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AODD/THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS:  
EDUCATING CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO ARE DEAF-BLIND



## A Message from NMPED

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“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.”



# Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deafblind

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**DEAF-BLIND NETWORK**  
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ACROSS THE NATION

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# The Importance of Building Trusting Relationships

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EDUCATING CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO ARE DEAF-BLIND





# Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind

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

- *OHOA Module: Building Trusted Relationships*





## Objectives

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*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.



## Deaf-Blind Overview

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## Who is Deaf-Blind?

### Vision

Low Vision

Legally Blind

Progressive Loss

Cerebral Visual Impairment (CVI)

+

### Hearing

Hard of Hearing

Deaf

Progressive Loss

Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD)



## Typical Student with Deaf-blindness in New Mexico



- Physical and intellectual disabilities
- Cerebral Visual Impairment (CVI) or low vision
- Moderate to severe hearing loss
- Result of prematurity, hereditary or chromosomal condition





# Challenges of Deafblindness

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- Impacted Communication
- Dependence on Others
- Chaotic Life
- Difficulty Forming concepts
- Isolation

# Barriers to Building Trusting Relationships

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FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE DEAF-BLIND



## Unpredictable Schedules

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- Limited access to Information
- Communication Barriers
- Increased Anxiety and Stress
- Difficulty with Transitions
- Loss of Trust



## Communication Barriers

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- Unique modes of communication
- Behavior
- Reactions
- Who is listening?
- Accessible expressive communication



## Missing Information

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- Inconsistent Access
- Difficulty filtering information
- Was someone telling me something?
- Is someone paying attention to me?
- Changes in schedule



## Lack of autonomy

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- I have no input in my daily schedule
- I'm not given opportunities to express my preferences or make choices
- Important information is not shared with me in a way I can understand
- My hands are controlled during learning, limiting my access to information
- Adults do things for me—even when I'm capable of doing them myself



## Previous Negative Experiences

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- Physical discomfort or negative interactions
- Being ignored or misunderstood
- Negative associations with new experiences
- Sensory overload



## Addressing Barriers

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- Acknowledge and address barriers to trust
- Respond to each student's unique strengths and needs
- Create individualized, consistent, and meaningful interactions
- Build safety and reduce stress through trust
- Trust supports learning, communication, and connections





## Let's Review...



- 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.



# How to Build Trusting Relationships

AND CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING,  
COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

# Reciprocal Interactions

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- Imitation students actions
- Wait for response
- Turn taking
- Explore activities together
- Joint attention
- Conversations



(Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind, n.d.)



# Autonomy

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- Choices
- Hand-Under-Hand
- Honor Refusals
- Wait time/Extra Time
- Predictable routines
- Collaborate with Educational Team



# Classroom Schedule

## Individualized Calendar (in defined space)

- Larger Icons
- Tactile Calendar
- Object Calendar
- Object Cues



## Utilize Schedule Consistently

- Return to schedule regularly
- Communicate upcoming transitions
- If appropriate, keep at students desk



# Classroom Schedule (continued)

## Appropriate to students understanding of time:

- Anticipation
- What's coming up next
- Am schedule/pm schedule
- Weekly schedule
- Monthly schedule



*All educational team members use individualized schedule to communicate information about the day.*



## Unique Communication Signals

- Subtle body movements or shifts
- Changes in muscle tone or posture
- Facial expressions
- Eye gaze or eye movements
- Breathing patterns (e.g., sighs, gasps)
- Vocalizations or nonverbal sounds
- Gestures (e.g., hand movements, reaching)
- Behavioral reactions to sensory input (e.g., squirming, rocking)
- Use of objects or touch cues
- Changes in skin color or sweating as emotional signals

(Alsop, 2002)



## Where are you?

- Establish consistent greeting rituals
- Maintain close proximity to the student
- Recognize subtle communication signals (gestures, movements, sounds)
- Respond promptly and appropriately to communication
- Build trust through predictable interactions



## Distress

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- Respond to distress immediately
- Distress may look like: meltdowns, rejecting things, people, or activities, aggressive to self or others. Being unable to move forward with activities.
- Response: change the pace, reduce demands or expectations, provide more information, increase physical assistance, introduce calming strategies



(Alsop, 2002)



## Team Collaboration

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- Students who are deafblind rely on the educational to provide consistency in providing access, communication and routines.
- Trust is built when all team members are responsive, informed, and consistent.
- Educational team collaboration





## Let's Review...

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- 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.



## What Can I Do Today?

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## Communication Dictionary

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- **Greeting Rituals**
- **Modes of Communication**  
Includes signs, spoken words, object symbols, gestures, behaviors, and reactions
- **Receptive Communication**  
List of how to communicate information to the student
- **Expressive Communication**  
List of what the student is communicating
- **Responses**



## Accessible Calendar

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- Schedule is individualized to meet the student's access needs
- Time frame (first-then, 5 activities in sequence, A.M./P.M, weekly) aligns with the student's strengths and abilities
- Calendar is presented consistently, including during transitions and activities
- All appropriate staff are using and referencing the calendar regularly with the student



## Maintain Close Proximity

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- Stay physically close to the student during activities.
- Be attentive to subtle communication signals.
- Respond promptly to the student's needs or requests.
- Provide support through an intervener or one-to-one paraprofessional.



## Promote Autonomy

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- Use the student's interests to engage in interactions
- Provide meaningful choices (and the information needed to make those choices)
- Do not control their hands. Use hand-under-hand
- Honor "No"
- Provide predictable routines
- Engage in social activities using reciprocal interactions




# Reciprocal Interactions

- Sit beside the student and interact with the same materials they're using. Allow them to lead the experience.
- Mirror the student's actions or vocalizations to show you're tuned in and engaged.
- After your action or communication, pause to give the student enough time to respond—without rushing.
- Develop simple turn-taking routines. For example, mimic what the student does, wait for them to respond, and repeat. Keep it playful and low-pressure.
- Attend to what the student is focusing on. Use your hands to explore the same object or activity, helping build joint attention naturally.
- During these interactions, do not place demands or have expectations of how the child should react or interact with activity. Instead, focus on building a trusting and supportive relationship with the student.



# Likes and Dislikes Form

**"LIKES" INFORMATION** 

Child: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

FOODS taste/ texture	SMELLS	TOUCH texture/ hug/ fabrics light- heavy	MOVEMENT rock/ bounce swing	VIBRATION car ride toys/ appliances	SIGHTS lights/colors	SOUNDS voices/ music pitch/ loudness environmental

MUSCLES push- pull bear weight	PEOPLE	PLACES	ACTIVITIES	TOYS	SELF STIMULATION BEHAVIORS	OTHER



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## Respond to Distress

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



(Alsop, 2002)



## Behavior as Communication

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- Keep in mind the connection between sensory impairment, communication and behavior
- Behavior is often rooted in communication
- Honor communication instead of punishing it (whenever possible)
- Redirect
- Functional Analysis



*“If I throw something because I don’t want it, teach me to push the materials to the side”*

(Alsop, 2002)



## Trusting Relationships

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- Engages more frequently in positive social interactions
- Participates more actively in learning experiences
- Transitions between activities with greater ease
- Experiences more moments of joy and connection



(Janssen & McFarland, n.d.)



## Let's Review...

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- Use a communication dictionary to document the students 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.





## Let's Review...

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- Engage in reciprocal interactions to build meaningful relationships using the students 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 as the foundation for all learning and engagement.

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

*– Barbara Miles, deafblind educator and advocate*



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Technical Assistance

Consultation

Trainings

Resources

Families

Educators

## The Project for New Mexico Children and Youth who are Deaf-Blind



## Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind

The National Child Count of Children and Youth who are Deaf-Blind provides extensive information on the population of children identified with deaf-blindness in the U.S, aged birth through 21. Data includes state and national information on:

- Population demographics (age, ethnicity, gender)
- Type and severity of vision and hearing loss
- Causes of deaf-blindness
- Presence of additional disabilities
- Educational setting
- Living setting



# Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind

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DEVELOPMENT  
& DISABILITY



## Who Can Refer?

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Anyone who knows or works with a child with deaf-blindness, including:

- Families
- Teachers
- Early childhood staff
- Physicians
- Nurses/discharge planners
- Physical/occupational and speech therapists
- Social workers/case managers



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& DISABILITY



# Want More Info?



## Project for New Mexico Children and Youth Who Are Deafblind

<https://unmhealth.org/services/development-disabilities/programs/other-disability-programs/deafblind/>



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