

## *Training Script*

### **The Importance of Building Trusting Relationships: Educating Children and Youth who are Deaf-Blind**

**Slide 1: AODD/The Importance of Building Trusting Relationships:  
Educating children and youth who are deaf-blind**

**Slide 2: A message from New Mexico Public Education Department**  
“Evidence-based interventions for individuals with deaf-blindness 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: The Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind** is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs and the New Mexico Public Education Department. The information shared in this presentation was provided by the Deafblind Network.

**Slide 4: The importance of building trusted relationships. Educating children and youth who are deaf-blind.**

**Slide 5: Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind**

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 6: Quote**

“Trust is the foundation of all interactions and learning for individuals who are deafblind.”

**Slide 7: Objectives**

By the end of this training, participants will be able to: Identify the importance of trust in building meaningful relationships with students who are deafblind. Describe how dual sensory impairments impact a student’s access to information, communication, and social connection. Recognize

the role of routines, proximity, and responsive interaction in fostering a sense of safety, connection, and emotional well-being. Promote student autonomy and engagement by using the hand-under-hand approach, honoring student choice, and avoiding physical control. Apply reciprocal interaction strategies to encourage joint attention, support social engagement, and deepen trust.

### **Slide 8: Deaf-Blind Overview**

First, it's important to have a basic understanding of deafblindness. Here is a brief overview.

### **Slide 9: Who is deaf-blind?**

When talking about students who are deaf-blind, we are referring to students who have both a vision and a hearing impairment. This includes students with low vision, blindness, progressive vision loss, or cortical visual impairment and who are hard of hearing, deaf, have progressive hearing loss, or Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD). Deaf-blindness limits a person's ability to consistently access visual and auditory information. Most children who are deafblind have some usable vision and some hearing.

It's also important to know that 80–90% of children and youth with deaf-blindness have additional disabilities. With this in mind, deaf-blindness in children and youth refers to a diverse group of students with varying strengths, abilities, and interests.

### **Slide 10: Typical student with deaf-blindness in New Mexico**

In New Mexico, a typical student with deaf-blindness often has physical and intellectual disabilities. They frequently experience Cortical Visual Impairment, or low vision, along with moderate to severe hearing loss. In this state, deaf-blindness is most commonly associated with prematurity, hereditary conditions, or chromosomal differences. While this does not reflect the full diversity of students with deaf-blindness, it is important to keep these factors in mind throughout the training.

### **Slide 11: Challenges of deaf-blindness**

Students with deafblindness face several significant challenges that impact their daily lives and learning. First, communication is often greatly

impacted. Because they have limited access to both visual and auditory information, expressing needs and understanding others can be difficult. This often leads to a high dependence on others for support and access to information, which can limit their independence. Their lives can feel chaotic due to unpredictable environments or changes they cannot easily perceive or understand. Many students also have difficulty forming concepts because they receive limited sensory input and experience. Finally, isolation is a common challenge. Without consistent access to communication and connection, students may feel socially and emotionally isolated from peers and adults. If you'd like to learn more, check out the Overview of Deafblindness training on the New Mexico Deafblind Project's website. This training provides a more detailed look at how deafblindness impacts students in educational settings.

### **Slide 12: Barriers to Building Trusting Relationships for Students Who Are Deaf-Blind**

In this section, you will learn about the barriers to building trusting relationships with students who are deafblind. First, it's important to identify common challenges that can make it more difficult to establish trust with these students.

### **Slide 13: Unpredictable Schedules**

There are many barriers that can affect students' relationships and success in the classroom. One important factor for students who are deafblind is that their classroom schedules and routines may sometimes be unpredictable.

When supporting a student, ask yourself: *Is information about changes being provided in a way that is accessible and appropriate for how the student communicates?*

Students who are deafblind rely heavily on consistent routines and clear cues to understand their environment and expectations. When schedules change without clear communication—through tactile schedules, sign language, object cues, or other appropriate methods—these changes may go unnoticed or be misunderstood.

This lack of clear communication can lead to limited access to information, increasing confusion, anxiety, and stress. Transitions can become especially difficult if they are sudden or unexpected.

Smooth transitions require advance notice and repetition to help the student prepare mentally and emotionally. When routines are broken without clear explanation, students may feel disoriented and lose confidence—not only in their surroundings but also in the adults supporting them.

Unpredictable schedules can negatively impact the student's engagement, learning, emotional well-being, and trust in others.

#### **Slide 14: Communication Barriers**

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## **Slide 15: Missing Information**

Because communication is often impacted for individuals with deafblindness, there may be barriers to communication.

For students who are deafblind, communication can look very different from spoken or signed language. Behavior is communication—actions and behaviors may replace words or signs. What might appear as a “behavior issue” is often the student’s way of expressing a need, feeling, or reaction to their environment.

Pay attention to behaviors like withdrawal, resistance, or physical responses. These can signal discomfort, confusion, or unmet needs. It’s important to respond not just to the behavior, but to the message behind it.

Communication with deafblind students often involves non-traditional methods such as touch cues, object symbols, gestures, or movement. Even if students don’t use speech or formal signs, they are still communicating meaningfully.

Deafblind students may not know if someone is present unless it is made clear through touch or close proximity. Without this awareness, social interaction can’t occur—because the student may not know a communication partner is available.

Students may use object symbols or communication devices, but if these tools are not readily available, their ability to communicate is limited.

By recognizing and adapting to these communication barriers, we can create opportunities for connection, inclusion, and relationship-building.

## **Slide 16: Lack of Autonomy**

Students who are deafblind may not be given autonomy while they are in school.

For many students who are deafblind, routines and activities are planned for them—with little opportunity for input or choice.

Even when activities are predetermined, students can still be offered choice within the activity.

Students should be invited to participate—not simply guided or managed. Respecting autonomy means asking, waiting, and responding. Touching, repositioning, or guiding hands without explanation or consent can feel invasive and may reduce a student’s willingness to explore, trust, or engage.

Without access to contextual information—such as who is nearby, what’s happening, or what’s coming next—students cannot make informed decisions. Without being offered meaningful choices, they can’t express preferences or assert autonomy.

Their hands are their primary channel for accessing information. When adults use hand-over-hand guidance or control the student’s hands without consent, it limits the student’s ability to explore, learn, and engage. This can feel disempowering and discourage participation.

Adults often anticipate needs or act on behalf of the student, especially when communication is slow or unclear. Though well-intentioned, over-helping limits independence, reduces confidence, and can unintentionally teach dependence.

It is important to remember: *Do with, not for.*

Limiting a student’s autonomy not only restricts their development—it can also hinder their ability to build relationships based on mutual respect.

### **Slide 17: Previous Negative Experiences**

All students have had negative experiences, and for students who are deafblind, those experiences can have lasting effects on how they engage with people and environments.

Early experiences shape how students respond to new situations, manage challenges, and build relationships. For example, if a student has experienced discomfort from being unexpectedly exposed to a new texture or environment, they may resist future activities.

When students attempt to communicate and are misunderstood or ignored—especially when using movement, expression, or vocalization—they may experience frustration, withdrawal, or learned helplessness.

New activities, while exciting for others, can be overwhelming for a deafblind student due to unfamiliar sensations, unpredictability, or sensory overload. In response, students may avoid those environments altogether.

Negative experiences can result in mistrust. When students don't feel safe or understood, they may be hesitant to engage with others or participate in learning.

Over time, these patterns can create significant barriers to forming trusting relationships. Trust depends on consistent, respectful, and responsive interaction. When students experience unpredictability, discomfort, or a lack of responsiveness from the adults around them, it can affect how they view and form relationships with others moving forward.

### **Slide 18: Addressing Barriers**

While there are barriers to building trusting relationships with students who are deafblind, these barriers can be addressed when we respond to each student's unique strengths and needs. When we create interactions that are individualized, consistent, and meaningful, we open the door to trust.

When a student feels safe and knows they can rely on the adults around them, stress levels go down—and opportunities for learning, communication, and connection increase. Trust becomes the foundation for deeper engagement with both peers and adults.

### **Slide 19: Let's Review**

Let's review the barriers to building trusting relationships for students who are deafblind: Unpredictable schedules can create confusion and anxiety. Communication barriers make it harder for students to express needs and understand others. Students may miss important information due to limited access to visual and auditory cues. A lack of autonomy can lead to frustration and disconnection. Past negative experiences may impact a student's willingness to trust. Identifying and addressing these barriers is essential to creating a foundation for trust.

**Slide 20: How to build trusting relationships and create opportunities for learning, communication and engagement.**

**Slide 21: Reciprocal Interactions**

For students who are deafblind, reciprocal interactions are the foundation of building connections and relationships. These early, back-and-forth exchanges give adults insight into what the student enjoys and how they respond to the world around them.

Adults can begin by simply observing what the student is doing. For example, if a student is feeling the vibrations of a drum, the adult might join in and imitate the same motion. By doing so, the adult learns whether the student enjoys the shared activity—or prefers to engage on their own. Waiting for the student’s response provides important information about their preferences and communication style.

Exploring an activity together—whether side by side or using hand-under-hand support—opens the door to meaningful interaction. These shared experiences can lead to joint attention, where both the student and adult are focused on the same object or action. From there, a conversation can begin, using gestures, movements, or shared actions.

Through this interaction, the student also learns about the adult. For example, if a student enjoys squishy textures, but when the adult joins in but pulls their hand away when they touch the squishy texture, the student may realize the adult doesn’t like playing with squishy activities. These mutual exchanges help build a stronger relationship and support the student in feeling safe, understood, and more willing to engage in activities.

## **Slide 22: Autonomy**

Autonomy is important for students who are deaf-blind because it empowers them to make choices, communicate preferences, and actively participate in their learning. This builds confidence, trust, and a sense of control in their environment.

To support autonomy, we need to go beyond simply giving students tasks—we need to offer meaningful choices that reflect their interests and abilities. This means avoiding “token” options and instead presenting choices that truly matter to the student.

Use hand-under-hand instead of hand-over-hand when working with the student. This allows the student to explore and participate in the activity without being physically guided or controlled.

It's also essential to allow extra time for the student to process information and respond. Processing delays are common; giving time shows respect for the student's communication style and supports their independence.

We must also honor refusals. A student may say "no" with body language, a facial expression, or a subtle movement. These forms of communication are valid and deserve a respectful response, just as we would respond to a spoken refusal.

Predictable routines help students feel safe, but within that structure, we need to build in flexibility. This gives students some control over their day, helping them feel more confident and engaged.

Finally, it's critical to collaborate with the student's team—including teachers, therapists, and family members—to document and share how the student communicates preferences and shows autonomy. For example, the team might track behavior cues, favorite activities, choices the student makes during routines, and moments when the student shows independence. This shared knowledge allows everyone working with the student to respond consistently and support autonomy across all environments.

### **Slide 23: Classroom Schedule**

Classroom schedules and calendars often display routines, special activities, and events. While these visual tools may be informative for many students, they are not always accessible to students who are deaf-blind.

There are many ways to adapt classroom calendars to support accessibility. For example, a calendar might include larger icons or high-contrast visuals. It could also be tactile, using raised symbols or textures to represent activities and events. Some students may benefit from an object calendar, where each activity is represented by a physical object associated with that activity. Most importantly, the calendar must be individualized to meet the communication and sensory needs of the student.

Calendars are essential for providing access to information, but they are only effective if the student is taught how to use them consistently. This means referring to the calendar regularly throughout the day—bringing the student to it, or bringing it to the student—to help them understand what is

happening next. Calendars can communicate transitions, upcoming changes, and daily routines. For some students, having a calendar at their desk can provide accessibility to the information and support independent access.

Pictured on this slide is a weekly tactile calendar, where each icon represents a piece of information. A student is feeling the tactile symbols with the adult.

### **Slide 24: Classroom Schedule (continued)**

Another important factor to remember is that calendars and schedules can convey a wide range of information. When individualizing a calendar, it's essential not only to ensure it is accessible but also that the information it provides is appropriate for the student's level of understanding.

For some students, a simple calendar showing what's happening next and when the activity is finished may be most effective. Others may benefit from a more detailed breakdown, such as separate morning and afternoon schedules. For some students, weekly or even monthly calendars may be meaningful and useful.

It is everyone's responsibility to use the calendar consistently when spending time with the student—whether it's a classroom teacher, a P.E. coach, or a therapist. When students are given reliable and accessible information about their routines, they are better prepared for what's ahead. This reduces unexpected surprises and stressful moments.

Over time, students learn they can trust the people around them to communicate information about their day in an accessible manner.

Pictured in this slide is an object calendar. There are four slots with object symbols that represent activities in the day. There is a bowl, a piece of padding, a toothbrush and a brush. Located directly behind the object calendar is an attached white basket for object symbols to be placed when the activity is done.

### **Slide 25: Unique Communication Signals**

Students who are deaf-blind often communicate in unique and subtle ways. These signals can include body movements such as squirming to show discomfort, rocking to indicate the need for a break or sensory overload,

facial expressions, eye movements, changes in breathing, vocalizations, word approximations, gestures, signs, and behavioral responses to their environment. Some students may also use object symbols or touch cues as part of their communication system.

Responding to these communication signals—whether they are gestures, movements, facial expressions, or changes in behavior—shows the student that their efforts to communicate are both understood and valued. When adults consistently notice and respond appropriately, the student learns that their communication has meaning and can influence others.

However, not all communication cues are immediately obvious. Team members who work closely with the student often develop a deeper understanding of their individual expressions, while others may need support in recognizing and interpreting these cues. For this reason, it is essential for the educational team to identify, document, and share the student's specific communication behaviors and what they typically signify.

When all staff are informed and respond consistently, it reinforces the student's communication efforts, fosters trust, and builds meaningful relationships that support learning and engagement. Consistent, meaningful responses to a child's unique communication will build the foundation for more intentional interactions and symbolic communication.

### **Slide 26: Where Are You?**

Students who are deaf-blind often lack consistent access to information about their environment, including who is available to communicate with them. If a student uses unique or subtle modes of communication, these may go unrecognized or unanswered. When the people around them do not respond, it can affect the student's ability to trust that they are being heard and that their needs will be met.

Maintaining close proximity to the student is essential. Students need to know who is present and available to communicate. It is important that every person working with the student greets them clearly, allowing the student to know who they are interacting with. This may involve a unique name cue such as a specific object or touch. With this information, the student knows who is available and can develop a meaningful, individualized relationship with that person.

Students with combined hearing and vision impairments may miss important information in their surroundings. They might communicate through words, gestures, or behavior and receive no response. This can lead them to wonder, “Where are you?”

If a staff member moves away without telling the student, the student may feel that interactions are unpredictable or inconsistent. This unpredictability can cause the student to reduce communication attempts because they don’t get consistent responses.

Greeting rituals must include saying “goodbye” or, for some students, even “I’ll be right back” to provide clear information about presence and absence. Consistency in these rituals across all team members is essential, and when appropriate, the student should also participate in greeting and farewell routines.

For a student who is deaf-blind to communicate and be understood, staff must be close enough to recognize unique communication signals and respond appropriately. By responding to and reinforcing communication consistently, the student can build trust and become more motivated to engage and express their needs.

### **Slide 27: Distress**

When a student who is deaf-blind experiences distress, it is important to respond immediately to support their emotional and physical well-being. Distress can present in many ways, such as meltdowns, refusing or rejecting people, objects, or activities, displaying aggression toward themselves or others, or becoming unable to continue with a task or activity.

Recognizing these signs early allows classroom staff to intervene before the situation escalates.

Effective responses can include changing the pace of the activity—slowing down or taking breaks—and reducing demands or expectations. These strategies help the student feel less pressured and more in control.

Other effective responses are providing clear, accessible information about what is happening or what will come next. This can reduce anxiety caused by unpredictability. Sometimes, the student may need increased physical

assistance to feel secure, such as hand-under-hand guidance or supportive touch.

Introducing calming strategies can also help the student feel calm and more able to communicate their need.

By responding thoughtfully and promptly to distress, we create an environment where the student feels understood, builds trust, and participates more fully in learning and social activities.

### **Slide 28: Team Collaboration**

Team collaboration is essential when supporting students who are deafblind. Because these students often rely on consistent routines and communication methods, having a unified team approach helps ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Sharing observations regularly is key—this includes noting communication attempts, behaviors, and how the student is engaging. Using shared tools like communication dictionaries, calendar systems, or data logs helps keep information accessible to all team members.

Collaboration goes beyond just sharing information—it involves planning instruction, behavior supports, and meaningful learning experiences together. Regular team meetings provide opportunities to reflect on what's working, make adjustments, and celebrate progress.

Don't forget to include families as active partners. They bring valuable insight and are often the experts on the student's needs and preferences.

To support students who are deaf-blind, it's essential that the entire educational team takes an active role in building trusting relationships and creating opportunities for learning and communication.

This begins with engaging in reciprocal interactions—joining the student in activities they enjoy and allowing them to take the lead. Supporting the student's autonomy by offering choices and respecting their preferences.

It's equally important to ensure the student has access to information about what is happening next. This could be through object cues, tactile symbols, or consistent calendar systems.

Students who are deaf-blind often communicate in unique or subtle ways, and it's our responsibility to recognize and respond to those signals. Staying in close proximity helps us notice those cues and engage meaningfully.

Finally, always be ready to recognize and respond to any signs of distress to help the student feel safe, understood, and supported in their learning environment.

If educational teams and staff do not provide this consistency across all adults, the student may become confused, anxious, or withdraw from communication. Lack of predictable interactions can undermine trust, making it harder for the student to engage, express needs, and learn effectively.

### **Slide 29: Let's Review**

Let's review:

- Reciprocal interactions are the foundation of relationships.
- Support student autonomy by offering choices, responding to preferences and honoring "no."
- Provide accessible information about transitions and activities
- Respond to unique or subtle communication signals.
- Stay in close proximity to recognize subtle communication and respond promptly.
- Address signs of distress immediately.

And of course, the entire educational team—including the family—needs to collaborate closely to identify and address any barriers. This ensures consistency across all adults working with the student, which is crucial for building trust and supporting success.

### **Slide 30: What can I do today?**

As this next section is covered, take a moment to think about a student who is deafblind that you know. Reflect on ways to individualize and apply evidence-based practices to build a trusting relationship with that student, and identify actions that can be started today.

Let's get started.

### **Slide 31: Communication Dictionary**

For students who use non-traditional or unique methods of communication, a communication dictionary should be developed to document key communication information. This resource must be accessible to all staff working with the student and should be regularly updated by the educational team.

The document should include the greeting ritual used with the student to ensure consistent and respectful interactions. It must clearly outline the student's communication modes, which may include spoken words, signs, gestures, behaviors, and object symbols. While some students may use limited verbal or signed language, they may rely heavily on non-symbolic communication, such as body movements, facial expressions, or other behaviors to express themselves.

In addition to expressive communication, the document should describe the student's receptive communication needs—how they best receive and understand information. Some students may respond to spoken language or signs, while others may require tactile symbols, object cues, calendar systems, or other concrete forms of communication.

A well-developed communication dictionary includes a clear list of what the student is communicating, such as:

- How they express “yes” or “no”
- How they show enjoyment or discomfort
- How they indicate a need for a break
- How they communicate illness or distress

It should also detail appropriate response strategies, ensuring that communication partners respond consistently. If the student has communication goals—such as learning a new sign or gesture—these should be included along with guidance for team members on how to support those goals through consistent responses.

A well-maintained communication dictionary fosters trust by ensuring the student receives information in an accessible way and that staff respond to their communication consistently and predictably. This helps create reliable relationships and a sense of security in the classroom.

### **Slide 32: Accessible Calendar**

Many students who are deaf-blind require an individualized calendar system tailored to their unique sensory and cognitive access needs. This may include:

- A calendar located on their desk or in a consistent location they can independently check
- A schedule that travels with the student to specials or other environments
- Adaptations like larger print, high-contrast icons, tactile symbols, or object-based representations

The time frame of the schedule also needs to match the student's strengths and understanding. While some students may benefit from a full-day schedule, others might require:

- An anticipation calendar, showing only "now" and "next" using real objects
- Separate A.M. and P.M. schedules
- A weekly or monthly calendar, if they have a stronger understanding of time and upcoming events.

Importantly, calendars are not just tools—they're routines. They must be used consistently throughout the day: at the start of the morning, before and after transitions, and during key moments like lunch or dismissal.

Ask yourself:

- Can the student access the information on the calendar?
- Does it support their understanding of time and sequence?
- Is the schedule being used consistently throughout the day?
- Are all staff members referencing the schedule regularly?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no" or "sometimes," consider ways to update calendar routines, provide staff training, or modify the calendar to make it more accessible—until the answer can confidently be "yes" for all.

**Slide 33: Maintain Close Proximity**

Stay physically present and nearby during activities. Proximity increases the student's access to people and information and allows you to notice and respond to subtle communication cues.

For some students, close proximity may also mean maintaining physical contact. For example, when sitting next to or across from the student, your foot or leg might gently touch theirs.

This simple, respectful contact can help the student stay oriented and reassured of your presence.

Students who are deaf-blind may feel isolated without consistent interaction or physical connection, which can impact their emotional state and engagement. Maintaining proximity—and contact when appropriate—can reduce that sense of separation and promote a feeling of inclusion and safety.

Stay alert to changes in movement, posture, or breathing—these may be the student's way of expressing needs or emotions.

Always respond promptly to any form of communication. This shows the student that their efforts to connect are effective and meaningful.

When possible, provide a dedicated intervener or one-on-one paraprofessional to ensure the student has ongoing access to support, interaction, and shared experiences throughout the day.

### **Slide 34: Promote Autonomy**

Promoting autonomy means creating space for the student to be an active participant in their world—not just a passive receiver of information or direction.

Start by identifying the student's interests and using those to engage in meaningful activities. When we build on what matters to the student, we foster genuine connections and motivation.

Offer meaningful choices—not just any choices, but ones the student can understand. Provide information in accessible ways so the student can make informed decisions.

Do not control the student's hands. When we take control of a student's hands, we're also determining what information they can access. Instead,

use a hand-under-hand approach. This method invites the student to explore and participate voluntarily. It builds trust, supports autonomy, and respects the student's right to choose how to engage.

Create opportunities to practice using the hand-under-hand approach when sharing objects or activities. This helps the student feel safe and respected in interactions.

Honor when the student communicates "no." If a student turns away, pulls back, or shows any sign of disinterest—respect that. Acknowledging their right to say no reinforces autonomy and builds mutual respect.

Provide predictable routines. Routines help students understand what to expect, reduce anxiety, and support greater independence over time.

Use reciprocal interactions to support social engagement. These natural, back-and-forth exchanges reinforce the student's sense of agency, connection, and communication.

### **Slide 35: Reciprocal Interactions**

Reciprocal interactions are essential and may look different for each student. Use these guidelines with your student to begin building reciprocal interactions and to identify how the student enjoys engaging with both the person and the activity.

Start by sitting beside the student and engaging with the same materials they're using. This creates shared space and establishes a sense of safety and familiarity.

Let the student lead. Follow their pace and interests rather than directing or guiding their actions. This builds trust and encourages authentic engagement.

Mirror the student's actions or vocalizations. This shows that you're tuned in, present, and responsive to their communication—no matter how subtle.

After you take a turn—whether it's a movement, sound, or gesture—pause and wait. Give the student time to respond. The silence or stillness you offer is an invitation.

Try developing simple turn-taking routines. For example, the student taps the table, you tap it too—then pause. If they respond again, continue the back-and-forth. Keep it playful and low-pressure.

Always attend to what the student is focused on. Use your hands to explore the same object or material. This shared exploration helps develop joint attention—a key foundation for learning and communication.

During these interactions, avoid placing demands or expectations on how the child should behave or respond. Your goal is to build a relationship rooted in trust, presence, and shared experience.

### **Slide 36: Likes and Dislikes Form**

A helpful tool for understanding and supporting a student who is deaf-blind is the Likes and Dislikes Form. This form gathers and organizes valuable information about the student's preferences, interests, and aversions.

The form should be completed collaboratively by the educational team, including teachers, therapists, support staff, and family members. Regularly updating it ensures the information stays current and reflects the student's evolving needs. Use the form to plan activities that align with the student's interests and to avoid situations that may cause distress or disengagement. Observe and update the form regularly, especially when new patterns emerge.

### **Slide 37: Respond to Distress**

When a student appears distressed during an activity, ask yourself these questions:

- Is the activity too challenging or not engaging enough?
- Is the environment overwhelming (too loud, too bright, too cold)?
- Is the student confused or missing key information?
- Does the student feel a lack of control or lack access to communication?
- Could the student be feeling unwell or tired?

These questions will help guide you in deciding how to address the student's distress.

### **Slide 38: Behavior as Communication**

When a behavior occurs frequently and the meaning is unclear, conducting a Functional Analysis can provide valuable insight into why the behavior is happening and what the student may be communicating.

When supporting students who are deafblind, it is essential to consider the connection between sensory impairment, communication, and behavior. Many challenging behaviors are actually attempts to communicate—especially when a student lacks consistent access to language or environmental cues.

Rather than punishing the behavior, recognize and honor it as a form of communication. Ask yourself: *What is the student trying to tell me?*

For example, if a student throws an item, it may be their way of expressing that they don't want it. In such cases, teach a more functional alternative—such as pushing the item aside.

Redirecting while acknowledging the communication sends the message: “I hear you, and I'll help you express it in a better way.” A Functional Analysis can help uncover the reasons behind behaviors, allowing for responses that are both compassionate and effective.

### **Slide 39: Trusting Relationships**

As you work to reduce barriers for students with deafblindness, you will begin to notice meaningful changes in their engagement and participation in the classroom.

When a trusting relationship is established, students often show increased involvement. They may begin to initiate and participate in more positive interactions—not only with adults but also with peers.

You may observe greater engagement in learning experiences, as the student feels safe, understood, and supported. Transitions—often challenging for students who are deafblind—can become smoother as trust builds with those guiding them.

Most importantly, you'll witness more moments of joy: shared laughter, a smile during a familiar routine, or a calm sense of connection during a favorite activity.

### **Slide 40: Let's Review**

Let's review:

- Use a communication dictionary to document the student's unique way of communicating and utilize it for every day interactions.
- Provide an accessible calendar to help the student anticipate and understand their day.
- Maintain close proximity to be available and to respond promptly.
- Promote autonomy by offering choices and using hand-under-hand support instead of controlling the student's hands.

#### **Slide 41: Let's Review**

- Engage in reciprocal interactions to build meaningful relationships using the student's interests.
- Respond to distress by identifying what the cause could be and addressing it.
- Understand that behavior is communication—seek to interpret and address underlying needs.
- Trusting relationships are the foundation for all learning and engagement. When you build that trust, the student will initiate in more communication, participate in activities, transition more easily between activities, and express more moments of joy.

#### **Slide 42: Quote**

“Trust is built when we respond consistently, interpret behavior respectfully, and honor a child's unique way of being in the world.”

#### **Slide 43: References**

#### **Slide 44: References**

#### **Slide 45: The project for New Mexico Children and Youth who are Deaf-Blind**

The project for New Mexico children and youth who are deafblind is a statewide program that offers technical assistance, training, and support to families, service providers, and educators of children and youth who are deafblind. For more information on topics, resources, or trainings, please reach out to the project team.

## **Slide 46: Project for New Mexico Children and Youth who are Deaf-Blind**

The Project also completes the National Child Count of Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind. This census collects detailed information about children identified with deafblindness across the U.S., from birth through age 21. The data includes state and national demographics, types and severity of hearing and vision impairment, causes of deafblindness, additional disabilities, as well as educational and living settings.

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 47: Project for New Mexico Children and Youth who are Deaf-Blind**

**Slide 48: Who can refer?**

**Slide 49: Want more info?**

**Slide 50: UNM CDD Information**

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](mailto: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 51: UNM Final Slide**