

Preparing the Classroom: Creating a Learning Environment for Your Student Who is Deaf-Blind

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Slide 2: Here is a message from New Mexico Public Education Department:

“Evidence-based interventions for individuals with deafblindness are not universal. Although these are evidence-based interventions, they should be individualized for a particular student. In the education setting, the IEP team will develop the plan for that student. The IEP team shall review an IEP at least on an annual basis.”

Slide 3: Preparing the Classroom: Creating a learning environment for your student who is Deafblind.

Slide 4: Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deafblind is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs and the New Mexico Public Education Department.

The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Slide 5: Information in this presentation was provided by the deafblind network.

Slide 6: If you have any questions or would like information or training on deafblindness, please contact the project for New Mexico children and youth who are deafblind.

Contact information will be shared again at the end of the training

Slide 7: In New Mexico, that project is The Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deafblind. This project provides technical assistance for families, service providers and educators of children and youth who are deafblind. Please contact the project if you are interested in resources, trainings, or support for an individual with deafblindness.

Slide 8: The information collected will inform how best to arrange the classroom and create organized, uncluttered learning spaces that are stimulating, motivating, and built on the child's strengths and interests.

Slide 9: By the end of this presentation, you will be able to identify the steps to create and maintain an organized and predictable learning space for students who are deafblind. You will be able to ensure clear, safe pathways to promote mobility and independence for individuals who are deafblind in various environments. You will know the importance of identifying adaptations and modifications to enhance accessibility and support students who are deafblind. You will know the steps to ensure the classroom arrangements meet the students accessibility needs. You will know how to identify if the student is able to access the classroom based on the classroom setup.

Slide 10: Organized and Predictable Learning Spaces.

Slide 11: Designated Workspace. When you have a student with deaf-blindness, it is important to create a workspace for that student that is in a permanent location. This workspace should have an identifier cue to support the student to be able to quickly know that it is their work station.

This workspace should be arranged to maximize both hearing and vision. Students with deafblindness often have some vision and some hearing. This space should also be organized and free of any clutter. Items provided to the student should be within reach to ensure the student can access the items.

Slide 12: Support Independence. For students who are deafblind, maintaining an organized and consistent environment is crucial for their independence and safety. Materials should always be placed in designated locations, ensuring that the student can reliably find what they need. It's equally important to keep the student's workspace clean and free of clutter, as any obstacles could pose a safety hazard. By familiarizing themselves with the layout of their materials, the student can gradually develop greater independence, allowing them to access and use resources with less assistance. This consistency not only supports their physical safety but also enhances their confidence and self-sufficiency in navigating their learning environment.

Slide 13: Peer Interactions. Some students may have equipment such as a wheelchair or other assistive devices. Be sure to have a plan for the student to have opportunities to meaningfully engage with their peers. They may need a larger space or need specific materials to support these opportunities. When you have a plan in place and materials readily available, these opportunities for engagement can be easily provided in the classroom.

Slide 14: Natural Environments. It is important to include our students who are deafblind in natural environments when appropriate to enhance the ability to generalize skills the student learns. For example, kitchen and bathroom areas.

Slide 15: Safety. Safety is also an important priority in the classroom. Adaptations and modifications may be made to the space to ensure safety for the student. Often students may have items such as adaptive strollers and other assistive devices. Be sure these items have a designated space.

You must ensure that any safety concerns be addressed, such as clearly identifying steps that may be present and providing non-slip mats when appropriate.

Slide 16: Learning Spaces. Mark entrances to learning spaces with identifier cues that are easily recognized and understood.

Pictured here is the entrance to a classroom with multiple cues to identify this room as unique to other rooms. There is a brightly colored fuzzy green item tied to the doorknob. A student with deafblindness will likely learn what room this is quickly based on this cue.

Learning spaces are not limited to the door to a classroom, a learning space could be a designated reading area or a circle time. A cue can be an item that is located in that space and quickly accessible to the student. When they can identify the cue to the space, they will quickly know what learning center they are located in.

Slide 17: Clear & Safe Pathways.

Slide 18: Clear Pathways. To ensure the student can safely navigate the classroom and the school, it's important that pathways within and between learning spaces are consistently kept clear. Any obstacles or clutter should be removed promptly to prevent tripping hazards and to facilitate smooth movement. This attention to maintaining open and organized spaces contributes to a safer and more accessible environment for students who are deafblind.

Pictured here is a young boy with his teacher navigating a hallway. He is holding a cane with his teacher assisting him. Although many students use canes to navigate their environment, other students may not use a cane to independently explore a space.

If you have a student who navigates the classroom by trailing a wall or furniture, be sure that these spaces are also free of items or clutter, such as a trash can, that might obstruct a student from getting to their desired location.

Slide 19: Landmarks and Cues. Clearly identified pathways within and between learning spaces are essential for independent navigation. Landmarks and tactile or visual cues should be thoughtfully included into the environment to help students recognize their location and identify specific stations. These cues need to be easily recognizable and meaningful to the student; for instance, different flooring textures or distinct wall colors can serve as reliable indicators of various areas. By including such landmarks, the environment becomes more accessible, enabling students to move confidently and independently from one space to another. This approach not only supports their orientation but also fosters a greater sense of autonomy.

In this classroom, the carpeted areas signify that the space is an activity area. The student can quickly identify where they are located in the classroom.

It is also important that in your classroom, you are not moving around the furniture often to create these new spaces and landmarks throughout the school year. For a student who is deafblind, it may take them longer to learn the new layout of the classroom. If you need to move furniture in the classroom, think about ways you can include the student so they are a part of the process and have access to the information.

Slide 20: Consistent Routes. In a classroom, including landmarks can help a student navigate the space more effectively. When the student leaves the classroom for other activities, it's important to use the same route each time so the student can learn the landmarks that identify other important rooms and spaces. Landmarks such as distinct features, sounds, and textures provide the student with valuable information about their location. Consistently following the same route allows the student to learn these paths, understand where they are going, and potentially move more independently. In the image, a child is touching a unique feature—a window with bright light and a wall with textured brick—that helps them identify their current location. Over time, the student will become familiar with these landmarks and better anticipate their next destination.

Slide 21: Environmental Adaptations and Modifications

Slide 22: Preparing the Environment. When training deafblind students, it's essential to carefully consider the environmental factors that can impact their use of both vision and hearing. The placement of a student's seating can impact how effectively they can utilize these senses. However, choosing a spot that enhances the student's vision, might inadvertently reduce their ability to use the other sense, like hearing. For example, a location in the classroom that offers the best lighting for visual tasks might also have background noise that makes it difficult for the student to hear. Students who are deafblind may also be impacted with vibrations that can come from doors closing or other environmental events. This can be distracting for a student and may make it difficult to focus on a task.

There may be other factors that impact seating as well, the student may have equipment that needs to be located by a power outlet. Be sure to utilize assessment results to determine ideal seating locations in classroom for your student.

Slide 23: Collaborate. For many students who are deafblind, they have large educational teams to ensure they are accessing their environment. It is important to collaborate with the educational team to make sure the students' needs are met and they have access to the classroom and the curriculum.

Educational teams may include O&M Specialists, Teacher of the Visually Impaired, Teacher of the Deaf, Occupational Therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists and other important team members.

Utilize this team to determine if a student needs adaptive position, assistive devices, amplification technology or magnification. Each student is unique, which means there is no one size fits all recommendation for your student.

Slide 24: Optimize Lighting. When choosing a location for your students work station, there are accommodations that optimize lighting to maximize the child's usable vision. Some examples might be having a students back to the window to reduce glare. A student may need a higher intensity light to access information. Nearly all students with deafblindness will benefit from reducing glare, be sure that materials such as laminated materials do not have a glare. Materials may need to be altered to ensure the student is able to use their vision to access information.

Slide 25: Contrast. To make spaces accessible to your student, you can modify the environment to create more contrast so that a student with low vision or impacted functional vision can still access the environment. Pictured here is a message presented in two different ways. The first is white text over an image of clouds and sky. Although the clouds are beautiful, you can barely read the message. The second image is black letters against a yellow background. The words are presented in a manner in which I can now read it to you.

“Use color, texture and contrast to help the child distinguish locations, objects and other materials.”

Providing contrast helps a student distinguish between objects and their backgrounds. Some examples if providing contrast in the classroom is using contrasting colored tape to distinguish the edge of stairs or tables. You can use dark backgrounds to emphasize light objects and light backgrounds to emphasize dark objects. Contrast can easily be created by keeping work areas clean of clutter.

Slide 26: Noise. Just as important for a students work station is the noise that could impact a students usable hearing. Be sure to identify noises in the classroom that could impact how the student is accessing sounds. Some examples are fans, air conditioning, open windows, even the chatter of other people talking around a student such as teachers.

Slide 27: Support Staff and Technology. Not only do students with deafblindness need accessible work spaces and classrooms, but often these students may have additional staff working with them. This may be an intervener, an interpreter, a paraprofessional, a brailist, any additional service that the student requires. It is important that the classroom accommodates this need for

the student. This may be a space where the student sits across from the other person working with them, or room for the other person to sit next to the student.

Be sure that any other assistive equipment or technology also has a specific space as well to ensure that it is readily available to the student or the person working with that student.

Slide 28: Let's Review. We have covered important strategies in preparing your classroom to create an accessible environment for your student who is deafblind. For example, identifying a designated workspace for the student with materials in specific locations to support the student to independently access it. A plan for peer interactions so the students can access their peers, especially when the student may need equipment to support them to do this. Natural environments included in the student's routine versus having a simulated environment. Safe classrooms and clear pathways to ensure a student can navigate more independently in the classroom. Landmarks and cues to give the student information about where they are located. Consistent routes in between different rooms and spaces so that the student learns the routes and can get information from landmarks and anticipate upcoming events and locations. Primary seating to ensure a student has a workspace that is located in an ideal spot to maximize hearing and vision. A student's workspace that supports staff and technology. A collaborative educational team to complete assessments and identifies what is best for the student.

Slide 29: Observation and Documentation. Now that you have your classroom ready, it is important to ensure that the adaptations and arrangements are supporting the student in the intended manner.

Slide 30: Safe and Secure. After setting up the classroom for your student, you may observe that certain arrangements may not fully meet the child's needs or preferences. It is crucial to continuously monitor how the child interacts with the classroom environment and the materials provided. Pay close attention to the ways in which the student accesses the space, and ask yourself critical questions about their participation: Does the student appear to feel safe and secure in the environment? Is the student showing signs of interest and active engagement in the learning activities? These observations are essential for making necessary adjustments to ensure the environment is truly supportive of the student's learning and well-being.

Slide 31: Needs and abilities. It is also important to continuously observe the child throughout the school year. As students learn and grow, their needs within the classroom environment can change. You might observe that a student has become more mobile and independent, which could necessitate new adaptations to ensure they can safely and meaningfully access the classroom. Additionally, a student may face new challenges during the school year that require the classroom setup to be adjusted or additional supports to be introduced. Regular monitoring and adjustments are essential to creating a responsive and supportive learning environment.

Slide 32: Documentation. Students who are deafblind often interact with various members of the educational team throughout the school year, including teachers, aides, therapists, and other support staff. To ensure consistency and effectiveness in supporting the student, it is crucial to thoroughly document the student's environmental needs within the classroom. This documentation should clearly outline any adaptations, modifications, and specific strategies that help the student navigate and engage with their environment. All staff members who work with the student must be fully informed and aware of these environmental needs to provide a cohesive

and supportive learning experience. This ensures that the student's needs are met consistently, regardless of who is providing instruction or support on any given day.

Slide 33: How do I know if it's working? How do you know if the classroom is meeting the needs of the student? How do you know if the student is able to effectively navigate the classroom and access materials?

Slide 34: Confident in Learning Environment. Once the student has time to learn the classroom spaces and cues, you should notice that student is comfortable and secure navigating the space. Many students may need supports to access the classroom, but you should notice that the student is becoming more independent in the classroom and participating in routines.

When a student who is deafblind feels safe and at ease, they are more likely to engage confidently in classroom activities and navigate the space effectively. This sense of security fosters independence, allowing the student to move within the learning environment with assurance and function as autonomously as possible.

Slide 35: Accessing the Environment. When the classroom is appropriately prepared for the student, you will also notice that the child is better able to recognize, reach for and distinguish objects and materials in the learning environment. The student now has greater independence and engagement in learning activities.

Slide 36: Anticipation. You will likely observe that the student begins to recognize patterns in daily routines, which is a key indicator of their growing familiarity and comfort within the environment. As the student navigates the space, they may start identifying specific cues—such as the texture of a surface, the position of a station, or the presence of certain objects—that provide information about their location in the classroom. These cues help the student orient themselves and understand their surroundings more effectively. Over time, the student may also begin to predict upcoming routines based on these established patterns, demonstrating an increased ability to anticipate what will happen next. This ability to predict routines not only boosts the student's confidence but also supports their independence and active participation in the learning process.

Slide 37: Free of Obstacles. You will know the classroom is supporting your student when you identify that the environment supports your students learning and independence and is not an obstacle to it. This means that a student can access materials needed for activities, and the materials are readily available. This may look like an extra chair to create an opportunity for another student to sit next to your deafblind student. An obstacle may be literal...a child is freely navigating the classroom without concern that a chair or trash can is placed in their path.

Another critical aspect to consider is ensuring that there are no obstacles hindering the student's ability to access different spaces and materials within the classroom. Regularly assess the environment to identify any equipment, furniture, or even people that may inadvertently block the student's path or limit their ability to navigate the space independently. If such hindrances are identified, immediate adjustments should be made to remove or rearrange these obstacles, ensuring that the student can move freely and access important materials without unnecessary barriers. Creating a clear and accessible environment is essential for fostering the student's independence and active participation in the classroom.

Slide 38: Let's review. Let's review what happens after you have prepared your classroom. It is important to monitor your student and determine if they feel safe and secure in the classroom. Are their needs and abilities being met as they change throughout the school year? It is also important to document the accommodations and modifications for the student so that anyone who is in the classroom will quickly be able to ensure the student has access. How do you know that your classroom is meeting the needs of your student? You will know when your student confidently navigates the classroom, accesses materials and items independently, anticipates upcoming activities and that the space is free from obstacles that prevent a student from being able to learn and grow in the classroom.

Slide 39: Deafblindness in New Mexico.

Slide 40: Deafblindness has such unique challenges, it is important that anyone working with an individual with deafblindness in New Mexico have training to understand this rare disability. It is important to utilize their strengths and abilities to create an individualized learning program. In New Mexico, there are approximately one hundred and fifty individuals identified as deafblind from the ages of 0-21. These individuals may have early intervention providers, speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, special education teachers, occupational therapist, O&M Specialists, counselors and paraprofessionals. There are free trainings and resources available to ensure that therapists and educators have the appropriate training to support individuals with deafblindness.

Slide 41: The Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deafblind provides technical assistance and training for families, service providers and educators of children and youth who are deafblind. It is provided through distance technology, in-home, classroom, telephone or email consultation. The project provides annual trainings/workshops to increase our state's capacity to meet the unique needs of children and youth who are deaf-blind, training can be requested to support staff and parents. Trainings are usually at no, or low cost, to participants.

Slide 42: The project can also participate in early childhood and school-aged transition support and consultation. The project disseminates resources on various topics in the field of deafblindness including distance-education, and online learning opportunities. The project is also involved in local, state and national initiatives and committees to advance the understanding of the needs of children/youth with deafblindness.

Slide 43: The Project also completes the National Child Count of Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind. This census provides extensive information on the population of children identified with deaf-blindness in the U.S, ages birth through 21. Data includes state and national information on population demographics, type and severity of vision and hearing loss, causes of deafblindness, presence of additional disabilities, educational setting and living setting.

Accurate census reporting ensures that our state receives the appropriate funding to meet the specialized needs of the service providers, educators and families of children with deafblindness.

Slide 44: If you know of a child or youth who is deafblind, please refer out to the project to ensure they have access to the resources provided and their information can be included in the annual census.

Slide 45: Anyone who knows or works with a child with deaf-blindness can refer someone to the project. Often, referrals come from families, teachers, early childhood staff, physicians, nurses

and discharge planners, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists, social workers and case managers.

Slide 46: For information or support for deafblindness, please visit the project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who are Deafblind website.

Slide 47: To contact the Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind, please call 505-272-0321 or toll free 877-614-4051. Or you can send an email to hsc-NMDB@salud.unm.edu. The UNM Center for Development and Disability has many resources available through the CDD Library and the CDD Information Network.

Slide 48: This training was adapted from Preparing the Learning Environment National Center for DeafBlindness Practice Guide. Other information was provided by the Open Hands Open Access Deafblind Intervener training modules: Environmental Accommodations and the Environmental checklist for Developing independence from the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

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