

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.

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Building Peer Partnerships through Information Provision

Julie Maier, Educational Specialist

“Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.” ~Helen Keller

In the Fall 2019 issue of *reSources*, I shared ideas about building peer partnerships between children and youth with deafblindness and their same-age peers through participation in shared activities, providing information to peers, and facilitating and supporting peer-to-peer interactions. In this issue of *reSources* I'd like to share some *strategies and tips for providing information to peers* that can help to build a foundation for positive reciprocal relationships

Purpose or need for informing peers

Positive, reciprocal relationships are important to our emotional, mental, and physical well-being. However, developing this type of relationship between learners who are deafblind and typically developing peers can sometimes be difficult to achieve without initial intervention and some ongoing support. Reciprocal interactions occur when two or more people are able to communicate messages and share ideas and emotions easily with each other. If the partners don't communicate or express themselves in the same ways, it helps to provide information to bridge that barrier.

It's important to acknowledge that if a classmate, teammate, club member, or neighbor hasn't met a person who is deafblind, they may not be quick to approach or engage with their peer who is deafblind because they just don't know how to do it. They're simply unsure how to initiate or extend an interaction or interpret the individual's initiations or behaviors. Offering information to peers can help them feel more confident and comfortable in approaching, interacting and getting to know the learner you are supporting. As more and more children and youth spend time in integrated school and community settings, it's critical that information about the impact of their deafblindness and other sensory or learning issues is directly discussed in order build awareness, understanding, and empathy that can lead to positive peer relationships.

On occasion, a peer who lacks information about a student and their sensory differences and needs may respond in negative ways, such as teasing or bullying. While such behavior should never be condoned or excused, the reasons for the bullying or teasing should be carefully examined and information to address it should be provided to that person and other peers. Sometimes this peer will change or stop their behaviors once they know more about their peer with deafblindness and understand why they communicate, move, learn or behave differently. Another method to address negative interactions is to provide information to groups of peers who can serve as allies and will stand up and support their classmate with deafblindness by sharing information and showing others how to engage, interact, play, or work in partnership with a peer who communicates or behaves differently or uses special equipment or materials.

Information that can be helpful to share

In my opinion, information about learner’s strengths, interests, motivators, unique talents and skills, and supports they use is the most valuable information to emphasize. I call this type of information provision “ability awareness”, as it emphasizes the person’s abilities, rather than disability. I like to emphasize similarities between the individual and their peers rather than pointing out differences. I find that only sharing information about the etiology of their deafblindness or a syndrome is not necessarily as helpful as learning more about the individual student, especially because there is such a range of skills and needs across most etiologies and syndromes. Differences are not ignored, but they are explained in contexts peers can understand such as communicating using sign language or tactile objects, completing classwork using enlarged text or text-to-speech readers, or activating a switch to complete steps in an activity. It helps to focus on the unique ways a student communicates and participates and the assistive technology or equipment they use.

Because learners who are deafblind do require different adaptations and supports and use specialized equipment and assistive technology, it’s important to discuss why these modifications, supports and technology are needed as well as their purpose. It’s also very helpful to provide peers with information that aids their peers in understanding the impact of vision and hearing loss on learning and connecting with others. Adults should support peers to get to know the student by sharing information and pointing out similarities between their interests, skills, and learning goals. They should include information about if and how much the learner can see and hear, the ways they compensate for diminished distance senses, the modes the learner uses to communicate, and ways to interpret and respond to the individual’s initiations or behaviors.

Finally, consider discussing and teaching peers some strategies they can use to initiate and engage in positive interactions with the student such as inviting them to join activities, making social comments, offering information or assistance, and also asking for information or help in return. Focusing on building these type of positive interactions allows all learners to hold valued roles and ensures reciprocity in the social partnerships versus the more typical “tutor” or “helper” roles peers sometimes fill.

Ways to provide this information

This information can be provided informally or within a more planned and formal presentation. Informal methods include sharing information with peers during class activities or in social settings about how the student is participating, the ways their equipment or technology helps them, and tips for how the peer could reach out to interact or support the student, as well as answering questions from peers.

More formal methods include:

- A presentation or lesson to the student's whole class, team, or club or to small groups of peers who are interested in getting to know the student better.
- Social groups, such as a 'lunch bunch' or sign language club or group, are another great venue to continually provide information on a variety of topics related that particular student's participation and goals, and understanding deafblindness.
- Preparing and presenting a [Personal Passport](#) or [All About Me Book](#) that includes specific information about a learner and the adaptations, supports, technology and equipment they use is another good method for presenting information.
- Reading [children's literature that include portrayals of people with disabilities](#) or watching videos or short films that address topics related to a particular learner's sensory issues and learning needs or disability topics in general is a great way to impact their peers' knowledge and understanding.
- Carefully planned simulation activities that include facilitated discussion about the experience are helpful in some instances.

Using print and digital media to share information helps to engage many peers. Children's books that includes characters who are deafblind, visually impaired, Deaf or hard of hearing, or have other physical or intellectual disabilities can be very effective ways to provide information to peers. Some guidelines for selecting books include the following:

- Carefully review books for factual content and illustrations, and age-appropriateness.
- Choose books that provide strong, positive portrayals of individuals with disabilities and use people-first language.
- Consider books in which characters with disabilities might be faced with challenges not necessarily due to their disabilities, demonstrating their important character traits.
- Choose books that do NOT promote stereotypes or generalizations, engender pity, or portray hopelessness for individuals with disabilities. Instead, choose books that illustrate capacity, potential, and commonalities.
- Consider the author's experience or connection to disability in order to better understand the themes and values included in book.

You might also thoughtfully select and show a class or a small group video clips or short films that include examples of individual who are deafblind participating in school, community, and home to provide examples or to teach students about vision and hearing loss or specialized equipment and assistive technology.

Sometimes teachers or service providers provide information through simulation activities where peers engage in an activity that is meant to simulate a particular experience, such as wearing a blindfold and earplugs and trying to complete a common school routine or navigate from one room to another. These types of activities can be helpful in providing additional perspective and understanding, but must be planned and implemented with great care. Many individuals with disabilities do not agree that these activities are useful and fear they may promote stereotypes or generalizations or cause participants to feel pity or hopelessness for individuals with disabilities. The goal of this activity should be to provide information that teaches peers about another person's perspective, and techniques and tools they use to participate and contribute to their community.

My advice for the use of simulation activities includes the following:

- Determine your goal(s) for the activity. Why have you decided a simulation experience would be more effective or helpful than providing information through another format? What do you want peers to learn about how an individual with deafblindness or other disabilities experiences the world and participates in daily life?
- Prepare peers in advance by explaining the simulation is an opportunity for them to experience—for a short time—what it might be like to have a sensory loss or physical or intellectual disability. It is NOT, however, the same as living with that disability.
- Emphasize the function of supports, adaptations, assistive technology, and equipment used during the simulation activity (e.g., a white cane allows a person with low vision to travel safely and independently; visual or tactile sign language provides more information to someone who cannot hear well; modifying rules allows a person using a wheelchair to participate in a recess game; having time to rock in a chair before story time on the rug helps some students to relax and focus).
- Include plenty of facilitated discussion time that allows peers to share thoughts about what they thought and felt during the experience so that you can ensure the activity didn't engender feelings of pity or relief. The goal of this experience is to increase understanding and empathy. This is also a time to listen to peers' questions and encourage them to seek out more information about disability, and supports and equipment used by people with disabilities.

Who can provide this information?

This information can be provided by anyone who knows the student well—a teacher, an intervener or instructional aide, a related service provider, parent, sibling or friend. As a student gets older, they can assist in providing information, especially in terms of sharing their interests and goals and different accommodations or assistive technology that are helpful for them.

How will you know if your efforts are effective/working?

The goal of providing information is to see changes in peers' attitudes, behaviors and interactions with their peer with deafblindness or other disabilities. Ideally, you'll know by observing changes in the behavior and interactions of the individual and their peers across settings. You may notice more reciprocal, positive interactions and see the students spending more time together. Another indicator would be peers seeking out information or offering their ideas and suggestions for enhancing the student's participation in the class or activities. Your conversations with other teachers, support staff, and family members about observable changes they have seen in their classes and at home will also demonstrate effectiveness of providing this type of ability awareness information. Finally, observing changes in a student's advocacy and awareness of their skills, goals and support needs would also indicate the student and peers have increased awareness and knowledge of deafblindness and other disabilities.

If you have questions, ideas or resources related to this topic, I'd love to brainstorm more with you. Please reach out and contact me at jmaier@sfsu.edu.

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