

Planning Family Outings

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Families with young children often enjoy visiting parks, zoos, nature centers, amusement parks, and other popular tourist sites during their free time. Many of us may have fond memories of these special family outings in our own childhood. Many of the venues are designed to provide an enjoyable experience for adult family members and children of various ages and many families do some pre-planning to prepare for the excursion. However, planning and executing this type of outing can be intimidating for families of children who have vision and hearing loss and other disabilities because of their child's unique needs and the different ways the child experiences new environments and new activities. Have you ever wondered what strategies might help a family participate in these experiences in ways that are fun for all members of the family, including the child with deaf-blindness? The following tips could be helpful when planning and enjoying similar activities in the future:

Planning the trip:

- ❖ Check the Internet and see if the venue you want to visit has a website. If yes, then check out the website to learn more about the accessibility of the site. Find out if there are any special services/programs/or accommodations offered for patrons with special needs, and any other suggestions for activities most families enjoy, as you may want to create some adaptations for those activities (e.g., tactile objects or a tool to hold items if your child has difficulty with this skill).
- ❖ Plan for enough time to get there and enjoy the venue at a leisurely pace for your child.

Arriving at the destination:

- ❖ If possible, share information with your child about the place you are visiting through signs, tactile objects, or photos. For instance, if you are visiting a nearby children's farm or petting zoo, you might let your child feel the food you have brought to feed the animals, a piece of rough wood that feels like the fence, or some hay to touch and smell.
- ❖ Take your time when you arrive and pay attention to visual, auditory, and tactile aspects of the environment. What does your child seem to notice? What materials or landmarks could be touch cues to give your child information? Don't forget the smell of the place too—that may be new and interesting to your child.

- ❖ If there is a docent, guide, or ranger at the venue, check in with that person. Be sure to ask any questions you might have and see if s/he has ideas or suggestions about activities your child might enjoy or any special arrangements that might be made to allow your child meaningful access and participation (e.g., allowing them to get extra close to an exhibit or to an animal to pet; giving your family a private session in the petting zoo area; allowing your child to touch and feel something that others may be asked not to touch). You may need to explain to the person that without full vision and hearing, your child is relying much, much more on his/her other senses.

During the visit:

- ❖ Continue to pay careful attention to transitions and pacing of the activities. Don't rush through activities or the venue. Give your child lots of time to notice any particular sounds, sights, textures, surface changes (e.g., walkway to gravel or grass, ducks quacking, or sunlight falling through the trees) that catch his/her attention. Provide information to your child during these transitions and give him/her plenty of time to process the information you're providing.
- ❖ If this is a venue you have visited before, try to follow a routine in terms of the route and activities you try. This will help your child feel familiar with the place and activities and could lead to a better sense of security, heightened awareness, increased initiations, and more exploration.
- ❖ Look for opportunities to provide new information to your child. Try to keep the information simple and clear and think about how your child might be experiencing this setting and activity with his/her vision and hearing loss.
 - ❖ Look for signs from your child about how s/he feels or what s/he wants:
 - ❖ Is s/he enjoying this place and/or activity?
 - ❖ Is s/he tired or finished?
 - ❖ Is s/he curious? Nervous? Excited? Confused?
 - ❖ How can you tell?
 - ❖ What could you do to provide acknowledgment of how s/he is feeling or what s/he wants?
 - ❖ What could you do to give your child more information about this place or activity?
- ❖ When providing information about what others are seeing and/or hearing, it is important to remember that getting a sense of places, other people, animals, play structures, vehicles (such as a carnival ride or train ride) is so much more difficult for children with deaf-blindness. How can you teach a child who cannot see and hear what a cow is? It is impossible to touch an entire cow or train, so it will be difficult to get an accurate full picture. What about comparisons of places, animals, and objects? How is a cow different from a sheep or a rabbit? What is similar? What about a car vs. a train vs. a carnival ride?
- ❖ It will take time, repetition, and associated connections for the child to develop and learn concepts like these. You should not feel that they cannot or will not learn them, but just be mindful that concept development will take more time and be more challenging due to your child's lack of access to the visual and auditory information. Our vision and hearing are so important for incidental learning (i.e., concepts, routines, and skills we just pick up by watching and listening). Try to keep these questions in the back of your mind:

- ❖ What is my child’s perception of this event, object, or material?
- ❖ What is most important to him/her?
- ❖ What other information do you need to provide?
- ❖ What will help my child understand this event, creature, or object better (e.g., slowly touching all parts of a rabbit using hand under hand techniques and providing information about parts of the animal and movements it is making using your child’s preferred mode of communication)?

After the visit

- ❖ If possible, try to “converse” with your child about the activity you just shared together. Review the order of activities (e.g., arrival at the Children’s Farm; walking by the pond and feeling water; the gravel path to the barn; giving lettuce to the cows; petting the sheep). You could use words/simple phrases, signs, objects, and an experience or schedule book—whichever mode works best for your child. This is a nice way to have that conversation with your child that many parents engage in with typically developing children as they drive home.
- ❖ If you are able to gather materials from the place you visited or collect items that can represent parts of the venue or certain activities, then try to create an experience book at home so you and your child can continue to recall the experience. You can then use it again if you visit the venue as a communication and conversation tool.