



## ***New York State Technical Assistance Project***

### ***Serving Children and Youth Who Are Deafblind***

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## **Fact Sheet 20**

### **Orientation and Mobility for Children Who are Deafblind**

#### **How Movement Effects A Child's Development**

Children learn through action, learning is not passive; we do not ask children to learn by absorption we engage them in an activity. This engagement frequently involves movement in and exploration of a child's surroundings. Through this movement children develop their motor skills, an understanding of the physical world, and gain a basis for language and social rules through interaction with a variety of children and adults.

Children who are deafblind face a large challenge in learning how to move through their environment because their lack of sensory input removes the stimulus or reason to do so. Their lack of movement hinders this natural learning process and in fact isolates them more than non-movement would a hearing and sighted child as they still have their distance senses to perceive the world. Learning about the world when you are deafblind requires direct contact with it, if not to perceive it as in the case of a child who has no or little vision, then for a child who is visually impaired to confirm their visual experiences. Movement is also critical to the development of social relationships in childhood. Many of a child's social learning experiences happen when playing with other children. Games such as tag and hide and seek teach children many of the rules of social interaction. For many of us, these early learning experiences may seem trivial but how many of us count a friend from early childhood as one of our closest adult friends? This lack of movement also effects how a deafblind child perceives and organizes the world thus hindering basic conceptual development.

#### **O+M Benefits and Outcomes for Children Who Are Deafblind**

Orientation and Mobility (O+M) instruction supplies many of the experiences that hearing and sighted children get naturally to the child who is deafblind. The O+M instructor, in a systematic and purposeful way, teaches the child about their environment and how to move through it. The significant amount of learning that the hearing and sighted child does incidentally that the deafblind child misses can be supplied through O+M. This instruction covers many developmental domains for the child who is deafblind and teaches not only specific travel skills but aids in their overall cognitive and sensory development. O+M can improve gait through improving balance and muscle tone resulting in a more typical and functional gait pattern thus aiding in a child's functional movement. O+M also gives children increased sensory input through different experiences in their environment. The simple act of learning how to trail brings a child into physical contact with many different tactile experiences, thus increasing the amount of sensory input they receive. This increased sensory input also teaches the child how to use their residual senses in a functional and meaningful manner.

Physical contact with the environment also creates opportunities for conceptual development. Children who are deafblind learn through doing and this contact allows them to learn concepts that are related to their immediate environment, making them concrete and functional in nature. O+M creates opportunities of repetitions (i.e. the child experiences the same environment repeatedly) that are needed for the deafblind child to learn a concept. Typical areas of concept development are body image, spatial concepts, environmental concepts, and social concepts to name a few. O+M instruction increases a child's opportunities for choice and control by giving them chances to show their preferences through movement.

O+M instruction provides an enriched context for the development of communication skills as it provides the child with an enriched communication context. This includes more topics to communicate about, more reasons to communicate, and a larger range of choices to make. Students who are deafblind can show increased communication skills in a variety of environments in which they receive O+M instruction.

## Strategies for O+M

- **Purposeful Movement:** Movement should be functional for children who are deafblind. Specific routes with meaningful destinations that are a part of their daily routine should be at the center of their O+M program. Always keep in mind that some children have difficulty generalizing a skill across time and environment so skills should be taught in the environment and at the time in which they actually occur.
- **Include children in play:** Facilitate play between the child who is deafblind and other children. This could be a physical activity such as going down a slide together or a functional task such as holding hands while traveling to a different location in the school.
- **Communication Systems:** O+M is the perfect opportunity for building communication skills because it gives the child concrete experiences in their natural environment that communication and language can be paired with thus teaching the child that they can use the chosen system to effect change in their environment. Comprehension of language is contingent on experience and O+M supplies that experience. Communication for O+M can use what ever mode whether symbolic or presymbolic from tangible systems such as object cues and calendars, to signed or spoken language.
- **Environmental Organization:** Children who are deafblind learn to orient themselves better in a well organized and predictable environment. Organization and layout of physical space should be relatively constant. It helps if classrooms are organized with areas serving specific functions such as a reading area, a play area, Art area, group area, etc. This helps the child build the idea that locations have meaning. Another strategy to support this concept is to mark a child's cubby, chair, and any other location with a tactile cue.
- **A Team Approach:** A transdisciplinary model with role release, where the O+M instructor trains other staff to reinforce specific skills is critical for a child's success. If O+M skill instruction only occurs when the O+M instructor is present the child will not be successful in becoming independent in moving about their environment in a purposeful manner.
- **Landmarks and Environmental Cues:** Children orient themselves according to environmental features they encounter in their environment. When teaching a child who is deafblind specific routes natural landmarks and cues should be used to help the child learn the route and to confirm location and progress when they have learned it. Landmarks may include doors, bulletin boards, hand rails, stairs, changes in floor texture, etc.
- **Opportunities for Problem Solving:** Orientation and mobility instruction through the interaction with the environment provides many opportunities for problem solving. Opportunities such as an obstacle in a child's path of travel, moving of an object such as a chair that marks their destination, or becoming disoriented requires that the child try to figure a solution. This requires that they engage in a few steps such a realizing what the problem or discrepancy is and coming up with a solution such as walking around the object or searching for the chair.
- **Concept Development:** O+M provides the perfect opportunity for concept development as children who are deafblind require contact with their environment to learn concepts as simple as over and under or as complex as parallel and perpendicular.

The purpose of a fact sheet is to serve as a starting point by providing general information about a topic of interest. For more information, please contact NYSTAP.

References:

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