

GENERAL LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF CHILDREN WITH DEAFBLINDNESS

Children who have a hearing impairment learn mainly through their vision. Children who have a visual impairment learn mainly through their hearing. The child with deafblindness may not have enough hearing to learn the way the child with blindness learns AND may not have enough vision to learn the way the child with deafness learns. [J. M. Mcinnis] An educational program that takes into consideration the unique learning needs of each child will have to be designed specially for him/her.

The child with deafblindness may develop particular characteristics that affect learning.

Depending on the age of onset, Deafblindness can affect learning in the areas of cognition, communication, social interaction, motor skills, and motivation.

The child has difficulty with communication

The child may have distorted perceptions. It is difficult to see the whole picture or relate one element to the whole.

The child may have difficulty anticipating what is going to happen. Clues from the environment or from the faces/actions of others may be difficult to read.

The child may be somewhat unmotivated. Things may not be seen or heard enough to be desirable.

The child needs to learn mainly through first hand experiences. The lack of vision and hearing make it hard to learn through incidental or group learning experiences.

Service Providers need to consider these techniques when working with students with deafblindness.

1. Help the learner to communicate and to understand communications. This is the most important aspect of the program.
2. Make use of the residual hearing and the residual vision.
3. Give plenty of time for reactions and for decisions. It may take longer to relate what is seen with what is heard. It may take longer to relate the movements of an experience with the objects of that experience.
4. Build a strong relationship. Some of the student's motivation will come from pleasing the service provider. Also, it is necessary for the learner to have a very high level of trust in the person who is helping him/her participate in an activity.
- 5.. Develop positive self-esteem by giving the [earner many opportunities for choices. Praise the student at appropriate times.
6. React to the learner's actions. Communicate to the student about the actions as they happen. Ask questions and or narrate the actions. Keep a steady conversation going with the child even during a free play time.
7. Let the student know immediately if he/she is successful. It may be difficult for the learner to judge this because he/she may not see what was done as a whole or may have trouble comparing what was done to the model. Set up experiences so they are successful.
8. Plan experiences so that problem solving is required. These may be very simple problems such as clothing that is inside-out or a desired object that is difficult to reach. Use these opportunities to teach language and to teach problem solving.
9. Activities should be functional to the child. Skills can be learned through the natural routines of the day.

Using the "Whole-Whole"* Approach:

Activities and experiences should be planned to involve the learner in every step. The child needs to be helped to experience the total event from start to finish. For example, if giving the student a snack do not simply place the juice and treat on the table in front of the learner. Instead, have him/her help make the juice or help open the can, and help locate the glass. Then the learner can pour the juice. The student can help open the box of treats after locating it on the shelf. The child can remove the treats from the box and pass them to others. In the end the glasses will need to be washed and put away and the snacking areas straightened. Make this part of the experience. The learner with deafblindness needs to have help experiencing the whole activity from start to finish.

[*J. M. Mcinnis]

"Functional" Hearing and Vision Loss

Some learners are considered "functionally deafblind". That is, these children have no (or very little) medically observable impairment in the end organs (eyes and ears). The impairment is in the brain centers that receive and/or process the information received through the eyes and ears. Vision and hearing reports on these children may state "cortical loss" or "central auditory dysfunction" or simply, "CNT" (can not test). For these learners the educational needs of communication, functional activities, and tactual learning are the same as for children who experience deafblindness from other causes. However, a child with a cortical loss needs a very different approach to teaching. Studies have shown that these learners need to have sensory input minimized or presented one at a time. For example, do not require a visual response if you are also requiring an auditory response. Also, for these learners it is even more important to teach through the natural routines of the day.

Other learners who are considered "functionally deafblind" may not have learned to use the vision they have and/or the hearing they have. The education program for these learners may wish to emphasize vision skills and auditory skills. The child may then learn to function in a program for non-sensory impaired learners.

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