
FUNDAMENTAL CLASSROOM CONDITIONS TO ENHANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE DEAF-BLIND

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Introduction

Students who are deaf-blind need special conditions and accommodations in the classroom in order for educators to effectively address their unique needs. Vision and hearing play such a critical role in learning, establishing relationships and mobility. When these two senses are impacted, classroom staff working and interacting with these students need first to be aware of and sensitive to this impact, and second to identify strategies to respond appropriately to it.

In this article, I will focus on three fundamental conditions that need to be in place in the classroom: 1) relationships and safety, 2) structured support and 3) team collaboration. I will also address strategies that can be implemented to create these conditions.

These conditions and strategies may apply in any kind of educational setting (for example, special day class, general education class, specialized school, resource room, etc.) and need to be tailored to the individual student.

Relationships and Safety

The very foundation of creating good classroom conditions for a student who is deaf-blind is promoting and facilitating an environment where he can connect and bond with others and feel safe. This is a goal that takes time, thought, care and conscious effort because our challenge for this student is ensuring he feels a sense of belonging and safety within the environment through strong relationships.

Although it may not always be apparent, creating these relationships is as important for the student who is deaf-blind as for any other person. Through the building of relationships built on trust and respect, the student knows that another person can be his safe guide in unfamiliar environments, a communication partner, and a key support as he learns and moves towards more independence.

It takes time for the student to feel at ease with people that he doesn't know. This process may cause some anxiety—for the student and for the classroom staff. Feeling comfortable within his social environment can happen in a relatively short period of time if the right conditions are in place.

A relationship may start between the student and one other person, usually an adult, who will spend time with the student building the relationship. This person should be sensitive to the student's needs and enjoy being with the student. This person might be the student's one-on-one aide, a classroom assistant, or the classroom teacher.

Once the relationship has been built, the student may be able to gradually expand the circle of people with whom he feels safe (i.e., those with whom he can join in classroom activities and share learning experiences). At this stage, the student might also begin establishing connections to classmates as well. A strong relationship will often encourage the student to try things that he would not have tried otherwise. This special person, or these special people motivate the student to learn. Barbara Miles and Barbara McLetchie have written, “A deaf-blind child will have difficulty developing accurate ideas about the world unless she has at least one trusting, significant, meaningful relationship to serve as a center from which to explore the world in gradually widening circles.” (See references at end of article.)

The following are some strategies that could help build a trusting and safe relationship.

1. Take time to be with the student and get to know him.
2. Do activities together with the student that are enjoyable to him.
3. When working with the student, do not intervene only when you need to correct or support, but find other opportunities where you can share and interact with the student (e.g., playing together with a new toy, sharing a photograph of an activity he did over the weekend with his family, having a snack together, doing physical activities together which he enjoys, etc.).
4. Have a consistent way to approach the student so he knows what he can expect from you as you relate with him.
5. Don't rush. Take your time when introducing yourself and activities, when doing the activity independently or together, when moving from one activity or location to another, or when finishing an activity.
6. For the student with significant visual impairments or who is totally blind, maintain physical contact with him. For example, if you are sitting with him, you can place your leg or feet by his. You don't have to necessarily touch his hands all the time because this may interrupt what he is doing. Keeping some kind of physical contact is important so that the student knows you are with him.
7. Make it clear to the student when you are stepping away from him and someone else is taking your place.
8. Wait for his responses to what you do and then respond to him.
9. Find out what motivates the student and what he is interested in, and then build activities around these motivators and interests.
10. Identify strategies to use when guiding him so he can feel safe when he is traveling with you.
11. Learn how the student communicates and be responsive to communicative attempts.

Structured Support

Another condition that needs to be present in the classroom in order for the student to feel grounded and connected is the presence of a structured environment. This consists of an organized and clear environment that can give the student a sense of order, predictability and confidence.

For a child with typically developing vision and hearing, these two senses give him information about his relationship to the environment (e.g., where does he begin and end in space, where does the physical environment start, what are his physical contacts with people and objects in his environment, how he moves through and impacts his physical space). Vision and hearing also provide information about where things are in space and also about the passing of time (e.g., day/night, morning/ afternoon, beginning/middle/end of activities, what will happen next, what happened yesterday, what will happen tomorrow, etc).

A structured environment will allow the student to spend less time trying to figure out his classroom environment, and allow him more time to focus his attention on thinking, learning, and communicating. There are levels of structure and physical support that need to be in place within the student's environment in order to help the student find his "sense of place" in space and time:

Classroom organization:

- Clearly defined work areas in the classroom. These areas might include his cubby, desk, chair, calendar/schedule, dining area, break area, and the place where the teacher can usually be found.
- Specific places in the classroom where he keeps his belongings. For example, from the moment he enters the classroom, he needs to know where he is and where he needs to put his backpack and other personal belongings. If seated at his desk, this could be the place where he can keep his books and other materials.
- Accessible and consistent areas in the classroom where he can easily access the materials he needs to be actively engaged in classroom learning experiences.
- Elimination of unnecessary clutter so the student can move as independently as possible throughout the classroom.
- Clear labeling of work areas, places and materials with pictures, textures, concrete objects, print, Braille, etc.

Identification of people interacting with the student:

- People interacting with the student should consistently make it clear who they are through name signs and/or identifications cues that are unique to them.

Materials organization:

- Presentation of work materials in clearly defined containers. Materials can be presented in trays, boxes or binders.
- Use of "finished" containers. When an activity is finished, the student can place the materials used in a "finished" box.
- Accessible and clearly labeled materials. Materials that are accessible and labeled for the student will allow the student to search for things more independently or put things away in the right places with less assistance.

Use of schedules:

- Individualized schedules. The student needs a schedule that includes what is he going to do next, what is he going to do throughout the day, what he'll do tomorrow, what he did yesterday, etc. The level of complexity of the student's schedule will vary depending on the student, as will the level of concrete objects of reference the student requires.
- Calendars even for students who seem to have internalized their schedules. The student should have a schedule/calendar even if he seems to have committed his routine to memory. The reason for the schedule is not only to tell him what will happen next, but to also give him a way to remember what happened before, or to know what will happen tomorrow. The schedule will also allow him to tell you what he wants to do by choosing a later item in his schedule or an item that is already in the "finish" section of the calendar.

Beginning, middle and end of an activity:

- Beginning: The student needs to know when an activity starts and ends. The start of an activity could be exploring the calendar together to find out what is next, and then introducing the materials involved in the activity.
- Middle: This stage is the doing of the activity itself. It is what the student does to complete the

activity. In this stage you need to be very observant of the student's actions and provide just the right amount of support that the student needs in order to do the activity.

- End: When the activity is finished, you and the student can sign and say FINISHED, and then put any work or materials away. Depending on the type of work and the mobility of the student, work or materials can be placed in a box by the student's side, or in a binder with all his work, or in a cabinet where the materials are kept. If the student has a calendar box, the schedule representation of the activity is placed in the calendar's "finish" box.
- Pacing issues. Pace yourself so the student can understand what is going on and has adequate opportunities to respond. More often than not, our tendency is to go faster than is ideal for students.
- Transitions between activities. Transitions from activity to activity are as important as the activities themselves. Well-planned transitions allow the student to better understand and respond appropriately to the activities in which he is involved.

Physical support:

- Specialized seating. The student may need a special chair or a regular chair where he can support his feet on the floor. This chair will support him physically so he can pay attention to what is in front of him. If needed, other types of supports may be recommended by the physical and/or the occupational therapists.
- Designating a break area. The student may need an area where he can take a break from the classroom routine and/or from his wheelchair. This place can have a mat, beanbag, rocking chair, or any other place for relaxation. It can also have favorite toys, objects to play with or books to read during the break.

Team Collaboration

A student who is deaf-blind often has a fragmented perception of the world. One of the main jobs of service providers and families is, to the best of our abilities, to help the student to fill in these gaps perceptions and experiences. Therefore, it is critical that team members view the student as a whole person and not only from the perspective of their area of expertise or discipline. It is through this whole person approach that the student can start building an un-fragmented experience.

Team collaboration is critical in the education of a student who is deaf-blind. This is a student with complex educational needs and no single person will have all the answers to the challenges this student faces. The team is there to support the daily work of the student and the classroom staff with goals, appropriate activities, adaptations and supports.

To truly collaborate, the level of coordination and detail requires team members to:

- Focus their efforts on the student and the staff that are working and interacting directly with the student on a daily basis.
- Share their expertise and experience with other team members and classroom personnel through talking, modeling and writing.
- Learn from the others in the team, and implement practices that go beyond their area of expertise, experience and "responsibility".

Some specific day-to-day strategies for building a collaborative model:

- Work together on the adaptation of the materials needed for learning (e.g., have real objects available, have pictures of actual objects and activities, enlargement of print). Parents can be involved in providing ideas and materials for these adaptations.

- Classroom teachers can provide lesson plans to team members at least one week in advance so they can adapt and locate appropriate materials for the student.
- It might be necessary in some cases for team members to pre-teach some concepts before the student learns about them in class with the rest of the students.
- Team members can communicate in a variety of ways: informally when visiting classrooms, in regularly scheduled meetings with clearly defined agendas, through a communication notebook between school and home, keeping and using a log between service providers in the class, and electronically by email, text messaging, etc.
- The communication protocol that the service providers and the families follow should be thoroughly discussed and agreed upon, and not be left to chance.

Conclusion

Students who are deaf-blind need supportive environments in which they can establish strong relationships, grow, and learn. We can support this by raising the awareness of people who work and interact with them and by supporting the collaborative efforts of these team members. Care, consistency, and an eye for detail are critical ingredients in meeting these challenges, which can only happen with a carefully planned and continuous effort.

Bibliography

About relationships and safety:

Harmonious Interactions

Practice Perspectives, #1, June 2007

National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB)

This article addresses the importance of teaching families and educators to create and maintain high-quality interactions with children who are deaf-blind. Harmonious interactions form the basis for meaningful, secure relationships that are essential for learning and communication. This publication is based on research and training activities conducted by Marleen Janssen, Marianne Riksen-Walraven, Jan van Dijk, and Bernadette van den Tillaart. (*Information from DB Link Info Services.*)

Available as PDF: <http://nationaldb.org/NCDBProducts.php?prodID=35>

Available as print, Braille copies: NCDB @ 800-438-9376 | info@nationaldb.org

Developing Concepts with Children Who Are Deaf-Blind

By Barbara Miles and Barbara McLetchie. 2004.

National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB)

Concepts are the ideas that give meaning to our world. This fact sheet discusses the process by which a deaf-blind child may develop their own unique concepts based on their personal experiences.

Discussion involves the necessity of providing experiences to maximize a child's opportunity to develop concepts and the critical element of relationship in providing meaning. Discusses attitudes, environments and techniques that promote concept development. (*Information from DB Link Info Services.*)

Available as html + PDF: <http://www.nationaldb.org/NCDBProducts.php?prodID=29>

About structured environment:

Structuring the Environment

By Anthony Best

DBI REVIEW, #22, July-December 1998, pp.4-9. (1998)

This article discusses the significance of a structured environment to meet the communication, mobility and learning needs of deaf-blind children. The three elements of an environment that need to be structured and controlled are examined; these are people, space, and time, with a focus placed on the physical environment. Describes how to use an ecological audit of environments and sub-environments to analyze and identify skills needed by children for successful interaction and for developing precise learning programs to enhance learning. (*Information from DB Link Info Services.*)

Available as html: http://www.deafblindinternational.org/standard/review1_q.html

About team collaboration:

Resources and Strategies to Increase Access for Students with Sensory Loss

Presentation at CAL TASH Conference 2009 by Gloria Rodriguez-Gil

Non-published. Power Point presentation available by request. Please email Gloria Rodriguez-Gil at gloriagil@vzavenue.net

