



# Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired Outreach Programs

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## Let Me Check My Calendar

by Robbie Blaha, Education Specialist

and Kate Moss, Family Training Specialist, TSBVI Deafblind Outreach

One of the typical modifications recommended for many children with deafblindness is the use of some type of calendar system. While these devices are very effective, often times parents and even the professionals can be unsure about how the calendars should be used and even why the calendars are needed.

### What is a calendar system?

The term "calendar system" typically brings a device: a dayrunner, a wall calendar, a van Dijk calendar box. A device or time piece is an important part of any calendar. Using a calendar program with a child also supports the development of communication, provides emotional support and power, as well as, teaches abstract time concepts and vocabulary.

### Why use a calendar system?

There are a number of reasons a calendar system is often recommended for a child with deafblindness. The calendar system provides emotional support to the child in the following ways:

- It provides the child the security of knowing what is going to happen next. Because of the sensory loss the child experiences, he/she may miss natural cues related to future events.
- It gives the child things to anticipate. Looking forward to a fun event can lift the child's spirits and help him stay connected with the world outside himself.
- It alerts the child that an unexpected change in routine is going to occur. Having the opportunity to prepare for a change often makes the change less stressful.
- It allows the child to participate in decisions about the days events. This gives the child a sense of control in his/her life.

Another very important reason a calendar is used is that it helps in the development of communication skills in the following ways:

- It allows the child to talk about things that have happened in the past or will happen in the future.
- Using the calendar format and symbol provides the child and you with a mutually understood topic for dialogues.

A calendar is also invaluable in developing time concepts because:

- It provides a clear way to represent the passage of time which helps teach the child beginning time concepts (past, present, future events).
- It aids in teaching more advanced time vocabulary such as "wait", "later", "afternoon", "morning," "day", "night", etc.
- It provides an individualized time piece for the child that is easy for him to understand.
- It prepares the child to learn more abstract and traditional time pieces (watches, datebooks, etc.).

## **Before you begin a calendar**

Before you begin a calendar system, a student's individualized communication program must be in place, that is, appropriate goals and objectives must be determined. If you aren't clear about what you want the child to do (i.e., request, reject, initiate a conversation, use object cues, etc.) you cannot develop a calendar dialogue, pick appropriate symbols, etc.

Activity routines must also be developed so that you have something to represent in the calendar. Don't start a calendar until these two things are in place.

When these two things are done, the time frame must be selected that is appropriate to represent to the child. Although there are five time frames typically used in calendar systems this article will look at only two of these which are called "anticipation calendars" and "daily calendars".

## **Anticipation Calendars**

### **The child who uses an anticipation calendar**

You would begin with an "anticipation" level calendar if a child is demonstrating only a very basic understanding of the activities which you want to represent in the anticipation calendar. The following are traits typical of a child at this level of calendar usage:

- The student recognizes some of the people, locations, sounds, smells, objects, and actions associated with a few of his activities. For example, in a familiar skating activity, she knows to raise her foot when presented with her roller-skate and will reach out her hand to grasp the walker when it is presented. This indicates that she has a memory of the object and what she does with it. She would not offer you her foot when you showed her the walker. An object must be recognized by the child in the routine before it can serve as a cue out of the routine.
- She may or may not anticipate the start of an activity based on signal level cues. As a rule, children who benefit from anticipation systems do not currently recognize an activity or routine until they are actively engaged in it.
- When participating in predictable routines, the child understands when the activity is finished.
- The child is at an early stage of "representation" and has no organized way to request preferred activities or to reject them.
- The child needs a great deal of support to attend to things outside of her body. The child will accept brief interactions with others.

## Designing the time piece

The child at the anticipatory level has a past that consists of the activity he has just completed. His future is the activity about to take place. You will need a container (the time piece) to represent both the future and past activity. It is important to make these two containers different from each other (i.e., a green bowl for the future, and a red plastic basket for the past).

## Selecting symbols for the anticipation calendar

It is important to select an object which the child has consistently responded to or correctly used in a favorite activity. The child must have had a meaningful experience with this object in the context of an activity before he can recognize it out of context (i.e., in the calendar system).

It is helpful to select an object for the calendar that is only used in that specific activity. For example, a child might use a small plastic cup in snack time, lunch time, while brushing his teeth, and during water play. Using this cup as a symbol for water play may be confusing to the child. Each activity must be represented by an object that is unique to that activity.

## Developing the calendar routine

Interacting with the child through his calendar becomes a routine in itself. These are some considerations for developing this "calendar routine":

- It is important to highlight the presentation of the object so that the child knows that something is about to happen. You don't want her to think this is just something you are giving her to play with for a while. Using a special shelf or box to hold the object symbols will alert the child.
- The adult guides the child to pick up the object initially, but fades this prompt over time. This allows the child to take the responsibility for part of the exchange between himself and the adult.
- Allow the child time to act on the object in whatever way he chooses. This will increase his knowledge of the object and help him relate the object in the calendar to the object when it appears in the activity. This also gives the child an opportunity to initiate an action rather than becoming dependent on prompts.
- It is important to build in sufficient wait time (at least 5 seconds) for the child to respond to the object. Not all children respond immediately when presented with an object. Take time to observe the child's responses to the object from day to day in order to determine if there is a change in his understanding of the function of the object as a symbol for the activity.
- Perform a familiar action with the object (e.g., pour with a pitcher, brush teeth with toothbrush, etc.). This may be done coactively if the child needs this support to tune into the object, or you may be able to demonstrate for the child with more vision. This technique will help the student recognize the object because for some kids the object is the action you perform with it. Make sure the action is something the child actually does in the routine.
- At first, the object is presented to the child very close to the beginning of the activity in time and space. Too much time or travel dilutes the critical association between the object and the event. For this reason you may want to make the object-symbol box portable. Once the child begins to respond to the object outside of the actual event, the time and distance between the object and the activity should be extended. This stretches the child's attending skills and gives him/her more of a "future" concept. This is a

prerequisite to moving to a more advanced calendar systems.

- After completing the activity, the child will drop the object symbol in the "finished" basket. Again he may need coactive support in this step, but fade this level of prompting as soon as possible.

Basically, the flow of the calendar routine is this: present the object to the child; perform an action with the object; proceed immediately to the activity; and when the activity is completed; let the child drop the object in the finished basket.

### **Expanding the anticipation calendar**

The time piece can be altered to depict an expanded future and accommodate a pair of objects by dividing it in half. Several symbols can be placed on a shelf. As a rule, the activity on the left is done first since left to right is a common format for calendars.

Increasing distance in time and space between the presentation of the object and the activity can stretch the student's attending abilities, expand his concept of "future", and make the object symbol more representational. For example if you are currently presenting the object in the future basket when he is one foot away from where the activity takes place, does he seem to understand it when you present it at a distance of 3-4 feet away from activity?

## **DAILY CALENDARS**

### **The child who uses a daily calendar**

Most of the time a child will start with an anticipation calendar and then move to the next level which is the daily calendar. However, some children may be able to go directly to a daily calendar system. Looking for evidence of the following traits in the child's interactions will help you make this decision.

- If the student has been on an anticipation system and has already been exposed to beginning time pieces (e.g finished basket), he demonstrates an understanding of these time pieces. For example, he orients to the future container and fusses when he sees the trampoline symbol because he does not really care for gym. When the teacher moves it to the "finished" container, the fussing stops.
- The student participates in the calendar routine by taking a turn (picking up the object from the future box and returning it to the finished box).
- The student attends to his environment and does not withdraw for approximately 3 minutes.
- The student remembers the activities and objects from familiar events in several daily routines. (e.g. searches around the table for food when the spoon is put in his hand).
- The student can tolerate time and distance between the presentation of the object and the actual activity and still understand the connection between the two. For example, the student can be shown an object and travel a short distance to the activity without completely withdrawing or losing the thread of what is about to occur.
- The student anticipates several steps within a few routines. (concept of future)
- The student anticipates an upcoming event from an object cue. (concept of future) The student understands when an activity has ended. (concept of past)
- The student is ready to extend the future beyond one or two symbols when he pairs a few events that routinely occur in sequence. For example, he heads toward the playground

when lunch is over.

## **Calendar design**

The calendar design has to teach the child that each section represents a piece of time. The divisions between sections must be very clear to the child visually and tactually. The design also has to represent time in a sequence. This activity happens first, this activity happens next, and so on. A variety of materials can be used to make these calendars: coffee cans, a slotted box, plastic baskets hooked together, etc. as long as they represent these two features. Just be sure that they are stable and don't move. The design needs to be sturdy and stable so that the child will not destroy it when he explores the calendar.

As a rule of thumb, the child should be able to easily feel the entire length of the calendar by placing her left hand on one end and her right hand on the other end. Calendars that are too long can be very confusing to the child. The individual sections of the calendar should also be a little larger than the child's hand.

The calendar needs a way to show "past." This can be done either with a "finished" basket or a cloth drape over a section. It can also be helpful to highlight the "present" activity by placing a piece of red tape in front of the current section, marking it tactually, etc. The "future" is represented by the slots to the right of the present activity marker.

As each routine is completed, the child will pull a drape over the section of the calendar containing the symbol for that activity or place it in a "finished" basket.

Remember that the calendar needs to be set up in a consistent place so the child can easily locate it. This device is a large part of his communication system and he needs to be able to get to it when he has something to say.

## **Selecting symbols for the daily calendar**

Kids who are using these calendars may be using objects, parts of objects, pictures, tactual symbols, print symbols, or some combination of these forms. These will be presented in conjunction with sign, speech, and/or touch cue depending on their individual communication IEP. For students using signs, and/or speech you will need to tie time vocabulary to the device. For example, when you pull the cloth flap over a completed activity symbol you could sign the word "finished". When you reference the present activity, you would use the vocabulary "now". Vocabulary for "future" activities would be "wait" or "later."

Once these signs or words are mastered, additional vocabulary can be introduced. It is important to think about the vocabulary you want to introduce and be consistent in using that chosen vocabulary. For students who sign I would use "past" and "future." For students who are verbal you may consider other standard time concepts such as "yesterday", "Wednesday", etc., but avoid clever terms like "hump day".

## **Calendar dialogue**

Remember, the calendar should improve interactions between you and the child, so don't do all the talking. Build in opportunities for the child to take a turn. Respond to the child's lead by observing what he seems to find interesting or motivating in the symbol. Make comments by acting out motions you make with the object, pointing out characteristics of the object such as texture or shape, or confirming what the child tells you about the object (e.g., "Yes, stir with the spoon.")

## **Designing the calendar routine**

*Basic Skills for Community Living* published by TSBVI offers the following regarding routines:

"The routine for the daily calendar should be done in the same consistent manner each time. An example of a routine might be:

1. Find the symbol
2. Dialogue about the activity Find the materials
3. Travel to the place Complete the activity Put materials away
4. Carry the symbol back to the calendar Discuss the activity that just took place
5. Return the calendar symbol to the calendar or finished box and designate as finished."

(Levack, et al, 1994)

### **Expanding the daily calendar**

When the student understands the calendar routine, you can begin to expand its use in dialoging with the student. What follows are some strategies you may want to try:

- Discuss a number of activities at one sitting. Talk about several activities in sequence and introduce the sign for "then" to connect them.
- Increase the number of slots that are included in the calendar. Remember, don't make it longer than the child's arm span.
- When setting up the calendar for an extended period of time, give the student choices between two activities and place his choice in a slot.

Calendar systems are incredibly beneficial to children with deafblindness or who are visually and multiply disabled. However to be effective, they must be matched to the student, designed appropriately, and used effectively. You may contact TSBVI Outreach if you need some help in setting up your calendar or using it correctly with your child or student. We can also be of assistance if your child is ready to use a more advanced calendar system.

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