
THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF TEAM MEMBERS FOR A STUDENT WHO IS DEAF-BLIND BY GLORIA RODRIGUEZ-GIL, CDBS EDUCATIONAL SPECIALIST

Introduction

In an article from the Summer 2009 issue of *reSources*, “Fundamental Classroom Conditions To Enhance Learning Experiences for Students Who Are Deaf-Blind”, I discussed the critical importance of team collaboration. This team collaboration may improve if team members know what to expect and what to ask of each other when jointly serving a student who is deaf-blind.

There are a number of reasons why team members may not be clear about the contributions other team members make to the team. Since deaf-blindness is a low incidence disability, this may be the first time team members have collaborated to such an extent with other teachers and therapists. Consider the following scenarios that are fairly common among teams I have served. The classroom teacher may not have ever worked with a teacher of the visually impaired, a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing, or an occupational therapist. The parent may not have ever worked with an orientation and mobility instructor. It may be the first such work experience for a one-on-one assistant and there may be confusion about what is expected as a member of the child’s team.

This article will include information about team members who are most likely to work directly and/or on a consultation basis with the student and the team. I will list the main contributions these team members make to educational teams as they support students and one another in their work. This work might be on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. I will include information about the consultant in deaf-blindness, although in many cases this individual does not work as intensively with students, either directly or in a consultative role. There may be other professionals on your child or student’s team whose disciplines are not included in this article. If you, the reader, believe I have omitted an important discipline, please feel free to include this information in the comments section at the end of this article. The purpose of this article is to encourage discussion about the work we all do when supporting students who are deaf-blind.

Team Members

The **parent** can be the most important member of the team. She or he is the most consistent person in the life of the student and is the person who knows the student best. The parent holds the “big picture” because she or he has the information and experience from all areas of the child’s life (e.g., home, medical, school, community, etc.). The parent also has a personal interest in the student and wants the child to be accepted and included in society. The parent may:

- be the driving force of the team and one of its leaders;
- be a unique source of information;
- bring the voice of the child to the team;
- identify educational goals by expressing expectations, priorities and fears;

- be an advocate for the child;
- learn and implement—in the home and community—the multiple strategies and specific techniques necessary to help the child learn, access the environment, communicate, socialize, and be as independent as the child can possibly be;
- collaborate with other team members to better support the child in school and in the community;
- reinforce at home what the child is doing at school and enrich this experience by organizing extracurricular activities; and
- share with the school what it is working at home and other critical information that will improve the child’s experiences in school.

The **classroom teacher** is the person in charge of the classroom. The teacher is the main source of instruction and manages the day-to-day classroom activities in coordination with the classroom staff, based on the goals set for the class and for each individual student. The teacher must be open to serving the student with deaf-blindness, who may have needs very different from others in the program. In addition, the teacher must take ownership of the student who is deaf-blind and work directly with him when appropriate, and not leave most educational responsibilities to the one-to-one assistant or other services providers who also work with the student. The classroom teacher may:

- actively collaborate with other members of the team by setting up goals based on assessment data and the team’s input;
- adapt the classroom environment, activities, and materials so they are fully accessible to the student;
- provide lesson plans to other team members in advance of instruction so team members can develop adaptations and, as appropriate, pre-teach specific concepts;
- learn the student’s communication system, and promote the consistent use of this communication system in the classroom;
- promote socialization between the student and classmates, and the school community at large;
- provide a structured and organized environment in which the student can learn and move in a safe and predictable environment;
- introduce changes to the child’s routine so that the child is continually challenged but not overwhelmed;
- establish an open channel of communication with the student’s family members and other service providers; and
- coordinate formal and informal meetings with other team members to plan activities, discuss pressing issues, and highlight accomplishments.

The **one-on-one-assistant or intervener** is a paraprofessional who, on a daily basis, serves a student who is deaf-blind in various school and/or community environments. Through a personal connection built on trust and respect, this paraprofessional assists the student with specific and appropriate strategies and techniques to support the student’s access to the physical environment, activities, and people around the student. This support not only allows the student to be as independent as possible, but also allows the student to have “whole experiences” to aid in concept development. This paraprofessional may:

- facilitate access to the various activities of the school day so that the student can be an active participant and can better understand these experiences and the results of his or her actions;
- use the student’s communication system to facilitate communication between the student and others in the classroom, school and community;
- expand the student’s communication system through consistent use in daily routines;

- collaborate with other team members by sharing ideas, and learning and applying their suggestions through face-to-face interactions, modeling and team meetings;
- adapt materials and activities so the student can access them;
- find a balance between the student's pace and the school's pace so the student can be an active participant to the best of his abilities; and
- establish—with the classroom teacher and others—systems for ongoing communication between the school and the student's family.

The **itinerant teacher of the visually impaired (TVI)** serves students who have vision impairment or blindness. The time she works directly with the student and/or consults with the team is written into the student's IEP. This teacher specializes in how to adapt the environment to make it more accessible through the use of residual vision, and/or the sense of touch. The Educational Service Guidelines for Blind and Visually Impaired Students contains a comprehensive list of TVI activities. These Guidelines state that the TVI may:

- conduct functional visual assessments;
- make referrals to clinical low vision testing;
- assess and assist in the use of optical (e.g., low vision devices) and non-optical devices (e.g., reading stands);
- determine appropriate visual materials based on size, color, and contrast of objects or pictures for communication board, picture/print labels, and reading materials);
- acquire materials from the American Printing House for the Blind (APH);
- make visual modifications to written materials;
- assess and modify visual environment; and
- provide braille instruction (Pugh & Erin, 1999).

This teacher of the visually impaired may also perform the following duties.

- Share with the team information about the student's visual functioning and the rationale for the visual and/or tactile adaptations recommended.
- When appropriate, provide the student with an array of visual experiences to improve the student's functional vision.
- When appropriate, provide the student with various tactile experiences to improve the student's tactile abilities.
- When appropriate, provide a multi-sensory approach so the student can learn to integrate all senses and gain the benefit of accessing the environment with all the senses working together.
- Create "sensory attractive activities" for the student in order to promote more outward interactions with the student and with the world around him.
- Train other staff members in the techniques and strategies used with the student in order to integrate these into the student's entire instructional day.
- Encourage collaboration among team members.

The **itinerant teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students (D/HH)** works with students who have hearing loss or deafness. The time she works directly with the student and/or consults with the team is written into the student's IEP. The student's hearing loss, in combination with vision loss and additional disabilities if present, will likely present challenges in the areas of communication, language and concept development. A D/HH teacher may work on all these areas, and may also address assistive technology that can enhance the student's residual hearing.

This teacher may:

- refer to an audiologist for further hearing testing;
- provide specific information about individual hearing impairments, types of amplification (including use and maintenance), support services and accommodations;
- provide direct instruction and/or consult and collaborate with the classroom staff and other team members on appropriate teaching strategies;
- share information about the child's communication system with other team members;
- teach the team how to use this communication system;
- adapt instructional methods and materials as necessary;
- pre-teach and post-teach academics to increase student understanding and comprehension;
- assess the student and use assessment data to design individualized goals;
- train other staff members in the techniques and strategies used with the student in order to integrate these into the student's entire instructional day; and
- encourage collaboration among team members.

The **orientation and mobility specialist (O&M)** serves students with visual impairments or deaf-blindness. Broadly, this specialist works on independent and safe traveling at school and in the community. The time she works directly with the student and/or consults with the team is written into the student's IEP. This specialist may:

- provide training related to body awareness;
- help the student know where he is in space and where he wants to go (orientation);
- help the student plan how to get to his destination (mobility);
- teach the student the concepts of space, environment and how to use the information received through other senses (sound, temperature, vibration) to maintain or re-direct orientation;
- teach the student how to use the white cane to provide environmental information while moving through space;
- teach the student how to use any residual vision and low vision aids when traveling;
- help the student learn about his environment and the communication/language skills that the student may need in that environment;
- develop accommodations that enable the student to interact with the public (e.g., requesting personal shopping assistance at the supermarket); and
- train other staff members in the techniques and strategies used with the student in order to integrate these into the student's entire instructional day.

The **specialist in deaf-blindness** is a teacher who has the knowledge and skills about the uniqueness of deaf-blindness and the profound effect that combined vision and hearing losses have on all areas of development (e.g., communication, challenges in accessing information, orientation and mobility, etc.). In California, some school districts, County Offices of Education, and/or Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) have specialists in deaf-blindness. In California, some of these specialists are also based at California Deaf-Blind Services (CDBS), which is the statewide technical assistance and training project federally funded through the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. CDBS serves students who are deaf-blind from birth through age twenty-one and may provide the following services to educational teams, families, and public and private agencies:

- technical assistance in person, via telephone, e-mail and video to home and school;
- training activities for individual teams and specific programs or on a regional or statewide level;

and

- dissemination of information, resources and products such as the electronic newsletter reSources, available through the CDBS website: www.cadbs.org.

The **speech-language pathologist or therapist** may work with students who are deaf-blind, along with their educational teams, to address communication issues due to sensory losses and additional disabilities. These therapists understand the impact that language and communication have on academic performance. Students who communicate through spoken language are very likely to have challenges related to language development and speech production, and the speech and language therapist can work with these issues. If the child does not have spoken language, the speech and language therapist can also work with the student in collaboration with the team on other modes of communication. This therapist may:

- work individually with the student on discreet speech or language skills;
- support the student through an integrated approach to support the student's participation in academic areas, as well as nonacademic, and extracurricular areas;
- collaborate with the team to design a communication system for the student that is functionally relevant within the contexts the student interacts and learns;
- collaborate with other team members to encourage opportunities for interaction within typical school activities with non-disabled peers;
- document and update the student's communication system in close collaboration with the teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing and others on the students' educational team; and
- educate families and professionals about the challenges of clear communication when other disabilities are present.

The **occupational therapist** (or OT) may work with the children who are deaf-blind by providing them with physical and sensory experiences that can help them go through the typical stages of development. Children who are deaf-blind—because of the dual sensory loss and other possible disabilities—may not go through typical development in the same way or sequence as do their non-disabled peers. Jill Brody, who is a respected OT in southern California states, “the occupational therapist evaluates a young child's overall development and plan activities that support learning and help the child interact successfully with his or her immediate environment.” (Brody, 2003). The federal regulations to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (commonly referred to as IDEA) includes the following definition of occupational therapy as a related service:

“Improving, developing, or restoring functions impaired or lost through illness, injury, or deprivation; improving ability to perform tasks for independent functioning if functions are impaired or lost; and preventing, through early intervention, initial or further impairment or loss of functions.” (Code of federal regulations, 2006)

This therapist may specifically:

- assess the student's function, with and without assistance, in different activities and environments, with different materials and tasks, as well as evaluate his responses to various stimuli;
- facilitate the student's active participation in purposeful activities such as self-help (e.g., feeding), play/leisure (e.g., proper positioning and physical support, motor planning when moving through space, grasping, exploring and manipulating toys, and using equipment for play and leisure), and classroom learning environments (e.g., proper positioning and support, using educational materials, accessing different environments through adaptive equipment or assistive technology); and
- provide sensory integration therapy when the student has a sensory integration disorder.

A good explanation of sensory integration disorder and the role of the OT can be found at: http://www.brighttots.com/sensory_integration.html. In all these areas, the OT works on fine and gross motor skills, sensory processing, visual-motor skills and improved neuromuscular functioning to assess, facilitate and enhance functional skills.

Bibliography

Alsop, L., Robinson, C., Goehl, K., Lace, J., Belote, M., & Rodriguez-Gil, G. (2007). *Interveners in the classroom: Guidelines for teams working with students who are deafblind*. Logan, UT: SKI-HI Institute.

American Speech-Language Hearing Association. (2005). *Roles of speech-language pathologists in the identification, diagnosis, and treatment of individuals with cognitive-communication disorders: Position statement*. Retrieved September 17, 2009 from <http://www.asha.org/docs/html/PS2005-00110.html>

Brody, J. (2003). *Occupational therapy for young children with visual impairments and additional disabilities*. Retrieved September 1, 2009 from <http://www.projectsalute.net/Learned/Learnedhtml/OccupationalTherapy.html>

Code of federal regulations 34 parts 300 and 301. (2006). *Assistance to states for the education of children with disabilities and preschool grants for children with disabilities: Final rule*. Published in the Federal Register August 14, 2006. Washington, D.C.

Council for Exceptional Children. (2000). *Developing educationally relevant IEPs: A technical assistance document for speech-language pathologists*. Reston, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children.

Foster, S., & Cue, K. (2008). Roles and responsibilities of itinerant specialist teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 153 (5), 435-449.

Giangreco, M.F. (2000). Related services research for students with low-incidence disabilities: Implications for speech-language pathologists in inclusive classrooms. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 31, 230-239.

McLetchie, B., & Riggio, M. (1997). *Competencies for teachers of students who are deafblind*. Watertown, MA: Perkins National Deafblind Training Project.

McLetchie, B., & Riggio, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Deafblindness: Educational Service Guidelines*. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind.

Pasco County Schools. *Occupational Therapy Program*. Retrieved October 9, 2009 from http://www.pasco.k12.fl.us/wiki/ESE:ESE_Physical_and_Occupational_Therapy/%22%20%20title=%22ESE:ESE_Physical_and_Occupational_Therapy#Roles_Responsibilities_of_the_Occupational_Therapist

Pugh, G.S., & Erin, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Blind and visually impaired students: Educational service*