

Integrating Your Child or Youth Who Is Deaf-blind into Groups: Strategies for Families and Caregivers

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Many children and youth who are deaf-blind share a particular challenge—the difficulty they have in joining and becoming a fully integrated member of their families and communities. Overcoming these obstacles can be especially helpful in mitigating their social isolation. Encouraging participation in groups such as one’s close or extended family, a regular set of friends who like to “hang out” together, school or religious related clubs, and so forth, can make life more fulfilling. And remember that entering into new relationships, especially those involving peers during adolescence, can sometimes be intimidating, regardless of one’s degree of vision and hearing loss, and the presence of additional disabilities and/or health issues.

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to highlight some interventions that are conducive to helping children and teens establish a sense of belonging at home, school and in the community. Integration into groups is not likely to happen automatically for the individual who is deaf-blind; it requires determination, thought, and action. But it can start early on with the active leadership and support of parents and family members.

Strategies for integrating children into family activities:

- Include your child in as many family activities as possible—both inside and outside the home—if you want your child to be actively engaged with your family.
- Celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays, graduations, religious events, etc. with your child, and invite family members, neighbors and friends to these celebrations.
- Encourage others to greet your child and, if necessary, model for them how to do this.
- When your child is present, acknowledge their presence by including them in conversations. If the children cannot actively participate in these conversations, try acknowledging their presence every so often during these conversations.
- Encourage siblings and other family members, friends, neighbors and classmates to have direct interactions with your child. You may have to facilitate these situations at first. You may also have to model how to interact with the child.

- If necessary, ask your child's educational team members for help with building and expanding the communication system the child uses at home.
- Allow and encourage the child to look and do things that are age appropriate (e.g., wearing age appropriate clothes, using or playing with items that a typical person the same age would use, exposing the child to music that other children the same age enjoy, etc.).

Strategies for integrating children into the school community:

- Think about how you would like your child to participate in their classroom and school community, and share this information directly with the school staff.
- Ask team members to include goals related to social skills in the child's IEP, and brainstorm with them to identify specific activities, environments and strategies that may facilitate this socialization.
- If the student is present at their own IEP meeting, have a family member introduce him or her if the child cannot do this independently.
- Share important information about your child with educational team members and classmates so that they get a clearer sense of who he or she is. This will give them a better understanding of how to more effectively include your child in school activities.
- From the beginning of your child's school years, consider the value of having them attend their neighborhood school. In this way, they will grow up as part of their local community right from the start, and members of the community will better understand your child's unique support needs.
- Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular school activities such as band, choir, athletics, cheerleading, and special clubs that promote involvement in social activities. Identify the appropriate levels of support your child needs to participate in these activities and consider asking the school for some kind of buddy system.

Strategies for integrating children into to the community:

- Organize a person-centered planning activity as a way to include your extended family, as well as people from the school and community, in planning for your child's future. For more information on this type of planning, check out <http://www.nationaldb.org/documents/products/MAPEnglish.pdf>.
- Include your child as much as possible when doing community errands.

- If your child receives orientation and mobility instruction, ask the O&M instructor to work with the child in your home community so that the child can be a safe traveler in your neighborhood.
- If you a member of a religious community, encourage your child's active participation in religious gatherings and other activities the congregation or group organizes.
- If appropriate, ask the IEP team for technology instruction that will assist the child in learning skills to participate in social networking and other distance-communication activities.
- Search for community activities that your child would enjoy and can participate in, either individually or with your family. These activities could be volunteer work, as well as social and educational events.

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