



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Deafblindness

As a classroom teacher, you may never have had a student with a low incidence disability in your classroom. For the first time, you may be faced with the challenge of ensuring that your new student with a combined vision and hearing loss is successfully engaged and making educational progress. Your collaboration and making educational progress. Your collaboration and ensures that the student's team is essential and ensures that the needs and goals of your student with deafblindness are met. To aid in this endeavor, this Teachers' Desk Reference aims to answer the following questions:

- What is deafblindness?
- What is the impact of deafblindness on learning?
- How are deafblindness, isolation, and behavior connected?
- What are best practices in programs for students with deafblindness?
- Who is on the educational team, what is their role, and what are their responsibilities?
- Is secondary transition planning important for students who are deafblind?
- Is assistive technology (AT) important for students who are deafblind?
- What should be considered for students who are deafblind and have complex needs?
- Why is family engagement important?
- What deafblind resources are available?

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What is Deafblindness?

The term "deafblindness" is a general umbrella term that includes a wide spectrum of visual and hearing functioning, ranging from blindness and deafness to moderate vision and hearing loss. As Barbara Miles states in DB-Link: Overview on Deaf-Blindness (2008):

"It may seem that deafblindness refers to a total inability to see or hear. However, in reality, deafblindness is a condition in which the combination of hearing and visual losses in children and youth cause 'such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness' [34 CFR 300.8(c)(2)] or multiple disabilities. Children who are called deafblind are singled out educationally because impairments of sight and hearing require thoughtful and unique educational approaches in order to ensure that children with this disability have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

A person who is deafblind has a unique experience of the world. For people who can see and hear, the world extends outward as far as his or her eyes and ears can reach. For the young child who is deafblind, the world is initially much narrower. If the child is profoundly deaf and totally

blind, his or her experience of the world extends only as far as the fingertips can reach. Such children are effectively alone if no one is touching them. Their concepts of the world depend upon what or whom they have had the opportunity to physically contact.

If a child who is deafblind has some usable vision and/or hearing, as many do, his or her world will be enlarged. Many children

called deafblind have enough vision to be able to move about in their environments, recognize familiar people, see sign language at close distances, and perhaps read large print. Others have sufficient hearing to recognize familiar sounds, understand some speech, or develop speech themselves. The range of sensory impairments included in the term 'deafblindness' is great."

Combinations of Vision and Hearing Loss

	Typical 20/20	Visual Acuity <20/200	Visual Acuity 20/200 to 20/400	Visual Field Loss >20 Degrees	Significant Visual Field Loss <20 Degrees	Visual Acuity 20/400 to 20/1000	Light Perception	Totally Blind
0-25 dB Normal								
26-40 dB Mild		Low Vision and Functional Hearing			Minimal Vision and Functional Hearing		Blind and Functional Hearing	
41-55 dB Moderate								
56-70 dB Moderately Severe		Low Vision and Hard-of-Hearing			Minimal Vision and Hard-of-Hearing		Blind and Hard-of- Hearing	
71-90 dB Severe		Low Vision and Very Limited Hearing			Minimal Vision and Very Limited Hearing		Blind and Very Limited Hearing	
91+ dB Profound		Low Vision and Deaf			Minimal Vision and Deaf		Blind and Deaf	
Created by Suzanne Morgan Morrow MA, CI, CT – NYDBC Collaborative – Adapted with permission.								

What Is the Impact of Deafblindness on Learning?

Students with combined vision and hearing loss need time and specifically designed opportunities to learn concepts and skills, as well as how to interact and communicate with others. In contrast, their typically sighted and

hearing peers have multiple opportunities to learn visually and auditorily. They have natural opportunities to develop their incidental learning by watching others, observing objects and actions, and listening to voices and other sounds. These interactions teach direct and indirect concepts, create opportunities for

interaction and communication with others, and provide knowledge and confidence to attempt tasks. Students who are deafblind, however, often do not have these learning opportunities. In fact, they often will not even be aware that the learning opportunity exists. “The more severe a child’s deafblindness, the narrower the world from which they can learn and the more important the sense of touch becomes” (Impact on Learning, NCDB, n.d., para .2). “When both vision and hearing are compromised, the multiplied effects create a barrier that blocks or distorts information” (Impact on Learning, NCDB, n.d., para.3).

“Typically, learning and development occur as children use their vision and hearing to interact with their surroundings. These distance senses increase engagement with a world that exists beyond the boundaries of their physical bodies. The world of a child with deafblindness is limited to what can be gathered from other senses, particularly touch, and any available vision or hearing. Without appropriate intervention, this limited access leads to isolation that affects a child’s development and learning” (Impact on Learning, NCDB, n.d., para. 1-2).

Without specially designed instruction to address areas that emerge naturally for their typically sighted and hearing peers, students with deafblindness will have missing, inconsistent, and/or fragmented information. This will, in turn, deeply impact their progression throughout school and life. They will have difficulties with communication, concept development, and with the ability to understand or participate in events. Therefore, it is important for educational teams to fully

assess the needs of students with deafblindness, address their educational and communication needs, and plan for their long-term success.

How Are Deafblindness, Isolation, and Behavior Connected?

The combined lack of vision and hearing for students with deafblindness creates a barrier to the world around them, which includes the ability to understand concepts, to know if people and objects are present, and to be aware of possible communication attempts. The more severe the visual and hearing impairment, the more distorted or blocked information becomes. This makes gathering important and necessary environmental information extremely difficult and often results in isolation for the student who is deafblind. It can also lead to behaviors that can be easily misinterpreted and seen as unacceptable, defiant, or related to other conditions. These behaviors are often caused by the lack of incidental information available to the student who is deafblind. He or she has only a few pieces of a very large puzzle of information and is constantly trying to fit them together to determine what is going on or what someone may want. This is why it is important to try to determine the real reason why a particular behavior is happening and to provide the student with ample time to piece things together and to then respond.

Children with deafblindness require teaching methods and educational settings that take into account all the ways that the combination of absent or limited vision and hearing impact learning (Characteristics of Good Programs, National Center on Deafblindness, n.d).



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What are Best Practices in Programs for Students With Deafblindness?

Students who are deafblind have unique needs that require specifically designed opportunities, accommodations, and instruction within the classroom. Educational personnel need to be aware of the impact of the student's visual and hearing loss on the student's ability to access all types of information, as well as accommodation strategies. Programs that exhibit best practices for students with deafblindness include:

- Opportunities to build safe, trusting, and respectful relationships with a multitude of individuals;
- An organized and clear classroom environment that provides a sense of structure, predictability, and assurance;
- An educational program that maximizes the use of remaining vision, hearing, and other senses;
- An educational team that is responsive to the needs and communication attempts of the student; and,
- A team that works collaboratively with the family and one another.

Building Safe, Trusting, and Respectful Relationships

In order for students who are deafblind to make progress in the classroom and on their individualized education program (IEP) goals, they need to first develop a safe, trusting, and respectful relationship with those with whom they work. This will take time and requires hard work but, once established, it will provide encouraging

results. The world is a scary place for everyone at times, even more so for students who are deafblind. Building these types of relationships will let students know they have a safe person they can communicate with and rely on when attempting new and unfamiliar things. This type of relationship usually starts with the student and one other person. Examples include an intervener, paraprofessional, or interpreter acting in the dual role as interpreter and intervener. It should be someone who enjoys being with the student and is sensitive to the student's needs.

For practical strategies on building trusting relationships, refer to [Building Trusting Relationships: NCDB Practice Guide](#).



Structured Support

Students who are deafblind need a sense of structure, predictability, and assurance, which can be provided through an organized and clear classroom environment and scheduled school day. Refer to *Fundamental Classroom Conditions to Enhance Learning Experiences for Students Who Are Deaf-Blind* for tips on providing a structured environment in the following areas:

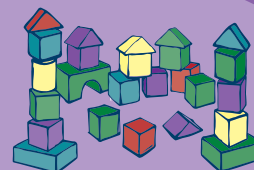
- Classroom organization
- Identification of people interacting with the student
- Materials organization
- Use of schedules
- Beginning, middle, and end of an activity
- Physical support

Examples of Strategies That Could Help Build a Trusting and Safe Relationship

**Adapted from California Deaf-Blind Services, reSources Summer 2009 (Vol. 14, No. 2)*

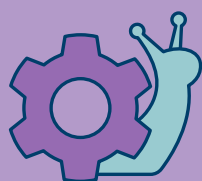


1. Take time to be with the student and get to know him/her.
2. Do activities together with the student that are enjoyable to him/her.



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).

4. Have a consistent way to approach the student so he/she knows what he can expect from you as you relate with him/her.



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.

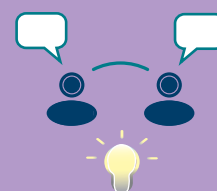


6. For the student with significant visual impairments or who is totally blind, maintain physical contact with him/her. For example, if you are sitting with him/her, you can place your leg or feet by his. You don't have to necessarily touch his hands all the time because this may interrupt what he is doing. Keeping some kind of physical contact is important so that the student knows you are with him/her.

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/her.

9. Find out what motivates the student and what he/she is interested in, and then build activities around these motivators and interests.



10. Identify strategies to use when guiding him so he/she can feel safe when he/she is traveling with you.

11. Learn how the student communicates and be responsive to communicative attempts.



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For more practical strategies on structured support, refer to California Deaf-Blind Services' resource (2009; Vol. 14, No.2) Fundamental Classroom Conditions to Enhance Learning Experiences for Students Who Are Deaf-Blind (pages 2-4).

Imagine that a friend was taking you out, but wouldn't tell you where you were going or what you were doing, and you had to be blindfolded and wear noise-canceling headphones the entire time. With your vision and hearing compromised, how would you be able to answer the following?

- As you are in an unfamiliar place and being moved from point A to point B to point C, etc., how would you know where you were in space in relation to other people around you, or where objects such as a dinner table, plate, or utensils were located?
- How would you know where it was safe to step and not twist your ankle or bump into something hard (ouch!)?
- How would you be able to tell how much time had gone by? Had the night just started, were you in the middle of the night, or was it about to end?
- What would you do if you needed to use the restroom? How would you find it?
- If someone touches your arm and starts talking to you, how would you know who they were? How would you respond? Would you be startled when they touched you?



What is the Importance of Collaborative Teaming?

Collaborative teaming is vital to the success of a student who is deafblind. Teams who incorporate the three “Cs” – Coordination, Cooperation, Collaboration – share the responsibility to work toward a common outcome of success for the student. Each team member brings his/her own expertise and experience to the group and, as a result, enriches one another’s instruction. This,

in turn, creates a multi-faceted approach to the students' educational programming. Collaborative teaming is successful when teams plan and implement together, share resources, communicate with one another frequently, have a shared unity of purpose in their instruction, use common language with the student, and have administrative support.

Examples for Team Collaboration*

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.
- In some cases, it might be necessary for team members to pre-teach certain 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.

**From California Deaf-Blind Services, reSources Summer 2009 (Vol. 14, No. 2). Used with permission.*

https://5871e0203a.clvaw-cdnwnd.com/5f010285cae218a5d7d72c47c1fa8f71/200000993-81d9d83519/Fund_Class.pdf

Who is on the Team, What is Their Role, and What are Their Responsibilities?

The actual team for a student who is deafblind consists of more than just the educational team. It also includes the medical team, as well as the home and community team. As you consider the NCDB graphic "Who's Who on the Team? Supporting a Child with Deaf-Blindness," consider the following questions:

- How many adults are in the student's life compared to his/her same-age peers?
- How many of the professionals collaborate together?

Graphic used with permission.

Kennedy, B., Veto, M., Fitzgerald, S., Kenrick, S., Edelman, S. & Mogan, M. (2015, September). *Collaborative teaming and family partnerships*. In National Center on Deafblindness, Open Hands, Open Access: Deaf-Blind Intervener Learning Modules. Monmouth, OR: National Center on Deafblindness, The Research Institute at Western Oregon University.

Who's Who on the Team? Supporting a Child with Deaf-Blindness



To learn about individual members of the educational team, and their roles and responsibilities, check out NCDB's *Educational Personnel*.



Is Secondary Transition Planning Important for Students who are Deafblind?

Transition planning is a process that all students go through. An effective transition plan assists students and their parents as they plan for life after high school. Transition planning is essential for students with combined vision and hearing loss (deafblindness). Students who are deafblind are one of the lowest-incidence, yet most diverse, populations receiving services mandated by IDEA. These students have unique educational and life challenges because of their dual sensory impairment. The student's interests, needs, and additional disabilities will help guide the transition process. Effective transition for students who are deafblind will involve extensive collaboration among schools, agencies, families, and the student.

Transition services and a written transition plan are required for students who receive special education services. By law, transition planning must start at age 14 in Pennsylvania; however, for students who are deafblind, it is recommended to begin transition planning when the student begins kindergarten!

Is Assistive Technology Important for Students Who Are Deafblind?

Assistive Technology (AT) is an equalizing tool for students with combined vision and hearing loss (deafblindness). The use of AT does not provide these students with an unfair advantage, but

provides equitable access like their sighted peers. The use of AT also increases a student's access and participation in the general education curriculum. It is important to note that AT does not have to be high tech; it is any adaptive device, tool, or technology that increases participation, achievement, and/or independence for the students who are deafblind. Students with combined vision and hearing loss will use technology in all aspects of their lives, just as their peers do. It is everywhere in our world today, from making everyday purchases (e.g., Apple Pay, Venmo, PayPal, credit cards), to planning a vacation (e.g., Travelocity, Airbnb, Uber). Technology is an embedded part of society and changes rapidly. Students with deafblindness need to know how to use everyday technology, as well as assistive technology, in order to successfully navigate the world around them. It is important to know that not one AT tool will meet the needs of a student with deafblindness, and that it will be necessary to learn multiple devices and technologies in combination. By teaching only one type of technology, you potentially could limit a student's career options. Also, some devices can fail in the moment, be discontinued, or have compatibility limitations that require other technology tools. Through a comprehensive assistive technology assessment, the educational team can determine which devices, tools, and technologies are needed. To ensure a good match, a trial period is recommended.

Examples of Assistive Technology

Low-Tech	Mid-Tech	High-Tech
Long white cane	Visual timer	Environmental control devices
Head Pointer	Spell checker	Smart devices
Slant board	Closed Captioning	Voice recognition
Post-It Notes	Switches	Scanning Access
Magnifiers	Adaptive scissors	Cochlear Implant Speech Processor and Hearing Aid Programming with Software
Pencil grip	Built-in Accessibility	Eye Gaze Systems
Highlighter	Reading Pen	Screen Reader and Screen Magnification Software
Manipulatives	Alternative keyboard	Speech-To-Text (STT)/Text-to-Speech (TTS)
Squishy ball	Remote microphone	Optical Character Recognition Scanning/ Software (OCR)
Printed core boards	Low-cost - Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices	High-cost - Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices

What Should Be Considered for Students Who Are Deafblind and Have Complex Needs?

Students with combined vision and hearing loss (deafblindness) may also have additional disabilities. These disabilities vary greatly in their range and severity. The presence of additional disabilities can significantly impact a student's ability to learn about their environments, communicate with others, and participate independently in the classroom. The best practice is to collaborate as a team to provide consistent instruction and intervention across all environments for students with combined vision and hearing loss who also have additional disabilities.

Why is Family Engagement Important?

Families are the one consistent presence in the life of a student who is deafblind. Teams can help families build their knowledge and skills, so that they can meaningfully engage in the process and best advocate for the needs of their child. The education team can partner with families to provide educational, medical, and transition service information, specifically how they work, what they provide, and how they can be obtained. By providing education, training, and partnering opportunities to families, teams can ensure that families will be able to effectively engage with service providers, agencies, and other families throughout their child's lifetime.

For practical strategies for working with students with complex needs, refer to *Optimizing Availability for Learning: NCDB Practice Guide*



For more information on family engagement, refer to *The Value of Family Engagement: Identifying Unique Needs and Priorities of Families with Children Who Are Deaf-Blind* from NCDB.



What Deafblind Resources are Available?

- **PaTTAN Deafblind Web pages** include sections on Interveners, Transition, Family Resource Group, Child Count, and School Team Supports.
- **The Pennsylvania Deaf-Blind Project**, through the PaTTAN system, offers the following services for professionals who work with children and students who are deafblind, as well as their families:
 - **Consultation** (also referred to as technical assistance or TA) via telephone, online, or face-to-face contact
 - **Trainings and in-services** (statewide, online, and at local request)

For more information, refer to *The Pennsylvania Deaf-Blind Project Brochure* and/or *The Pennsylvania Deaf-Blind Project One-Pager* (English/Spanish).

- **National Center on Deafblindness (NCDB)** is a national technical assistance center that works with state deafblind projects and other partners to improve educational results and quality of life for children who are deafblind and their families. Its site has a wealth of resources on deafblindness, and educational strategies. A few areas to check out include:
 - **Deafblind Overview**, which includes sections on What is Deafblindness, Profiles, Causes of Deafblindness, Vision and Hearing, and Education.
 - **Educational Practices**, which includes sections on Foundations of Learning, Assessment, Educational Services, Communication Basics, Communication and Concept Development, Promoting Learning, Recreation and Leisure, Life Skills, and Transition to Adulthood.

- **Practice Guides**, which include Building Trusting Relationships, Appropriate Assessment Strategies, Optimizing Availability for Learning, Preparing the Learning Environment, and Hand-Under-Hand Technique.
- **Professional Development Opportunities**, which provides information about opportunities in the United States for teachers and related service providers to learn about deafblindness and instructional practices for children and youth who are deafblind.
- **Family Engagement**, which includes sections on Meeting the Needs of Families, Family Engagement Coordinators, and national Family Organizations.
- **Interveners and Qualified Personnel**, which includes sections on the Open Hands, Open Access (OHOA): Deaf-Blind Intervener Learning Modules, Personnel Development, Teachers of Students who Are Deaf-Blind, and Interveners.
- **Transition**, which includes sections on Improving Transition Outcomes and Resources for Families and Services Providers.
- **For Families**, which includes sections on Services and Organizations, Learning Resources, Key Topics for Families, and Family Events.
- **Characteristics of Good Programs**, which provides a wide array of resources on topics such as classroom fundamentals, teaching strategies, home visits with families, observations, and the impact of deafblindness on learning.

- **Classroom Observation Instrument for Educational Environments Serving Students with Deaf-Blindness (COI)** – As NCDB’s website states, the COI is a “research-based tool designed to help guide and inform educators’ decisions about their students with severe and profound disabilities including deafblindness. The COI comprises three main sections: a teacher interview, a review of the student’s cumulative folder, and an observation rubric. A scoring guide is also provided to assess individual sections and the total instrument. Using this comprehensive tool can help teams more clearly identify a model classroom for deafblind students and streamline the overall classroom observation process.”

- **Helen Keller National Center for DeafBlind Youths & Adults (HKNC)** – As it states on its website, “HKNC is the only organization of its kind—providing training and resources exclusively to people age 16 and over who have combined vision and hearing loss.”

- **IEP Quality Indicators for Students With Deafblindness** – As stated in the document, “This document is designed to help educational teams develop appropriate IEPs for students with DeafBlindness. Indicators not present may indicate a training need for the team. The presence of these indicators demonstrates a well-designed IEP in areas related specifically to the impact of DeafBlindness.”



Post-Secondary Transition Resources

- **PaTTAN Deafblind Transition Planning** – Here you can find information related to secondary transition for students with deafblindness.
- **Transition: CDBS** has a variety of articles on topics related to secondary transition with a wealth of information.
- **National Center on Deafblindness Transition Planning** – The transition planning area of NCDB's website highlights important information and resources on this topic. A few areas to check out include:
 - **READY Tool:** Readiness Evaluation of Transition to Adulthood for Deaf-Blind Youth
 - **Recommendations** to Improve Transition Outcomes for Students with Deaf-Blindness and Additional Disabilities
- **PaTTAN Publication Secondary Transition Series** – This series focuses on important topics that students and families should address prior to graduation from high school.
 - **Entitlement vs. Eligibility** (IDEA, ADA, and Section 504) - This PaTTAN publication (part of a series) explains the difference between entitlement

services accessed while in school and eligibility services available outside the school system. It also provides a comparison and explanation of various legislation (e.g., IDEA, ADA, Section 504).

- **Post-Secondary Education Expectations** – This PaTTAN publication (part of a series) addresses questions families should be prepared to address in preparation of their child's graduation from high school.
- **Other titles in this series include** – *Customized Employment, Exploring the Options of a Two- or Four-Year College, Financial Fundamentals, Job Skills, Post-Secondary Education Expectations, Preparing for Employment, Promoting Independent Living While Still in School, The Importance of Employment - Why Work?, and Understanding Self-Advocacy.*

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Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro, Governor

