Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

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Ten Issues to Always Consider When Intervening for Students with Deafblindness

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Abstract: This article provides a framework for analyzing ten common issues a teacher, intervener, or caregiver must address when effectively supporting a student who is deafblind. Questions are provided to help guide a team in planning the best sensory access for the student in all environments.

Key Words: deafblind, access, vision, hearing, tactile

A primary role for those intervening with a student who is deafblind is to make accommodations to provide the best possible access to information, spaces, and materials. These accommodations should be planned in advance for the best visual, auditory, and tactile access. This planning is most effectively done as a group including teachers, interveners, related service professionals, the student, family, and other caregivers.

During advanced planning, write strategies that will help the student be more successful when each of the following basic issues are considered, taking into account vision, hearing, and touch:

- physical space – qualities of the room and activity area;

- positioning – where the student, instructor, and materials should be;

- materials – how teaching materials look, sound and feel;

- devices and equipment – adaptive aids used for sensory impairments;

- orientation & mobility – knowing where you are, and getting around;

- communication – getting information from, and giving information to others;

- trust and security – feeling supported, connected, and safe;

- literacy – recording information for future reference, and retrieving recorded information;

- pacing – how quickly the lesson should move forward; and

- content of the activity or coursework – adding to, reducing, or changing what is taught.

It might be easiest to divide a planning sheet into three columns for vision, hearing, and touch, so each is considered for each issue. The strategies developed should help the student access

as much information as possible, as easily as possible. This will help the student use his or her energy for learning, rather than trying to figure out what is happening, or what is expected.

Despite the best planning, however, the student and staff will encounter some settings and situations that are new or unexpected, before there is a chance for advance planning. For this reason, those intervening for a student with deafblindness should always have these ten issues in mind in every situation. At the point when making accommodations for these ten issues becomes second nature for the person doing the intervention, the student has the best opportunity to have the fullest access to instruction.

For each of the ten issues, the following are examples of questions that the planning team should consider, and that the person doing the intervention should always keep in mind. Please remember that these are examples, and there are many other things to consider, based on the individual student's settings, situations, abilities, and challenges.

Physical Space – Qualities of the Room and Activity Area

Primary question. How should the room and activity area look, sound, and be arranged so the student can move freely, easily gather materials, easily access information, and not be distracted by visual, auditory, and tactual clutter?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Is the lighting bright enough, or is there too much glare?
- Does the room decoration create a good visual background?
- How are the acoustics in the room?
- Is there a lot of distracting background noise?
- What kind of furniture is best to help the student be in the best position, and have clear convenient access to learning materials, communication partners, and activity areas?
- Is the workspace clear enough to easily explore tactually, or visually scan?

Positioning – Where the Student, Instructor, and Materials Should Be

Primary question. What positions for the student, instructor, and materials would maximize the student's access to and understanding of information?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Where should the student sit or stand to see and hear most easily?
- Are there specific parts of the room to be avoided because of shadows, glare, or background noise?
- Does the time of day affect what position is best in this setting?
- Does the student need permission to move when necessary to improve his or her ability to see or hear, or to tactually explore what the other students are exploring visually?
- Are materials placed so the student can easily observe or get to them?

Materials – How Teaching Materials Look, Sound, and Feel

Primary question. Are all teaching materials easy for the student to recognize and use? Consider color, contrast, sound quality, texture, etc. These materials could include anything from a toothbrush to a washer, or a picture symbol to a computer.

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Do learning materials have good color and light/dark contrast when compared to the background, and between the different parts of the materials?

- Are the materials large enough to easily see?

- Do materials have distinctive sound qualities, that make them easy to recognize, or interesting to explore?

- Are tactual elements, such as raised lines and textures, added to reinforce visual materials?

- Whatever possible, are tactile models and symbols made from real objects that are tactually distinctive, rather than plastic replicas?

Devices and Equipment – Adaptive Aids Used for Sensory Impairments

Primary question. During the activity, how should the student use any adaptive devices or equipment such as magnifiers, assistive listening devices, electronic Braille notetakers, or switch activated appliances?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- In what situations would magnification be helpful, and which devices would be most effective, efficient, and easy to use?

- Do the student and others in the environment know how to use any amplification, or other sensory devices?

- Are computers, telecommunications equipment, or other tech tools equipped with accessibility features?

- Does the student need help setting up and using devices quickly enough to keep up without missing instruction or other essential information?

Orientation and Mobility – Knowing Where You Are and Getting Around

Primary question. What would help the student know where he or she is, be able to find people and things, and go to familiar and unfamiliar destinations?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Are rooms and hallways free of clutter to promote ease of movement?

- Are materials stored in consistent locations that are easy to access?

- Are landmarks for orientation identified or created?

- Has the student learned clear consistent routes to independently move through familiar settings?

Communication – Getting Information from and Giving Information to Others

Primary question. What strategies would help the student express him or herself to staff or classmates, and what strategies would help staff or classmates be more clearly understood by the student?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Does the person intervening need to learn new vocabulary or create new communication symbols in order to be prepared for a new lesson or activity?

- Which communication partners in any setting can communicate directly with the student, and in which cases is there a need for someone to interpret or facilitate interactions?

- In any situation, does the student have an effective way to communicate both expressively and receptively, and all the materials and equipment necessary to do so?

- Are symbols, devices, and other materials available if necessary for the student to communicate about unexpected concerns or topics?

- Does the student need to switch to different communication strategies based on the situation, such as during group discussions, when the room becomes noisy, or when the lights are dimmed?

Trust and Security – Feeling Supported, Connected, and Safe

Primary question. What would reduce anxiety for the student, so he or she can feel secure and focus on learning?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- During the activity, how does the student remain connected to someone he or she knows, and with whom he or she has a trusting relationship?

- How does the student know what is about to happen, and what other people's expectations for the student are?

- Does the student know who else is involved in the activity, and what they are doing?

- Does anything in the situation or activity create confusion or uncertainty for the student, and what can be done to reduce it?

- Does the student need instruction in how to advocate for appropriate modifications, such as asking a teacher or classmate to repeat something, slow down, or change position?

Literacy – Recording Information for Future Reference and Retrieving Recorded Information

Primary question. What would help the student be able to read or otherwise retrieve recorded information, such as tape recordings, pictures, tactile symbols, object symbols, etc.?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- What medium would be most effective in this setting: print, Braille, voice output, pictures, tactile graphics, tactile symbols, object symbols, etc.?
- Is all print easy to read, considering size, color, and type style?
- If the student uses voice output, is there a good listening environment?
- Would the student benefit from headphones or an alternative listening device?
- If the student reads Braille, are Braille materials available in advance?
- When pictures cannot be visually accessed, are tactile graphics or tactile symbols available?

Pacing – How Quickly Should the Lesson Move Forward

Primary question. How do the student's needs related to vision, hearing, and touch affect the pace at which information is given to the student, how long the student needs to explore materials, and how much time he or she needs to respond?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Before beginning a lesson or activity, is time set aside to allow the student to explore the area, become acquainted with materials, get into proper position, prepare and test equipment, or otherwise assure accessibility?
- Does the student need extra time to orient to a communication partners, especially in a group?
- Is the student given extra time when needed to pause for gathering and/or processing information?
- Are breaks needed to prevent fatigue for the student, or for the person providing intervention?

Content of the Activity or Coursework – Adding to, Reducing, or Changing What Is Taught

Primary question. How should the content of the lesson be modified to account for the student's needs related to vision, hearing, and touch? For example, do demands need to be reduced? In addition to the regular content of the lesson, do other skills (e.g. visual scanning) or information (e.g. background concepts) need to be added?

Examples of other questions to consider:

- Because of the student's pace, does the amount of work need to be reduced?
- If some of the lesson must be omitted due to time, which elements take priority, and which can be removed?
- Are there concepts in the lesson or activity that are unfamiliar to the student, so that additional explanation or background information must be provided?

- Does the student need pre-teaching before a lesson, or does extra instructional time need to be set aside later to fill in gaps in the students understanding, or to reinforce concepts?

- Do the goals of the activity or instructional methods need to be modified to take into account the student's sensory needs and capabilities?

- Are activity routines and materials used consistently, so the student can more easily recognize them?

- In addition to subject area content, does the lesson need to include instruction on sensory issues, like how to effectively use vision, hearing, or touch to actively participate in the activity?

By answering such questions in each area, accounting for vision, hearing, and touch, educational teams will provide better intervention for students with deafblindness. Students will have better access to information about the environment, what is happening to around them, and what others are communicating. They will be able to concentrate on learning, rather than struggling to gather information. Access to information and environments is a right.

It is important to keep in mind, the purpose for these accommodations is not to provide a crutch, or make to students dependent on the people providing the intervention. When done well, this intervention will increase students' independence by providing better access. For that reason, staff people doing the intervention should always be trying to help others in the environment, and the students themselves, be aware of these issues so better access can occur more naturally, even without assistance. This access makes things easier and fairer for everyone involved.