



Engaging Environments

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It is important that the environments in which the student who is deaf-blind spends the most time are engaging environments, that is, environments that are predictable, responsive, and organized. In such environments, changes should occur, but they should be carefully planned. Although engaging environments should also be stimulating, activities should lead to direct outcomes for the student, not just provide stimulation. Engaging environments are arranged to invite active participation, teaching and learning, social interactions, and a minimum of confusion and downtime.

It is easy to determine if an environment is engaging by observing it for a short time. You have probably walked into a classroom in which few materials were available and there was no apparent schedule or organization. It may have been difficult to determine what was being taught, but it was obvious from the students' lack of engagement in meaningful activities that it was not a facilitative educational situation. In these environments, if students are not actively engaged in meaningful activities, if teaching is not occurring, and if positive feedback is not provided, the students may withdraw or engage in inappropriate behaviors to be active and get some attention. The teaching staff are then engaged in addressing problems and maintaining basic caregiving activities and have less time available for active teaching.

One of the major features of a predictable environment is consistency. That is, each person involved uses the same specific tactile and object cues each time to announce, for example, "I'm taking you out of your wheelchair" or "We're going to eat." Another key feature is temporal regularity. That is, activities occur at the same time each day for the same amount of time. If there are changes in the routine, they are announced to the student, and there is a system for the student to know his or her daily schedule or to help determine his or her schedule.

Teachers can assess the predictability of environments in the community to select the most engaging environments for interaction. For example, one fast-food restaurant may have a high turnover of employees and clientele, whereas another may have a steady staff and consistent clientele that comes in at specific times. If the same person waits on a student each time he or she comes in to order a meal, that person will become familiar with the student more rapidly than if many different employees do so at various times. (Such facilitators play a part in the instructional strategies that are selected for teaching. Effective instructional strategies do not

only involve the student who is deaf-blind. They also involve potential social partners to facilitate social interactions.)

An engaging environment should also be well organized and reflect a schedule that indicates who teaches or interacts with a specific student at a specific time for a specific activity or skill. The physical organization of the major environments involved is important, too. The student should have spaces in all the environments that are clearly his or hers, and there should be specific areas for specific activities and for quiet time. Materials should be organized, so the student knows where they are and can get them (or request them).

The age of the student must be considered in developing an organized environment. For an older student, the entire school may be considered the major environment. If the student is learning O&M skills, adaptations may be used in the hallways and rooms to facilitate skills acquisition. The school staff should also be aware that unpredictable barriers should not be placed in the routes he or she uses.

Establishing a schedule that varies fast-paced activities, slow-paced activities, and preferred and nonpreferred activities is also important in organizing the learning environment. Too often, all fast-paced and preferred activities take place in the morning, and one may wonder why the student even attends the educational program after lunch.

The specific phases of activities—the preparation-planning phase, active participation phase, and termination-closure phase—must be considered as well. In some preschool settings, a child and his or her teacher may spend 20 minutes a day putting blocks in a container, and afterward the teacher throws the trash away for the child and puts objects away in their appropriate containers when the child could be helping and, in doing so, continuing to develop skills. By analyzing each phase of an activity, teachers can target additional functional skills and expand the activity so that more iteration occurs and opportunities for teaching functional skills are not missed.



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