

## Promoting Interactions with Siblings and Peers

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We can all probably agree that social relationships with one's peers are an important quality of life outcome. For adults, these relationships might be childhood or school friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, and people associated with organized group membership. For children, these relationships are usually siblings, cousins, neighbors, and schoolmates. These relationships are established through continually reciprocal interactions and involvement in shared activities and experiences, and for most of us these relationships are highly valued components of our daily lives. Forming these positive social relationships can be difficult for children with dual sensory losses and/or other medical needs. This is due to the fact that they require a great deal of care and support from adults to participate in daily life activities, communicate, and maintain good health, and thus they often have limited access to or interactions with peers.

Many children with deaf-blindness are not yet able to initiate interactions with peers or siblings, and usually other children do not recognize or understand the child's attempts to engage or interact. This can be a challenging need area to address when a child's health issues are very prominent and developing communication and motor skills and other adaptive life skills are a higher priority for the parents and service providers. However, it's important to also recognize that interactions with other peers can provide opportunities to learn and practice skills in each of those areas, and might even provide extra motivation for the child to interact and play with someone closer to their age.

At first, taking the steps to promote positive interactions and social relationships may seem daunting. However, reciprocal interactions and play with peers or siblings can be as simple as involving the children in taking turns at a slower pace and introducing and exploring new interesting materials, toys, or simple cause-effect activities. These interactions and play also provide the supporting adult (i.e., a parent, care provider, or educator) a natural opportunity to model and show a peer or sibling the things that the child is interested in, can do, and is able to communicate with others. Initially, the child and the peer partner will need consistent adult assistance to guide the interactions and play using some of these valuable and reliable approaches and strategies:

- “Follow the child” (especially interests and initiations)
- Proper pacing and allowing enough time to process and respond to interactions from others and take turns
- “Do with, not for” and encouraging peers to provide support and motivating encouragement
- Hand-under-under support
- Creating and using adapted materials, especially tactile, up close and modifying activities or rules of a game to allow use of AAC devices or partial participation
- Use of interactive media to engage both the child and the peer in a shared experience (e.g., looking at enlarged photos on an iPad or taking turns with a computer video game through use of a switch)

When considering elements of a satisfying quality of life, it seems important not to forget the need we all have for companionship and involvement in pleasurable shared activities with our peers. Certainly, this is an essential area to nourish and support for children with deaf-blindness as well.