In this issue:

- **Movement, Inclusion, and Creativity:** Themes of our annual teacher symposium
  - by Julie Maier, CDBS Educational Specialist
- **The Importance of Connections: A Parent Perspective**
  - by Myrna Medina, Family Engagement Specialist
- **Beyond California: Connections at a National Level**
  - by Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator
- **CDBS Introduction**
  - by Kayla Coburn, CDBS Educational Specialist
- **Creating connections requires opportunities, informed peers, and facilitation**
  - by Julie Maier, CDBS Educational Specialist

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**Movement, Inclusion, and Creativity: Themes of our Annual Teacher Symposium**

*Julie Maier, Educational Specialist*

For the past several years California Deafblind Services has partnered with San Francisco State University’s Extensive Support Needs (ESN) Teacher Training Program to host an annual Symposium on Deafblindness focused on the educational needs of children and youth who are deafblind. For each symposium we invite a nationally recognized expert in the field of deafblindness to share their expertise and experiences with us at the beautiful SFSU campus. This partnership between the SFSU Extensive Support Needs Program and CDBS has established a vital ongoing professional development opportunity for many teachers of the deafblind in our state.

Our symposium this year was held on November 2nd and Dr. Elizabeth Foster, an assistant professor of adapted physical education (APE) at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, was chosen to lead this symposium. Beth is a high-energy, engaging presenter who is passionate about movement, recreation, and communication and specializes in finding ways to involve all students in fun, interactive and inclusive activities in the classroom, recess yard, PE class, and extracurricular activities through collaborative planning and creativity. Her workshop, “Innovative Equipment Opens Access to Movement” described why movement is so crucial to every student’s day and shared ways to increase opportunities for movement, especially for students with sensory loss and orthopedic impairments. She discussed the use of movement to build students’ confidence and success in other academic areas and promote expressive communication development.
She also provided information about adapted physical education to assist in building networking and collaboration opportunities between educators serving students with sensory losses and movement and motor needs.

The interactive afternoon session included a “make it and take it” activity in which Dr. Foster provided examples of innovative, fun, one-of-a-kind recreational materials and equipment that can be created from simple everyday reused or recycled household or school items. It was wonderful to witness the participants then join forces to create materials to use for recreation, interactive social play with peers, and even practice math and literacy skills.

This symposium also serves as an annual reunion and offers graduates from the ESN program at SF State who completed the specialization endorsement in deafblindness a chance reconnect and share updates about their work. This year we extended the symposium invitation to other educators participating in our newly formed Teacher of the Deafblind Community of Practice to attend. The addition of more teachers who hold Visual Impairments and Deaf/Hard of Hearing credentials and also self-identify as teachers of the deafblind definitely provided valuable opportunities for collaboration and shared learning opportunities across credential areas.

*For more information about our Teacher of the Deafblind Community of Practice, contact Julie Maier at jmaier@sfsu.edu.

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The Importance of Connections: A Parent Perspective
by Myrna Medina, Family Engagement Specialist

Connections: contact, networking, relationships, links, liaisons. These are just a few definitions for connections that in reality serve the same purpose. Interpersonal connections can happen through many different ways such as face-to-face, via telephone and email, and social media platforms. And the most important piece of connection to me is the reason why such connection is needed, and that is that it needs to have a purpose and an intentional goal.

It is well known that one person doesn’t have all the answers to all questions, nor do they have all the information related to a specific topic. But it is also well known that families often ask similar questions and connecting with others can help them sort out answers, whether by sharing challenges, knowledge, resources, or by providing further connections.

I often hear people say, “Thanks for sharing this” or “I didn’t know about that.” It is certain that we all have missed valuable opportunities to learn from others, whether helpful resources, useful strategies on specific topics or concerns, potential referrals, and more. It is also true that families of children with special needs are in desperate need of information in order to receive emotional support and help our children succeed.

Connections give people opportunities to build personal understanding, shared experiences, and deeper compassion, which all help to create stronger bonds and supportive environments. These will help us to become more informed and empowered to be a better voice for our children and for our whole families. It also gives parents and professionals opportunities to build strong partnerships, share responsibilities, work together to accomplish our often similar goals, provide active ongoing support, and create meaningful learning environments. Connections serve to encourage peer-to-peer supports by sharing real-life experiences or testimonials, resources, referrals, and answers. Or simply by having someone to talk to or being the person someone else can talk to that will make you both feel close, even if there are many actual miles between you.

We are now in the cyber era and social media is a great connection tool, whether you are using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or any other social media platform. It is often a good idea to consider creating your own networking tools that will help you create a stronger community, one that will be more positive and meaningful to all participants. This could be by creating a closed Facebook page, a text group, or through personal emails or face-to-face or in-person gatherings. These all can offer excellent ways of connecting, bonding, networking, socializing, etc.
It is also good to remember that connections are not just important for educational purposes but also for emotional support. Just the feeling of not being alone in this journey makes a huge impact on families and professionals.

Here two important opportunities for connections that are available

1. Network of Family Support Providers: This is a group of family members throughout the vast state of California who volunteer to provide family-to-family support. Please see the CDBS website for more information about Family Support Providers: http://www.cadbs.org/family-support-providers/.

2. Spanish Language monthly calls. This is a great opportunity for parents that are more comfortable speaking Spanish to meet once a month and join friendly conversations for mutual support and learning. http://www.cadbs.org/es/eventos/
Beyond California: Connections at a National Level
by Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

Why Connect at a National Level?

Why are connections at the national level necessary for those of us who call California home? Don’t we have everything we need right here in our own state? After all, California is the most populous state in the U.S., with a 2019 estimated population of 40 million people. For context, Los Angeles County with 10 million residents has a population that is larger than all but 9 U.S. states. The Los Angeles metro area has a population just slightly smaller than the entire state of New York. The nine counties of the San Francisco Bay Area have a combined population equal to population of the state of Washington. And the cities of Sacramento and Fresno have a combined population almost exactly equal to the population of the state of Rhode Island.

What do these demographic data have to do with connections and why does it matter? It is important because even in a huge state like California with many major metropolitan areas and millions of people, it is still possible to feel very alone. If you work in the field of deafblindness, you may be the only person in your area who does your same job, so that opportunities to interact with others who understand your work and its challenges are scarce, if not non-existent. If you’re a family member, you may be the only parent or sibling in a school, district, or even county who truly understands your circumstances and the unique, specialized needs of your family member. If you’re an individual who is deafblind, you may be the only one in your area with your specific etiology, making face-to-face connections with peers difficult. While California, with its size and diversity, offers extraordinary opportunities for making statewide connections of all kinds, making the most of national networks is still a central need for many of us. And we are fortunate to have a remarkable national deafblind network whose size and might belies the relatively small number of children and youth who are deafblind.

Connections Based on Specific Etiologies and Diagnoses

Connections around specific etiologies of deafblindness or diagnoses serve a critical role in the sharing of information, resources, strategies, and emotional support. By etiology, we are referring to the cause of the child’s deafblindness, if it is known (e.g., syndromes and conditions such as CHARGE, Down, Usher, Alström, Stickler, cytomegalovirus, meningitis). Diagnoses refer to the causes of deafness (e.g., chronic middle ear infections, auditory neuropathy spectrum disorder) and visual impairment (e.g., glaucoma, cataracts, colobomas, retinopathy of prematurity). A few of the etiology-specific national organizations we at CDBS interact with most frequently include the following:

- CHARGE Syndrome Foundation: [https://www.chargesyndrome.org/](https://www.chargesyndrome.org/)
- Usher Syndrome Coalition: [https://www.usher-syndrome.org](https://www.usher-syndrome.org)
- Cornelia de Lange Syndrome Foundation, Inc.: [https://www.cdlsusa.org](https://www.cdlsusa.org)
- Global Foundation for Peroxisomal Disorders: [https://www.thegfpd.org](https://www.thegfpd.org)
- National Down Syndrome Society: [https://www.ndss.org](https://www.ndss.org)
These organizations provide platforms for connecting with other families, medical professionals, and experts in their respective areas of focus. If you are looking for an affinity group around a specific etiology or diagnosis, check out the National Organization for Rare Disorders (NORD) at https://rarediseases.org for possibilities or contact anyone at CDBS for help. And if you're curious about how the incidence in California of specific etiologies associated with deafblindness, check out the national child count information at: https://nationaldb.org/reports/national-child-count-2017.

In addition, CDBS maintains the California census of children and youth who are deafblind (from birth until age 22 or their exit from the educational system). One of the advantages of collecting this information is that we have the capability—when requested—to match consumers, family members, and educators with others who have or experience the same etiologies of deafblindness. For individuals with diagnosed etiologies, the power and benefits of meeting others with the same exact etiology cannot be overstated.

**Connections Based on Educational Programs and Service Delivery**

For both families and professionals, the National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB) maintains national initiatives that attract participants from throughout the U.S. interested in sharing information in the following areas:

- Early Identification
- Family Engagement
- Interveners and Qualified Personnel
- Assessment, Planning and Instruction
- National Child Count
- Transition

Information on each of these initiatives can be found at the NCDB website: https://nationaldb.org.

NCDB plans to launch a new and improved website very soon that will include updated ways to connect with others in the work of these national initiatives. Check out their website or follow them on social media to stay up-to-date on the progress of their new website.

**Connections Specifically for Consumers, Families, and Educators**

For consumers, a leading consumer group specific to deafblindness is DeafBlind Citizens in Action (DBCA), whose tag line is ‘Leveling the Playing Field for People who are Deafblind.’ DBCA provides a forum for deafblind adults to connect in solidarity around issues of advocacy and public policy. You can get more information about DBCA at their website: https://dbcitizens.org.
For family members, the major national family organization in the U.S. is the National Family Association for Deaf-Blind (NFADB), whose tag line is ‘Empowering Families of Individuals who are Deaf-Blind.’ CDBS Family Engagement Specialist Myrna Medina is an NFADB board member and can explain what membership in NFADB can mean to family members as well as professionals. For more information about NFADB, go to: [https://nfadb.org](https://nfadb.org).

For educators, consider connecting with the Council on Exceptional Children (CEC), Division on Visual Impairment and Deafblindness (DVIDB). DVIDB is one of many chapters that comprise national CEC and is a leader in research, teacher education, teacher retention activities, legislation, and public policy. Find out more about CEC and the DVIDB at: [https://community.cec.sped.org/dvi/home](https://community.cec.sped.org/dvi/home).

**In Closing**

You don’t need CDBS to be the gatekeeper to any of these national connections. However, we are happy to help you navigate your way to them or through them if that helps you know where to begin and how to get started. Contact anyone at CDBS to let us know what you are looking for and we’ll help you to make those first connections.
**CDBS Introduction**  
by Kayla Coburn, CDBS Educational Specialist

Hello to the very inspiring deafblind community! My name is Kayla Coburn and I am excited to be the newest member of the CDBS team. As someone who has been asking Julie Maier for the last five years how to get her job, I am very excited to finally be a part of the team and to work with the people who have always inspired me.

Special education has always been a huge piece of my heart. What I love most about special education is how the community is so connected. It all started for me after I volunteered with an organization called KEEN (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now). I would take public transit to the San Francisco Embarcadero every Sunday morning and play sports with children identified with a variety of disabilities. I then took on a job teaching gymnastics to children ages 2-12 and was the teacher who always welcomed children who learn differently into my class, which led to Sunday classes for students on the autism spectrum. Each step had me connected to more families and organizations, and also to students that I still talk to today.

Once my undergraduate studies came to an end, I decided to apply to the special education graduate program in moderate/severe disabilities (now called the Extensive Support Needs or ESN program) at San Francisco State University. Before graduate school started, a friend discovered that I know American Sign Language and quickly connected me to her sister who had a student who is deafblind in her classroom and needed a signing aide. I jumped at the opportunity and a couple of weeks later I was working with my first student who is deafblind. I loved everything about it: finding ways to communicate, working with all the therapists, and teaching his peers how to befriend, include, and understand my student.

As my first school year ended, graduate school began. I continued working with this student and quickly became obsessed with everything regarding special education. While in my graduate program, I applied and was accepted into SFSU/CDBS specialization program in deafblindness. Since the first class, I was hooked. The complexity of every student and finding successful accommodations and modifications blew my mind. Once I got my first teaching job, I continuously asked my administrators to give me students who are deafblind, but my small district had none. After four years as a special day class teacher at an elementary school in Daly City, I moved back to Orange County with my husband. I continued to ask Julie to give me her job, even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to fill her shoes. So, I got another teaching job in a special day class at a middle school in Orange County.

Halfway through the year I was informed about two open part-time positions, one for Helen Keller National Center and one for California Deafblind Services. I couldn’t believe it. After five years of waiting for a job to open in the deafblind field, suddenly there were two. I am so thankful that I am in both of these positions and have joined the deafblind community. I didn’t think it would be possible to get these dream positions while also being able to work along the side of my favorite mentors and professors. All of my connections in the special education community have gotten me here today. I witnessed how strong and connected the community is through every family, teacher, aide, therapist, and student I was ever lucky enough to cross paths with. One of my goals for CDBS is to keep us connected on more online platforms. To stay informed on what we are doing, connect with us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. I am so excited to be a part of such a great team and hope to connect with you all soon.

Kayla Coburn - Instagram @californiadeafblindservices
Creating connections requires opportunities, informed peers, and facilitation
by Julie Maier, CDBS Educational Specialist

One of my roles as an educational specialist involves observing students who are deafblind in a variety of settings and activities throughout their school day as they receive instruction and intervention from their interveners, teachers and other support providers. One area that consistently draws my attention is the types of interactions I notice between students and their classmates and other same-age peers. Does the student have the chance to interact with peers or do they primarily interact with adults? Which partner initiates the interaction? When peer-to-peer interactions occur, is the interaction reciprocal and balanced or does it look more like the peer is a ‘helper’ for the student? Which types of activities and settings promote positive interactions between the student and peers? Do the interactions extend into conversations and participation in shared activities?

I consider these questions because for most of us the social connections we formed in school were often the most rewarding part of our school experiences and certainly had significant impacts on our social and emotional development. I believe that every student is seeking social connections at school, even if it is with just a few friends, and that positive social connections and relationships with peers should be a priority goal in every student’s IEP. For students who are deafblind, especially if their communication skills are emerging or different from their peers, the educational team will need to identify and use specific structures to develop meaningful social connections and relationships.

In the past year I’ve been fortunate to witness several examples of meaningful, positive social connections—some just emerging and others more established. I’ve observed a middle school student participating primarily in mainstream classes receive academic and social support from a different trained peer mentor in each of his classes through the facilitation of his intervener and teachers. I watched a few general education kindergarten students join a young classmate with CHARGE syndrome underneath a play structure and attempt to use their own version of sign language to communicate with her in a beautiful example of naturally occurring play. Another student who communicates primarily through tactile objects and facial expressions is often surrounded by her classmates in her special education class, along with peers from general education classes during reading-buddies and recess. These peers have been taught how to gain her attention, ask questions and make comments, provide her time to respond, and use interactive materials to read or play together.

Each of these students is not merely present in their class or school community but has developed a presence there. This presence is essential to membership and social connection. People with a presence are known not just by name, but also for their interests, skills, and their unique support needs. People with a presence contribute something of value to the group or community. What can help more students who are deafblind build that presence in their class and school communities? Three essential components to consider are opportunities, informed peers, and facilitation.

Opportunities

All students—with and without disabilities—make connections through time spent together engaged in shared activities on a consistent basis. Building social connections starts with ensuring that the students we serve spend time in common places in the school, at the same time, and engaged in the same activities as their peers. Examples include: attending recess with same-age peers; eating lunch
in the cafeteria at the table with same age peers rather than the special education table; attending school assemblies; attending clubs at lunch and after school; and attending classes and specials (library, art, music, PE) with same-age general education peers. If these opportunities don’t yet exist, then developing plans to offer more of them is the first step to take.

Opportunities for participation in enjoyable, socially meaningful activities must also be considered, as simply being in the same space won’t guarantee connections. Connections between students and peers can be promoted through activities that include shared interests. This may be working on a science or art project together, a shared reading activity, attending the Robotics Club or Earth Team meetings, looking at photos in an album on a cell phone or tablet during lunch, or starting a Cooking Club or Sign Language Club at your school. How do you figure out the interests that might connect students? I’d suggest try chatting with the students about their interests and newest social trends, taking a look at the school clubs list, and asking other teachers and support staff and families for their ideas.

**Informed peers**

I find that other students are often very curious about their schoolmate who is deafblind and the fact that they communicate or behave in unique ways, complete different types of assignments, and use assistive technology. Sometimes this curiosity is not noticed in the glances or stares of other students or recognized as a positive trait when direct questions are asked about a student. These are the clues that let us know the peers are interested and curious, and this interest is exactly what is needed to build connections. I encourage teachers and interveners to invite and answer questions from peers. In other instances, I think that perhaps the reason some peers don’t approach or engage with a schoolmate who is deafblind is they simply don’t know how to initiate an interaction or interpret the student’s initiations or behaviors. Again, offering information can help peers feel more confident and comfortable in approaching, interacting and getting to know the student you are supporting.

It is essential that the adults supporting the student provide the peers with information that helps their peers understand the impact of vision and hearing loss on learning and connecting with others. The information should not be solely etiology-specific or heavily focus on the child’s differences or needs. Instead, teachers and interveners can help peers get to know the student through sharing information about their interests, skills, and an explanation of accommodations and assistive technology they use and their purpose. It also helps to share information about how the student sees and hears and ways
they compensate for diminished distance senses, the communication system they use, and ways to interpret and respond to the student’s initiations or behaviors. Finally, it’s necessary to share strategies that peers can use to invite the student to join them in an activity, make social comments, and provide the student with information or help or ask for information or help in return. Sharing ways that everyone can contribute and offer something of value to another person will go a long way in ensuring your supporting reciprocal social connections and not only creating peer ‘helpers.’

Facilitation

The third component promoting social connections is the facilitation of peer-to-peer interactions and support. This requires the adult providing the support to identify ways to decrease their direct intervention and instead provide modeling, coaching, and encouraging feedback as the peers take on some intervention responsibilities. We know the level of direct intervention support provided by a trained adult varies from student to student and at times is the most appropriate type of support required for that activity. However, to build that connection between the student and their peers, the students need opportunities to learn to communicate and interact as directly as possible. One suggestion I offer to teachers and interveners when suggesting this type of facilitation is to ask yourself this question, “Do I need to do this with the student or could a peer do it instead?” If the answer is a “A peer could do it,” then your role as the facilitator is to provide the peer(s) with support, prompts, and feedback to successfully partner with the student.

Peers benefit from modeling and coaching when learning some of the following: specific signs, how to use a tactile or photo communication system, or understanding a student’s speech or vocalizations; the particular order to do an activity or routine together with a student; the types of questions or prompts to offer the student while completing a class assignment or playing game; how to get a student’s attention and how long to wait for response; and what certain behaviors mean and the best way to respond. Wouldn’t you feel much more comfortable and at ease if you knew that the peer you were engaging with was aware of what you like and don’t like and what works and what doesn’t? Well, I’m certain both students who are deafblind and their classmates and peers feel the same way.

There’s so much more to share about building and supporting positive peer relationships between the students we serve and their peers. I hope to follow up on these thoughts about social connections in this edition of our e-zine reSources with fact sheets about specific structured peer supports in future editions. I’d love to hear about any of your success stories and ideas. Feel free to contact me at jmaier@sfsu.edu if you’d like to connect and share.