



Natural Conversations with Persons who are Deafblind

How does one begin to communicate or converse with a child who cannot see or hear, or who has very limited vision and hearing? Are you drawn to interact immediately, or are you hesitant? If you are hesitant, are you aware of what makes you hesitant?

Some common sources of hesitancy upon meeting a child who is deafblind may be thoughts like these: "He doesn't know any language, so I wouldn't know where to begin." "I can't really communicate with him until he learns some language." "I feel really sorry for him." "I don't know how to relate to people like her. I wouldn't know what to talk with her about." "I haven't a clue how to interact."

Even some teachers who have considerable experience teaching children with special needs are likely to bring limiting assumptions with them when they meet a child who is deafblind, assumptions that can seriously interfere with the child's learning. The most limiting assumption is that no real conversation or communication is possible without formal language. But this is not true - every child with deafblindness, at every moment, is already expressing herself. What she needs is someone who will receive her communication skillfully and enter into conversation with her. Out of that conversation will grow relationship and language.



Conversational interaction precedes language. It is not the other way around. If you reflect for a moment, you will see that this is true for children with vision and hearing. Infants and their caregivers engage in countless nonverbal conversations before the children learn their first words. They exchange eye gazes, smiles, a huge variety of facial expressions, movements, and sounds. Back and forth. Children who are deafblind usually miss the opportunities for the same kind of natural conversational interaction and natural exposure to language. But if they have adults and partners around them who know how to have conversations with their hands, with their bodies and with touch and movement, then they will not miss out. Without such partners, they will become passive, isolated, and increasingly uncommunicative.

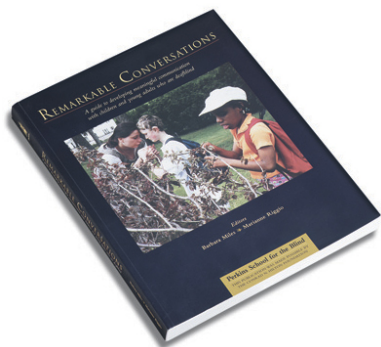
In order to become good conversation partners for children who are deafblind, we need to know what makes a good conversation. We actually already know this because we have regular conversations with friends. We can reflect upon our experience of conversations and transfer our knowledge into our interactions with children who cannot see and hear.

Good conversational interchanges almost always include the following elements:

- Mutual respect and trust
- Physical comfort
- Topics of mutual interest
- Genuine turn-taking
- Comfortable pacing and enough relaxed time
- Both partners feeling heard by the other
- Learning something new

Our conversations with persons who are deafblind should be, and can be, as satisfying as conversations between any friends. We need to think how each of these elements can be included in our moment-to-moment interactions with children and adults who are deafblind who are our friends, students, children and family members.

Becoming a good conversation partner for a person with vision and hearing challenges is perhaps the greatest gift you can give him or her. And, in the final analysis, the real teachers in the art of conversation with people who are deafblind are the children and adults who are deafblind themselves. They are the ones, individually, who will teach each of us how to have genuine and meaningful interactions with them. Each will teach us about herself. We need to listen carefully, watch carefully, touch carefully, respecting each person and each gesture of that person. True communication can then take place, and all of us will be richer as a result.



(Adapted from Chapter 4 of Miles and Riggio, eds., *Remarkable Conversations: A guide to developing meaningful communication with children and young adults who are deafblind*. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind, 1999.)

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