

## FACT Sheet September 2014

### Access to Meaningful Communication

There are several important factors to consider when designing communication systems for this population:

▶ **Assessment of communication:**

There are many methods to assess the communication needs of a child who is deaf-blind. They can be direct or indirect methods of assessments. Direct assessments include observing and testing the person while interacting, playing, conversing, or exploring with the student. Indirect assessments include reading reports and talking with people who know the student well, interviewing the parents for additional input, and/or conducting a home-based assessment which can provide valuable information. Some methods of assessment are formal, such as standardized tests and checklists. When using standardized tests or more formal assessment methods, vision and hearing abilities must be considered.

▶ **Residual vision and hearing available for input of language and ability to interpret visual and auditory information:**

The team must know the functional use of vision and hearing, and how well the child interprets what he/she sees and hears. Some students may use their vision very well with adaptations (glare reduction, good contrast, lighting, etc.); however, others with the same visual concerns cannot functionally use his/her vision to access visual information. The same is true with hearing. Some students will have sufficient hearing when provided hearing aids, FM system, and/or other assistive listening devices; however, others having hearing losses that prevent access to speech sounds even when the best devices are available and in use.

▶ **Cognitive ability:**

The complexity of the communication system to be used must be related to the student's ability to learn. However, it should never be "an excuse" for not having a communication system in place for ALL children who have dual sensory impairments. It may be a system which uses touch and object cues only, but it

still is the system the child is using to receive and express communication. Value all types of communication. It is important for each team member to know the communication system and to use the method with the child. In most cases, it will include a wide range of methods (i.e. object and touch cues, gesture and some sign language, assistive technology devices, and augmented communication systems).

► **Motor and muscular abilities, both oral motor, fine motor, and gross motor:**

It is imperative to consult with therapy services for appropriate assessments in each of the areas. Teamwork will be essential for children who have physical needs including dual sensory losses to develop the most appropriate communication system. However, don't let the physical barriers deny access to communication systems.

► **Atypical behavior or behavior that indicates an attention deficit disorder and/or hyperactivity:**

Any difficulty in attention and concentration will affect the modes of communication that can be used effectively. Autistic-like behavior must be evaluated very carefully to distinguish it from behaviors associated with sensory loss. In most cases, a child who has a combined vision and hearing loss in addition to additional disabilities may exhibit some autistic-like characteristics however, it is important to program for the combined vision and hearing. Some of the evidence-based practices for autism may be used with children who are deaf-blind, but many of those will have to be adapted to meet the unique educational and developmental needs of this population. The one visual aid that might work for a child with autism may not even be appropriate for a child with combined hearing and vision. In fact, for children with combined hearing and vision loss, it is better to explore the evidence-based practices in the field of deaf-blindness.

► **Personal learning style and preference of the student:**

The team should and must take into consideration the learning style and preference of each student who is deaf-blind. They should consider the child's

social skills and interactions, the patience of the child with difficult tasks, the child's perseverance, the topics of interest of each child, the personal preference for the communication modes, and the past experiences of success and failure.

▶ **Personal preferences of other people closely involved in the student's life:**

It is vital that the family share their hopes and dreams regarding the communication system/mode with the team. Educators should ensure that the family is well informed about all the possibilities available for their child. The high expectation of family members in regard to modes of communication is so important for the success of the communication system used.

▶ **The skills of those who will teach the child:**

The language fluency and the possibility of acquiring more skills for team members are very important. For example, if a child is truly going to be a sign language user, it does not mean each person has to know sign language, but it does mean each person is willing to learn and adjust to the student's needs. It also means for those children using touch and object cues, for the team members to develop, implement, and be consistent in their use across the entire school day.



The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, H326C080023. However this content does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Maryann McDermott.