. Objects are accessible to touch and handling and therefore can ground interactions in real, shared experiences. They should always be used in conjunction with other forms of communication such as gestures, signs, and speech, and in the course of ongoing conversations.

Touch Cues:

All of the above methods of communication can be used by both a child with deafblindness and their communication partner as they interact with each other. Touch cues are different in that they are used by the communication partner to help a child anticipate what is going to happen. The following are examples of touch cues appropriate for infants and young children:

- Gently lifting the child’s arms and pausing before picking them up
- Gently tapping the child’s bottom before diapering
- Stroking the child’s face before wiping it with a cloth

VERBAL METHODS

Verbal communication is the communication of ideas through the use of words, spoken or not spoken, using a standard vocabulary and structure.

Oral language.

The expression of communication through speech and the understanding of it through hearing or lip-reading.

Tadoma.

A tactful form of lip-reading. The receiver's hand is placed on certain locations on the speaker's face and throat. It is rarely used as a primary mode of communication these days, but is sometimes used as a means of teaching speech to a person who is deaf-blind.

Sign Language.

The use of specific hand shapes, body movements, and facial expressions to represent ideas and concepts. Sign language can be received visually or tactually. With tactful reception (tactile sign) the receiver's hand(s) rest(s) lightly upon the hands of the signer, who signs using a typical sign space and standard signs.

Learners who are able to receive signs visually, but who fatigue easily, may benefit from tracking. This is a strategy that involves the learner placing his hands on the signer's forearms so he can keep track of where the signer's hands are moving, thus reducing visual fatigue.

Types of Sign Language

- American Sign Language (ASL)
- Manual English Manual Coded English

Manual Alphabet.

Uses a different hand or finger position to represent each letter of the alphabet. It requires spelling out each word and is therefore directly related to reading and writing.

Print.

Can be regular-sized or large for people with low vision. May also involve the use of various techniques of magnification.

Braille.

A reading/writing system for the blind, composed of raised dots.

Print on the Palm.

This involves the person who is communicating a message "writing" block letters on the palm of the receiver using the index finger as if it is a pen. Printing on the palm is often used by

people who are deafblind whose primary mode of communication is sign, when they are communicating with non-signing people.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems.

These include a wide array of systems, often very individualized, that supplement more traditional modes of communication. Examples:

- Object systems – the symbolic use of objects to represent activities, places, and things
 - Picture systems – the use of pictures as an organized system for communication (might include tactful pictures, made with a variety of textured materials that can be recognized by touch)
 - Electronic communication systems – technological devices used to receive and express information
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