

## Successful Adaptations for Learning to Use Touch Effectively

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### TACTILE SIGNING

#### Definition

Communication method based on a standard manual sign system in which the receiver's hand(s) is placed lightly upon the hand(s) of the signer to perceive the signs.

#### Purpose

To make language in the form of manual signs accessible to children who are deaf and have insufficient vision to access signs visually.

#### Examples

- **BALL:** Claw hands form ball-shape. Child places his/her hands on the signer's hands.
- **DRINK:** Place right "C" hand in front of the mouth, palm facing left and make a motion as if taking a drink. Child places his/her hands on the signer's hands and follows the signer's movements.

#### Considerations

1. Consider the child's ability to place his or her hand(s) on the signer's hand(s) to determine whether tactile signing is an appropriate method for the child's receptive communication.
2. Consider the motor complexity of signs and the child's motor ability. Consult an occupational or physical therapist if the child has physical impairments.
3. Keep number of sign movements to a minimum. Modify some signs to make them easier to detect tactilely. Signs that are "made on the body" should replace standard signs that are "made in the air". Signs made with the whole hand may be easier to perceive tactilely than signs involving finger movements or part of the hand. Two-handed signs with symmetrical movements are more easily recognized than asymmetrical ones.
4. Modifications of standard manual signs used by children who are deaf-blind should be kept to a minimum, so that they learn standard manual signs and are able to communicate with sign language users.
5. Some children will need signs tactilely in some situations but not in others (e.g., to follow the fast pace of signing, the child might choose touch and not vision, or the child may choose to use both depending on lighting conditions).

6. The use of tactile tracking helps a child with a reduced visual field to know where the signer's hands are in space and where to look. Tactile tracking involves touching the back of the signer's hands at the wrist.
7. Help the child understand the meaning of signs by signing about what you are experiencing together (See [Mutual Tactile Attention](#)).

## Advantages

- Children who are severely visually impaired or who are not visually attentive can perceive the signs tactilely.
- Tactile signs provide a method of symbolic communication.
- Tactile signs allow children to interact with those who use standard manual signs.

## Disadvantages

- Comprehension of tactile signs requires cognitive, tactile, and memory skills.
- Not all manual signs can be adapted easily to a tactile mode.
- Modification of sign tactilely may be idiosyncratic and may be only understood by a few communication partners involved with an individual child.
- Tactile signs require the receiver to know how to position his or her hand(s) over the sender's hand(s). Therefore, tactile signing may not be useful for infants and other children because of physical, behavioral or cognitive abilities that make it difficult for them to actively obtain information in this manner.
- The smaller hands of a child may not be able to accurately perceive the movements of the larger hands of adults that are producing signs.
- Use of tactile signs may be tiring for the sender because of the weight and pressure of the receiver's hands.
- Tactile signing interrupts an ongoing activity of the child. For example, a teacher produces a sign that a child receives tactilely and then the child begins the activity. To maintain communication, the teacher interrupts this child to provide sign input that the child receives tactilely.
- If tactile signs are not understood by the child, he or she may dislike this type of physical contact.

## Strategies

- Introduce key word signs to label communicative behavior that is within the child's repertoire (e.g., signals, gestures, objects cues). If the child recognizes his/her spoon as a cue for mealtime, then sign EAT, or if the child rocks his/her body when the swing stops, then sign MORE SWING.
- Begin with key word signs that are useful, used frequently, motivating, easy to make, easy to discriminate, and easily understood by the child. Determine the motor complexity of sign production and whether they will be an effective means of communication for a child with physical disabilities. Consult an occupational or physical therapist if the child has motor impairments.
- Create multiple opportunities for the child to associate the sign with the referent (object, person, activity, or experience) so he or she can learn the

meaning of the sign. Provide opportunities for the child to generalize the use of signs across activities, settings, and people.

- **Adapt standard manual signs and adapt their pace of production as needed so the child can perceive them tactilely. Modify signs to make them easier to detect tactilely. Keep movements to a minimum. Signs that are "made on the body" should replace standard signs that are "made in the air". Signs made with the whole hand may be easier to perceive tactilely than signs involving finger movements or part of the hand. Two-handed signs with symmetrical movements are more easily recognized than asymmetrical ones. However, be selective in adapting standard manual signs so that children can still communicate with a larger group of sign users.**
- **Help the child understand who is producing the sign and who is receiving the sign. In tactile signing, the sender produces signs and the receiver (child) places his or her hand(s) on the sender's hand(s). If the sender is signing on the child's body then the child is the receiver. If the communication partner is helping the child to sign coactively, then the child is producing the sign.**
- **The communication partner and child should be positioned so that they are both comfortable and able to produce and receive signs. Because the communication partner position may vary in relationship to the child (i.e., beside the child or in front of the child), he or she should remember to facilitate the child's access to signed communication.**
- **Some children will need signs tactilely in some situations but not in others (e.g. to follow the fast pace of signing, the child might choose touch and not vision, or the child may choose to use both depending on lighting conditions).**
- **Some children will need individual support to use their communication system in a classroom with other students where the teacher cannot convey information to the child individually.**

## **Source**

***Tactile Signing* represents a synthesis of information from Project SALUTE's focus groups, National Advisory Committee, staff activities, and a review of relevant literature such as the following bibliography.**

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