



# Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

## Outreach Programs

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### **Intervener Basics: Myth, Legend, and Reality**

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*Originally published Fall 2000, Texas Sense Abilities*

**Abstract:** There are some misconceptions associated with using interveners to provide support to students with deafblindness in educational settings. The author attempts to clarify intervener myths with the realities of the intervener model.

**Key Words:** Effective Practices, deafblind, intervener, misconceptions, access

Over the last decade, trained interveners have become a more familiar model used in schools and communities across the U.S. to provide individual support to people with deafblindness. Though many people are now familiar with the word or job title, the practices surrounding use of an intervener in school settings may continue to be misunderstood. Some misunderstandings are understandable, as the use of the intervener model has some complexities, and there are many gray areas in the practice based on meeting the individual needs of students who are deafblind and the circumstances of the settings where they learn. Additionally, through the years efforts to simplify complex issues have resulted in a perception of "rules" about the use of interveners that don't fully capture the depth of the issues involved.

For the purpose of this paper, let's call these misunderstandings and over-simplifications "intervener myths." By myths I mean to say, there are things I have heard people express about what interveners can or should do that do not tell the whole story, or fail to account for individual differences. Clarifying some of these issues might dispel some of these myths.

### **What is an Intervener, and how are they used in schools?**

Before getting to the myths, it might be best to start with the current ideas agreement what an intervener is. There is an initiative spearheaded by the [National Center on Deafblindness \(NCDB\)](http://www.ncdb.org) to gather feedback and arrive at a shared understanding of intervener issues.

A definition of intervener developed through this initiative states:

*Interveners, through the provision of intervener services, provide access to information and communication and facilitate the development of social and emotional well-being for children who are deaf-blind. In educational environments, intervener services are provided by an individual, typically a paraeducator, who has received specialized training in deaf-blindness and the process of intervention. An intervener provides consistent one*

*–to-one support to a student who is deaf-blind (age 3 through 21) throughout the instructional day.*

...an intervener's primary roles are to (Alsop, Blaha, & Kloos, 2000, <https://nationaldb.org/library/page/2266>):

- provide consistent access to instruction and environmental information that is usually gained by typical students through vision and hearing, but that is unavailable or incomplete to an individual who is deaf-blind;
- provide access to and/or assist in the development and use of receptive and expressive communication skills;
- facilitate the development and maintenance of trusting, interactive relationships that promote social and emotional well-being; and,
- provide support to help a student form relationships with others and increase social connections and participation in activities.

A definition like this goes a long way toward providing guidance to educational teams and community service providers utilizing the intervener model of support for people with deafblindness. However, some misconceptions or "myths" remain to be discussed.

## **Intervener Myths Dispelled**

### **Extra Set of Hands**

**Myth # 1:** An intervener is a 1-on-1 support to provide more help for the person, or an "extra set of hands".

**Reality:** An intervener is a related service that provides a person with deafblindness with access to information, interaction, and instruction he or she would otherwise miss due to sensory issues.

Any student in any school could benefit in various ways from a personal assistant. An intervener is more than a personal assistant. The intervener is essential for many students with deafblindness to gain basic access to and benefit from instruction and interaction. Explaining the need for a trained intervener should focus clearly on issues related to deafblindness: access to information, communication support, and promotion of trusting relationships.

The discussion questions found at the end of this article can illustrate these issues.

### **Everyone Needs an Intervener**

**Myth # 2:** Every student who is deafblind needs an intervener throughout the school day.

**Reality:** Every student who is deafblind must have consistent access to information, environments, communication, and instruction, in all instructional environments throughout the school day.

An intervener is one way to achieve this, but not always the only way to achieve this goal. There are several potential ways to insure access for a student with deafblindness:

- Environmental adaptations such as preferential seating, enhanced lighting, or noise control.

- Adaptive technologies.
- Low staff: student ratios to ensure individual attention.
- Communication rich environment.
- Assign an intervener with deafblindness-related training.
- Combination or all of the above.

The intervener is not intended to replace the other ways a student may gain access. The intervener model is needed when other solutions fail to ensure access to information, result in communication breakdowns, or create stress associated with lack of emotional support. The circumstances surrounding certain activities or settings during the day may make other solutions sufficient for full access in some situations, and an intervener necessary in others.

### Only Work with the Student Who Is Deafblind

**Myth # 3:** Interveners shouldn't work with other students, and shouldn't have to do work not directly related to their student who is deafblind, such as playground or cafeteria monitoring, because that is not their job.

**Reality:** Access for the student who is deafblind is the intervener's number one priority. The intervener should not be asked to do something else if it interferes with this priority.

To effectively support a student with deafblindness, these intervener responsibilities should take priority over other duties:

- providing access to the student who is deafblind by supplying information, supporting communication, and promoting emotional wellbeing;
- meeting with team members to discuss issues and strategies related to the student;
- meeting with teachers to become familiar with upcoming lessons in order to plan needed adaptations or modifications;
- making or adapting learning materials for the student to use during lessons.

However, if the student is absent, receiving intervention from another person who is providing information and communication access, or engaged in independent work, the intervener may be available help in other areas.

### One Intervener Per Child

**Myth # 4:** No more than one person can provide intervention over the course of a day.

**Reality:** Many students who are deafblind have trouble recognizing, trusting, and/or bonding with others, and have a need for great consistency in order to understand what is happening. For students that have these concerns, it is important that the intervener is someone they know and trust.

When trust, bonding, and relationship building skills are issues for the student, fewer people serving as intervener is helpful or necessary. But these issues need to be weighed against practical staffing issues, especially when the student has good relationship-building skills.

These issues should be discussed when considering intervener staff assignments.

Reasons it is beneficial to have only one intervener:

- People with deafblindness have trouble trusting and bonding with people they do not recognize or know, leading to stress or anxiety.
- The person who is deafblind may not yet have developed the social ability to deal with multiple people.
- People who are deafblind depend on consistency and routine to help them recognize what is happening and know what to expect.
- People who are deafblind often have unique communication systems and preferences that need to be used consistently.
- Expressive communication for people with deafblindness who are emerging communicators may be subtle and difficult to recognize or understand for people who don't know them very well. This leads to frustration and missed opportunities to interact.

Reasons more than one intervener might be helpful or necessary:

- If the person or situation requires long periods of continuous sign language, especially tactile sign, fatigue creates a problem.
- If only one person acts as intervener, there may be problems if the intervener is ill or absent.
- If the person can do well with an additional intervener, it may prevent any problems associated with emotional attachment.

### **Personal Care or Work in the Home**

**Myth # 5:** Interveners don't do personal care activities or work in the home of the person who is deafblind.

**Reality:** The role of the intervener is to support the person who is deafblind with access to information, communication, and emotional support. Interveners also teach skills to help increase the person's independence. These supports may be needed and provided in any location or during any life activity that happens to arise. Interveners do with, not for, the person with deafblindness.

### **Work Only with Children**

**Myth # 6:** Interveners work with children, particularly at school. Adults with deafblindness don't need interveners, and are supported when needed by Support Service Providers (SSPs).

**Reality:** SSPs are supports used by adults with deafblindness who have strong skills related to independence and self-direction. Interveners serve a different role than SSPs. The service needed is less related to age and setting as it is to the individual needs, abilities, and independence of the person being supported.

Some differences in the roles of SSPs and interveners are:

SSPs	Interveners
SSPs work at the direction of the person who is deafblind.	If the person who is deafblind has difficulty organizing, planning, and initiating due to age, maturity, lack of experience, or additional disabilities, the intervener may help provide direction and encouragement so the person has opportunities for meaningful activities based on personal preferences.
SSPs provide the information needed so the person who is deafblind can make decisions.	If the person who is deafblind has difficulty making or communicating decisions due to age, maturity, lack of experience, or additional disabilities, the intervener may help the person make good decisions based on the situation and the person's individual preferences.
SSPs supply information and facilitate communication so the person who is deafblind can use his or her skills effectively.	Interveners help a person who is deafblind use their skills by supplying information and facilitating communication, but also teach the person new skills and knowledge, and new ways to use their skills and knowledge.

## Conclusion

As interveners are utilized more regularly in school and community settings, questions about the practice will continue to be asked, and understanding about the role will be refined. Individual solutions to providing the most appropriate support for people with deafblindness will be discovered. Though these solutions may vary, principles of access, communication, and support should guide the process rather than preconceived notions found in "intervener myths."

## Discussion Questions

Discussion of these questions about the student's needs associated with access to information, communication, and emotional support may help clarify the kind of adaptation and intervention needed for students in a school environment. (Adapted from an unpublished draft of "**Determining the Need for an Intervener in Educational Settings**," by the Texas Deafblind Project.)

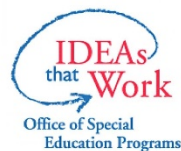
1. Does the student need assistance to effectively detect, gather, and/or prioritize information from communication partners and the surrounding environment?
2. Does the student rely on the sense of touch or near vision to gain information, so that he or she is unable to reliably get information that other students get from a distance?
3. In a group instructional setting, is it difficult for the student to gather information or follow a discussion?

4. Does the student use equipment or adaptive aids, but not efficiently or effectively enough to keep up with the pace of the instruction being given?
5. Is the student unable to orient him/herself to the environment or move to different learning environments without assistance?
6. Does the student rely on communication methods not generally used or understood by many of his or her communication partners (teachers, staff, or peers)? Consider all the various environments the student accesses throughout the entire school day.
7. Does the student often need individual intervention by a trained or knowledgeable support person in order to communicate effectively receptively and/or expressively?
8. Does the student need a high degree of consistency in strategies and communication systems, so that working with numerous people during the day causes him/her confusion and frustration?
9. Due to sensory isolation, does the student have difficulties in trusting, bonding, or relating and responding to a variety of people?
10. Because of sensory impairments, is the student unfamiliar with certain common information, so that in order to fully understand concepts or common references used in instruction or conversation, the student frequently needs more explanation than that given to other students?
11. Is the student unable to access the same information as classmates who are not deafblind?

Discussing these questions about the educational team can help identify the barriers to meeting the student's needs associated with access to information, communication, and emotional support.

1. Does the student's need for effective deafblind-specific intervention strategies and communication methods require additional education and training for staff members? If numerous staff will need training, would it be more efficient to concentrate training on fewer specialized individuals?
2. Does the specialized educational programming recommended through assessment and the IEP create a need for an additional trained support person? Before answering this question, examples to consider include, but are not limited to:
  - due to other demands in the classroom, does the instructor find it difficult to remain in close enough proximity so the student can maintain visual, auditory, and or tactile access to instruction;
  - due to the needs of other students, does the instructor find it challenging to adjust the pace of instruction so the deafblind student has enough time to get understandable information through either modified communication or tactile/close-vision exploration;
  - do any instructors have difficulty or unfamiliarity with the student's preferred communication modes (e.g. tactile symbols, sign language, tactile sign);

- does existing staff find it challenging to schedule time for deafblind-specific material adaptation and equipment maintenance (e.g., communication aids, vision devices, hearing devices, etc.).
3. Is it challenging to limit the number of individuals working with the student so that he or she can form trusting relationships?
  4. Is it challenging for the team to be consistent due to the large number of individuals working with the student?
  5. Is it challenging for the team to provide necessary background and fill-in information to help the student fully understand instruction and conversation across all settings?



This project is supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Special Education Program (OSEP). Opinions expressed here are the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the Department of Education.