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CHAPTER

Conversation: The Essence of Communication

Barbara Miles



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People who can see

AND HEAR ARE SURROUNDED NATURALLY BY A LINGUISTICALLY RICH ENVIRONMENT. FROM THE INSTANT A CHILD IS BORN, SHE HEARS HER MOTHER'S VOICE AND THE CONVERSATIONS AROUND HER. BECAUSE

OF THIS IMMERSION, LANGUAGE DEVELOPS NATURALLY DURING THE FIRST FEW YEARS. LINGUISTS AND EDUCATORS HAVE DISCOVERED THAT, IF A CHILD IS TO DEVELOP A COMFORTABLE MOTHER TONGUE, AN ACCESSIBLE AND RICH LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT IS ESSENTIAL. IF IT IS NOT NATURALLY THERE, IT MUST BE PROVIDED.



The child who is born deafblind does not have casual access to language. As a result, whatever language and communicative environment surrounds him must be consciously provided for (or “brought to”) the child who cannot see or hear. If this is not done, the child will not develop his own natural language or communication mode. The sad result—often seen in children who have not been given an opportunity to learn language or enjoy conversational interaction—is withdrawal from people and the environment, or extreme frustration.

Our responsibility is to provide this conversation-rich environment. We are not talking here about simply giving the child basic “survival vocabulary,” but rather about including him in the flow of life and conversation in a way that will allow him to develop into a creative thinker and communicator to the best of his ability.

How do we help a child who is deafblind become an effective communicator? Let us begin at the most basic level—at the moment you first meet a child who cannot see or hear.

Imagine this: You enter a classroom, and you see a child who is deafblind. You have already been told that he is six years old, and that he does not know any language.

Paul is small for his age and is seated in a wheelchair. His big shock of blonde hair nearly covers his eyes. You can tell right away that he is blind. His lids are closed, and his eye-sockets are hollow. You notice him smile for a moment, and his whole face lights up when he does. You are not sure what caused the smile—it is gone as quickly as it came.

His hands are small and delicate. His left hand is lifted, slapping on the headrest of his wheelchair in a rhythmic

pattern. After a few minutes of slapping, he moves both hands down to the seatbelt that holds him in the wheelchair and runs his fingers back and forth across the grain of the textured fabric. As he does this, he moves his head back and forth, almost in the same rhythm as his hand motions. Someone enters the room and slams the door behind him, but Paul shows no reaction, and continues to finger the seatbelt. You watch him for about 10 minutes, and he does only these repetitive motions with his hands and with his head. He seems lost inside his own world.

How does one begin to communicate with a child like this—a child who cannot see or hear, and who also has very little independent mobility? How would you approach him to begin communicating? 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 like Paul are 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. He looks odd, the way he is moving.” “I don’t know how to relate to people like him. I wouldn’t know what to talk with him about.” “If he can’t hear and he doesn’t know any language, 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 this: “This child doesn’t know how to communicate yet. I need to teach this child how to communicate before he can express himself, and before I can communicate with him.”

In this chapter, we will challenge this assumption. Paul is already communicating. He is already expressing himself. Every child who is deafblind, at every moment, is already expressing himself. What he needs is someone who will receive his communication skillfully and enter into conversation with him. Out of that conversation will grow relationship and language.

Many teachers and parents of children who are deafblind know instinctively how to have good conversational interactions with the children. They know how to read what the children are already expressing and how to respond in ways that are meaningful for them. We hope that this chapter supports them in continuing these interactions and possibly gives them more ideas for ways to carry these conversations forward. We hope also that it encourages others to experiment with entering into genuinely mutual conversations with children who are deafblind. This is how the children will learn to communicate with more and more assurance.

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 who can see and hear. 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, body movements, and sounds. Back and forth. Notice what goes on the next time you are around an infant. Adults often become childlike, making faces, gesturing, imitating movements and sounds, instinctively responding to the baby's every effort. They are having conversations long before the infant is able to use words. During the course of these conversations, the adults also use words, words

that are appropriate to the nonverbal interactions that are taking place. Listen. You will hear, "Mama," "baby," "sooo big!," "doggie," "up," "look!," "Dada." These are simple words related to the conversations that are taking place with faces and gestures. Over and over again, the child hears these words in the context of the developing relationship with Mother and Father. By the time the child

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says her first words she has heard thousands and thousands of words, all in the course of play and natural back-and-forth exchange.

Children who are deafblind usually miss the opportunities for the same kind of natural conversational interaction and natural exposure to language. Why? Because it is normally through the eyes and ears that such conversations occur. But children who cannot see or hear do not have to miss out. Children who are deafblind need to have adults in their environment who know how to have conversations that do not depend exclusively upon sight and hearing and that also do not depend upon language. They need partners who know how to have conversations with their hands, with their bodies, and with touch and movement. They need people willing to interact with them as equal conversational partners. If they are surrounded by such adults, they will have the chance to become active communicators. Without such partners, they will become passive, isolated, and

increasingly uncommunicative. Or, they will communicate in awkward and disturbing ways as they try to express themselves in any way they can.

We begin "teaching" communication to the child who is deafblind by becoming skillful conversational partners. The child learns to communicate by being treated as a person who can already communicate. We teach conversation by having conversations.

Paul, whom we met above, could sit all day alone in his wheelchair unless someone is willing to enter into conversation with him. It is so easy to leave a child like him alone; aloneness seems like part and parcel of who he is. He is not naturally connected to others through his eyes and ears as most children are. But Paul can learn. He can learn how to have satisfying conversations. He can become a confident communicator. This will not happen merely by training him to use a few words or object symbols. This will happen if people give him their complete attention and respond to his smallest attempts to communicate, even when these actions may not at first be intentional communications. Paul will become a good communicator if people are willing to engage in endless hours of meaningful conversation with him.

Elements of a Good Conversation

In order to become good conversational 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.

A good beginning exercise is to recall a satisfying conversation you recently had with a friend or relative. By visualizing yourself back in that situation you can think about what components made the conversation satisfying for you. They would probably include the following:

- You had a relationship of mutual respect with the person (or persons) with whom you were talking.
- You were physically comfortable and therefore able to attend to each other.
- There was a topic (or topics) of mutual interest.
- Everyone was allowed fairly equal turns to talk, with no one person dominating or using terminology that the other people could not understand.
- The pacing of the conversation was comfortable for all the participants. Transitions from topic to topic were made comfortably, and were made at times when everyone was ready for them.
- You probably experienced feelings of being heard. You knew somehow that the other person or persons were understanding what you said, and you felt as though you understood what the other person said and meant.
- You may have learned something new as a result of the conversation—perhaps something about your conversation partner.

Our interactions with persons who are deafblind should be, and can be, as satisfying to us as our conversations with our sighted-hearing friends. We need to think how each of these elements of a good conversation can be included in our moment-to-moment encounters with the children and

adults who are deafblind who are our friends, students, children, and family members.

Mutual Respect

Mutual respect is the foundation of a good conversation. I cannot have a good, productive interchange with someone who I feel looks down on me or discounts my importance as a person. The same is true for children who are deafblind. They need to feel respected in order to feel free and encouraged to become effective conversational partners. We will deal extensively with the issue of respect in Chapter Five, in which we discuss what makes up a good communicative environment. Here, we only need to examine our own attitudes. I must ask myself what expectations I am bringing to any encounter I have with a person who is deafblind. Do I expect that this child or adult will be able to converse with me? Do I expect that she has sufficient abilities to interact? Do I expect that I will be able to have a successful conversation?

The most helpful attitude we can have when entering into conversation with a person who is deafblind is one of respect for the child's (or adult's) own abilities. This may be difficult when these abilities differ significantly from our own or when it appears that a child can do so little for herself, as is often the case with children who cannot see or hear. A first important step in interacting with such children is to shift our focus from what they cannot do to what they *can* do. There is no child or adult, however disabled, who is not capable of conversational interaction. The smallest movement, including the breath itself, can become the basis for a truly respectful conversation. We, as partners, must regard persons with such respect that we are willing to learn their language (often a

language of movement and touch), be on their level (physically, as well as developmentally), and continually ascertain from them what they need for their own development.

Curiosity and interest are elements of respect. Curiosity about another person is the desire to continually learn new things about this person. It includes also the respectful realization that this other person's experiences of life may be significantly different from ours, and the willingness to try to discover what this different experience of life is like for her, so we can truly communicate with one another. Before we can have a real conversation with a person who is deafblind, we must be truly interested in her experiences.

When I first see Paul, I may be tempted to regard him as incapable. From one perspective, seeing Paul in a wheelchair might prompt me to say to myself, "Paul cannot walk, he cannot see, he cannot hear". But it is much more useful to look for what he can do. A respectful look at Paul will find that he can sit with support, he can move both his arms, he can use his fingers to feel things, he can move his head rhythmically, he can lift his left arm and slap it, he can smile. Each of Paul's abilities is a possible beginning point for a conversation.

It will also be very useful to me, as I seek to enter into conversation with Paul, to wonder what his experience of the world is like. What must it feel like to sit for most of every day in this confined space of a wheelchair? What must it feel like to him to get information mostly through his hands? What must it be like to have no words? How must he think? I wonder how he knows people. I wonder why he likes moving his head like that. I wonder what that seatbelt must feel like under his fingers. I wonder if he knows I am here. All of these questions, if I keep them alive, will help me have good conversations with Paul. They will encourage my respect for him as an



We need to include children who are deafblind in natural, spontaneous conversations. This girl is discovering that another person shares her love of cookies!

individual, and they will motivate me to get to know him as I would get to know a friend.

Emotional Comfort

People who can see and hear often invite another person into conversation by smiling and making eye contact. They also make physical gestures (often unconscious ones) that say, in effect, "I'm here. Let's talk." A person might move alongside a standing person, or seat themselves at a comfortable distance, or pull up a chair if that is necessary. We need to make similar gestures for the child who is deafblind, to let her know we are available for conversation, and want conversation. But we must make these gestures in a way that is accessible to her. If the child has some vision, we can approach, make eye contact, and smile in close proximity, so that she is sure to see us and receive these gestures of invitation. But if she has no vision, we will need to use touch to make the same gestures.

The way we touch a person who is deafblind is very, very important. For a significant proportion of the people who are



deafblind, touch is their primary (and most reliable) way of receiving information, and they will be sensitive to how they are touched in ways that most of us who can see and hear may only begin to imagine. A touch for a person who is deafblind can convey emotion, intention, goodwill or lack of it, haste or ease, approval or disapproval. We need to know when we touch what it is we wish to communicate. We need to learn how to make our hands and bodies convey our intentions. (Learning to touch skillfully is a particular challenge for those of us who are North Americans or Northern Europeans. Our cultures are not, in general, as comfortable with touch as are some cultures. For this reason, children born

deafblind in many segments of North American and European cultures are particularly vulnerable to isolation.)

In order to invite a child who is deafblind into conversation, we will need to approach with sensitivity and position ourselves in ways that are nonthreatening and friendly and allow maximum opportunity for interaction. What works will be unique for each individual.

Often this will mean touching gently on the shoulder or upper arm as an initial greeting and offering a name sign or inviting tactual access to distinctive physical features. The way we offer the name sign is important. It usually works best, after the initial touch on the shoulder or upper arm, to

pause a moment in order for the child to assimilate the information, then to gently slide your hand down the outside of the arm and place your hand under the child's hand so that the child's palm and fingers are resting on the back of your hand and fingers. If you are right-handed, the most comfortable position for you will probably be to the child's left, with the child's left hand resting on your right hand. But you need to take into account also the child's own hand preference and attend to that first, before your own. Face-to-face is also a good position, especially for children just beginning to receive language. In this case, both of the child's hands can rest on top of both of your hands. This is the position in which the child can receive tactile signing and it is also a good resting position, from which you can invite the child to touch whatever you want to show her, or follow her hands to share with her the experience of what she is interested in. With her hand or hands resting on yours, you can introduce yourself with your name sign and also give her access to a distinctive physical feature that will help her identify you. Simply make your name sign as you normally would for a sighted person, making the sign on your own body. From this position, you can also invite her to touch a distinctive ring, watch, beard, hairstyle, or whatever unique feature will come to have meaning for her.

The child should feel that his communication partner is supportive, interested and receptive.

There is no need to put your hands on top of the child's hands, or to force the child to touch you in any way. Invite the child again and again. Many children are not accustomed to being approached in this way, and they will not respond right away. But if you are careful and respectful, the child will learn, after being invited in a similar fashion a number of times, to reach out with eagerness to receive information tactually. Remember that the hands of a child who is deafblind are comparable to a sighted child's eyes. You would never place your hands over a child's eyes. By the same token, you should exercise extreme care in the way you touch the hands of the child who is deafblind—always use gentleness and sensitivity, and never handle them roughly or force them to touch. Invite and listen, watch for and feel their reaction to things. Rough or thoughtless handling of the hands of a child who is deafblind can cause “tactile defensiveness,” which can take a long time to undo and which is a tragic learned behavior in one whose hands must act as eyes. Many children who are labeled as being tactually defensive would not naturally show this behavior. It is a reaction that has

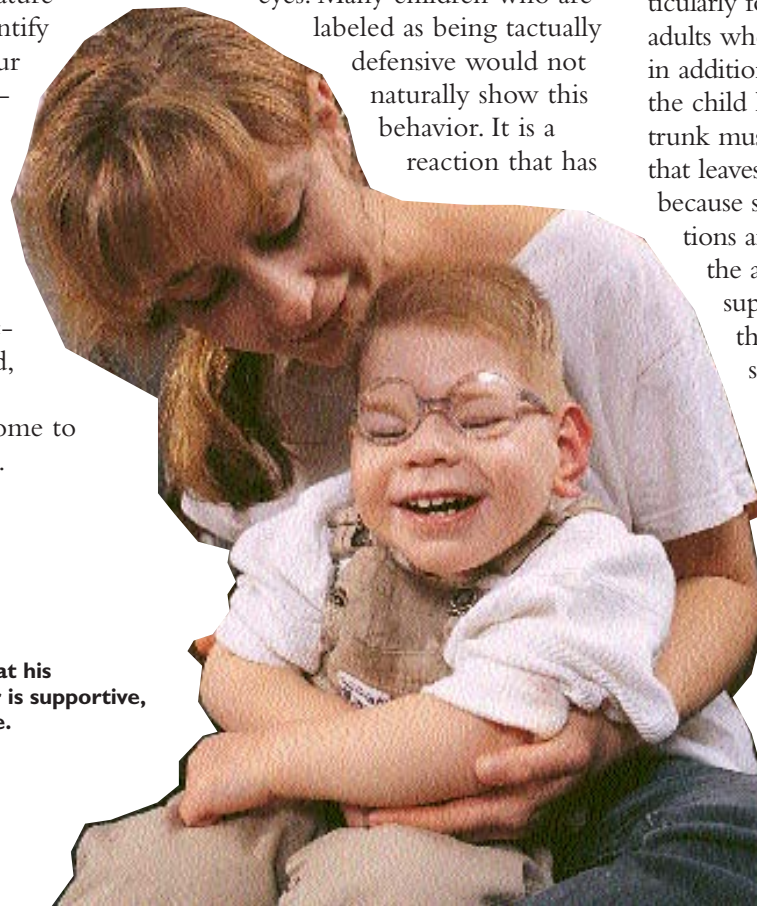
been learned because of the inappropriate ways that others have interacted with them.

Physical Comfort

Positioning the Person Who Is Deafblind:

Creating a physical environment that is conducive to conversation is particularly important when one of the conversational partners is a person who is deafblind. For a person without sight or hearing, the perceived world extends only as far as the fingertips, or perhaps a bit farther if the person has some usable vision. This means that the bulk of her attention is likely to be on her own body and its immediate environment. Therefore, bodily comfort is crucial. In order to have a successful interaction, the person who is deafblind will need to be seated or positioned comfortably in a way that allows maximum opportunity for expression and contact.

Physical therapists and occupational therapists can be invaluable in helping to recommend seating and standing options for the child or young adult who is deafblind, particularly for those children or young adults who have physical limitations in addition to their deafblindness. If the child has use of her arms, her trunk must be supported in a way that leaves her arms free to move, because some of the best conversations are likely to happen with the arms and hands. Good support for the feet (chairs that are not too tall or too small) and seating in a stable upright position is essential if the child is to feel secure. She should be warm enough (or cool enough), dry, well-fed, and suitably clothed. Careful attention to these physical needs will help make relaxed conversations possible.



Positioning Ourselves: We must find a comfortable, receptive position for our own bodies that allows the child to know we are present and ready to interact. In a seated position, this may mean maintaining light physical contact with knees, shoulders or hands. Such gentle, unobtrusive, and sustained contact will serve the same purpose for the child who is deafblind as eye contact serves for the child who can see—it lets her know that you are present. For good conversational interaction, the child should feel that her partner is supportive, interested, and receptive. Skillful positioning, supportive but nondirective touch, and willingness to wait can create the atmosphere for a satisfying conversational interaction.

Wheelchairs and other physical positioning devices create a special challenge for those who wish to carry on conversations with the children who use them. These devices can be isolating and can make it particularly difficult to find good conversational positions. Many times the best conversations with children who use wheelchairs or are in cribs for extended lengths of time can happen on a mat on the floor, where the conversation partners are free to move and can stay in some kind of comfortable, noninvasive physical contact. A young child, or one who has limited motor functioning, may be most comfortable when supported from the rear by the conversation partner who is in a seated position. In this position, the conversation partner can feel the child's breathing patterns and can sense bodily tension and relaxation, all of which can be valuable feedback to let her know how the child is feeling. Be careful not to restrict the child in any way; just make sure she is supported. It may be useful to have a large mirror available, so that the conversation partner can also see the child's facial expressions.



Whatever a student is paying attention to at the moment is a potential topic to be shared.

Conversations on a mat are often ideal, but are not always possible. If you know a child who is deafblind and who is in a wheelchair, a stander, or a crib for any length of time each day, be sure there are pieces of furniture nearby that invite people to have comfortable conversations with the child. A folding chair that is about the same height as the wheelchair will allow you to sit down next to the child and have your knee or shoulder touching the child's knee or shoulder, thus making yourself available for a sustained interaction. Without a suitable chair for yourself, such conversations are extremely unlikely to occur.

Standing over a child in a wheelchair or a crib, especially if the child is deafblind, is not likely to result in any kind of satisfactory mutual exchange.

Conversing in Motion: Some children, particularly those with some vision, are highly mobile, and to interact with them in a truly conversational manner will often require us to be mobile along with them. With a small child who has some vision and moves a lot, squatting so that our eyes can meet his at the same level is often a good way to begin an interaction. When eye contact is an available avenue, we should use it as much as possible in the same

way that we would use it conversationally with a friend. If a child is blind and moves around a lot it is also useful to squat and let the child feel that we are at her level, then move with them in a parallel position.

Since Paul is in a wheelchair, we will need to pull up a chair in order to be comfortable and to be really available for conversation with him. (We could also take him out of the wheelchair and sit with him on a mat, making sure he is well-supported, and that we are in a good position to interact. This would be a good option to try regularly when time and facilities allow.) I would approach Paul from his left at first and would touch him gently on the shoulder as I sat down beside him. I would speak as I did so, to take advantage of any residual hearing he might have. I would pause after touching him on the shoulder to allow him time to react to my presence. If I were meeting him for the first time, I would be alert to see how he liked this form of initial touch. (I may need to adjust how I approach him the next time, depending upon how he seems to respond to this greeting.) If he reached out for me, I would allow him to touch, and would put my right hand gently under his left hand and invite him to feel the chair I brought to sit on, and to feel my hair, face, and left hand, which wears a distinctive ring. If he did not reach out, I would gently slide my hand down the outside of his arm, and put my hand under his. Then I would make my name sign and show him the ring I always wear. After that, I would simply rest my hand on the arm of his wheelchair or on my own lap and wait to see what he would do next. As I waited, I would make sure that there was some form of extremely gentle physical contact between us, so that he knew that I was still there. Either my right knee would be touching his left knee, or my right arm or shoulder would be touching his left arm or shoulder, or perhaps his hand would be resting on mine as it was on

REMEMBER THAT THE HANDS OF A CHILD WHO IS DEAFBLIND ARE COMPARABLE TO A SIGHTED CHILD'S EYES.

the arm of his wheelchair. My waiting position would allow Paul to have control—it would leave him free to take the next turn in the conversation.

Topics of Mutual Interest

Discovering the Child's Topic: As with any conversation, we need a topic to talk about, one that is interesting to both of us. This is where many people get stuck in their interactions with children who are deafblind. Often, teachers and others introduce topics that they themselves are interested in—giving the child a direction, offering an object they think the child might like, signing about an activity—and when the child does not respond, the attempt at conversation ends. At first, it may seem as though a young child who is deafblind has no particular conversational topics that are of interest to her. This is not so. She may not be interested in our topics, or in what we think she should be interested in. But, it is extremely useful to assume that at any given moment a child who is deafblind has a topic that interests her. Whatever the child is paying attention to at the moment is a potential topic.

It is usually easy to tell what a sighted child is paying attention to—we watch her eyes and face. For example, an infant will look at a dog and smile, and the mother will point and say, “Look. A doggie.” A conversation has begun. Or a door will slam, and the infant will physically react and turn her head, and the mother will say, “Daddy’s home!” Then the child may smile and reach up, and her father may

say, “Hi! How’s my little girl? Want to get up? Daddy will pick you up!” And so on. The conversational interaction proceeds by means of eye gaze, facial expression, and body language. The child feels like an effective communicator even at this young age. Many times, her own interests steer the conversations, and these interests are read on her face even before she has any words.

If a child is deafblind, it becomes more difficult to tell what she is paying attention to. If a child has some vision, eye gaze and facial expression may be reliable cues. But often we must learn to look elsewhere to find out what the child is interested in at the moment. Being able to determine what a child who is deafblind is attending to, moment to moment, is one of the most important skills we can have as teachers and friends. Tuning into the child’s own interests, in a very detailed way, will enable us to have successful interactions in the present. It will also enable us to capture the child’s attention at future moments when we have something significant to teach or present.

Movement as a Conversational Topic: Hands, body movement, facial expression, tension, and relaxation—these will all give us clues to the attention and interests of the child who is deafblind. If a child is moving any part of her body, that movement itself is likely to be the focus of the child’s attention, and can be a potential topic of conversation. In fact, movement is very often the best kind of topic to share with a young child who is deafblind. Simply moving along with a child is a way of establishing a mutual topic. Whenever the child varies her movement, even slightly, you can respond. A very satisfying conversation can take place through movement alone. Jan van Dijk, a

Dutch teacher of children who are deafblind, has developed a whole method of early teaching based on movement and has termed this mutual movement “resonance” (1986). One can think of these times of moving along with the child simply as conversations without words. The goal is to establish a genuinely mutual interaction, one in which the child becomes more and more confident in her ability to be an equal, effective conversational partner. Whether she can do this or not will depend primarily on the responsiveness and patience of her partner. It is always best if the child is the initiator of the movement, if the topic is hers rather than the teacher’s.

When movement is the conversational topic, as it often is with the child who is deafblind, it is crucial that the partner pay detailed attention to her own body position in relation to the

child. When the child has some vision, one can mirror the movements of the child in close proximity, or in direct contact, so that the child can see that her movement has been recognized. But if the child is blind, mirroring movements in a way that is perceivable by the child (and in a way that does not interfere with the child’s freedom of movement) can be challenging. A conversation of this kind with a young child will often look very much like a dance. One needs to follow the flow of the child’s movements while maintaining gentle physical contact, most often with the same part of the body the child is moving. Thus, if the child is moving her arm back and forth, your own arm can follow hers, usually from underneath so as not to inhibit her movement. Or if she is moving her leg, your leg can follow alongside. Simply beginning gently in this way will

often lead to playful back-and-forth interactions. You can gradually (and we emphasize gradually) introduce your own ideas for variations on the child’s movements, and the conversation can develop over time.

I have introduced myself to Paul and am now sitting beside him—he in his wheelchair and my right knee is gently touching his left knee so that he knows I am there. Paul, after touching me for a moment with both hands, goes back to using his left hand to rhythmically slap the headrest on his wheelchair. I can now think of that movement as a potential topic of conversation that we can share. In order to establish it as a topic, I slide my hand gently under one or two of his fingers so that when he slaps the headrest he also feels part of my hand. Then I begin to move along with him, following his lead. He pauses. I pause with him. He smiles. He moves again. I move with him, following as precisely as I can the energy and rhythm of his slapping. Again he stops, and I stop too. No smile this time. Instead he takes hold of two of my fingers and pulls my hand outward along with his, then lets it go. I slap the headrest hard enough for him to feel the action with his head, which is resting on the other side of the fabric-coated metal. A look of astonishment, then a smile. Then we repeat this game, him taking my hand, pulling it outward and releasing it, waiting for me to hit the headrest. We do this for quite a while. As the conversation goes on, I vary my slapping rhythm slightly each time he releases my hand. When I do, he shows recognition by smiling, and sometimes laughing. Soon I am laughing, too, delighted at the connection I feel with him. Our conversation is enjoyable for both of us.

Movement is very often the best topic to share with a young child who is deafblind.

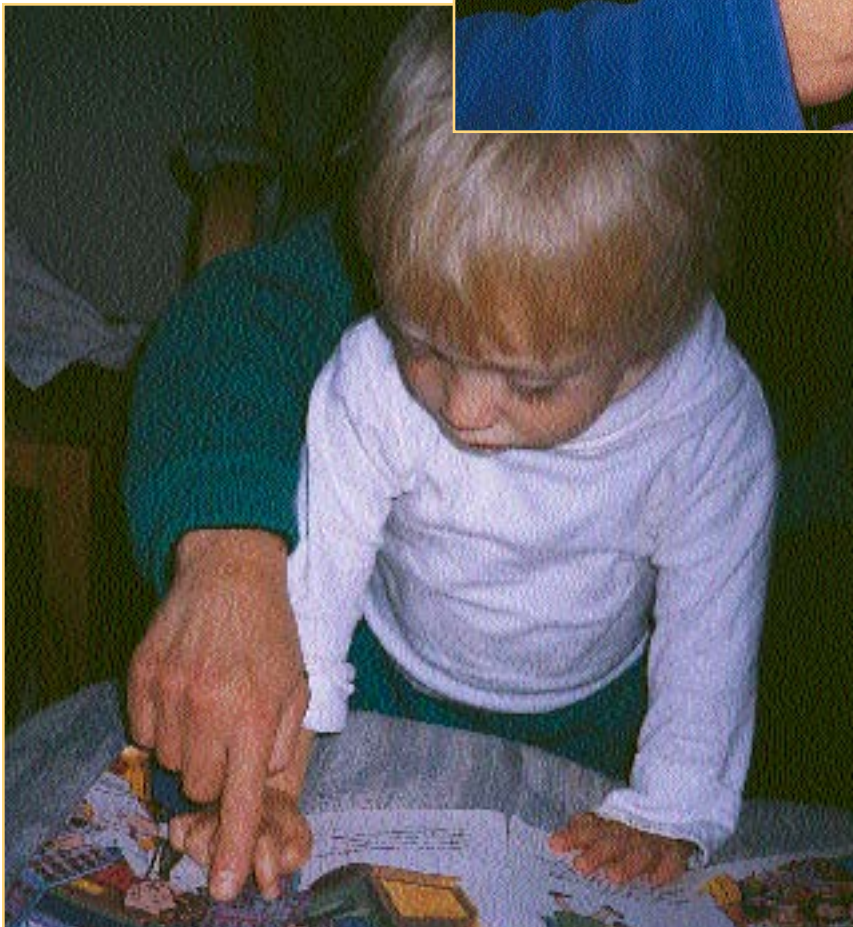


Bodies and People as Topics: The young child who is deafblind is usually most interested in her own body and in what it can do, which is why so many early conversations are about movement. Frequently,

the conversations involving body movements will develop naturally into conversations about bodies themselves. When the child becomes aware of another person moving along with her, she may become curious about that person. Her attention may shift from interest in the movement to interest in the person who is making the same movement. If this happens, we should rejoice, since it is a positive development for one whose lack of vision and hearing results in limited contact with the world. Any reaching out is to be encouraged and built upon.

Paul's gesture of grasping my fingers is a nice development in our conversation. He is now interested not only in his own movements, but also in my body and in its movements. Since my hand is available to him for an extended

A mother of a child who can see will point to something her child is interested in.



period of time, he is able to explore it and experiment with it. Making your hands available for the child to use is a very profitable thing to do with a child who is both deaf and blind.

How do we know when the child has shifted her interest from the movement itself to the person moving alongside her? We need to be very attentive in order to sense

these shifts in the child's attention. Perhaps she will reach out to touch a face, a hand, a leg, as Paul did when he grasped my fingers. Perhaps she will lift her head, or put it down as if in thought, and become quiet for a moment. Perhaps she will shift her body into a different relationship with her partner. When she does one of these things, we need to respond

The tactual equivalent of pointing is mutual touch, with the teacher's hand gently under part of the child's hand. (This girl knows her teacher shares her interest in the teddy bear.)



in skillful ways that let her know we have noticed this shift of attention, this change of conversational topic. If she reaches out with her hand, we may gently touch along with her whatever she is touching, our hand very slightly under her hand so as not to obscure her experience, but to let her know we share that experience. If she reaches out to touch our face, for example, we can touch along with her without controlling, as if to say, "Oh, you see my face." (We may also smile at the same time, so as to give her the tactual experience of that expression.) If she lowers or raises her head, we may want to mirror that with our own head alongside of hers, or gently touch her head with our hand. Using the back of the hand to

gently follow her head movement is a particularly non-intrusive way of touching. Either of these gestures will let her know we have noticed her shift in attention. Each time we affirm her own movement, we need to pause in order to let her have time to again become the initiator. Occasionally during these movement conversations, we may invite the child (our hand under hers, as described above) to touch another part of our body, or to touch a nearby object or person. If we continue in this way, the child's attention will gradually move outward, and her world will expand beyond her own body.

Objects as Topics: The point at which a child who is blind or deafblind becomes interested in an object for its own sake (as distinct from objects as extensions of her own movements) is an exciting moment. It signals an important step in the child's ego development. Usually (though not always) a child will first be interested in people and objects as extensions of herself or as things to be incorporated (put in the mouth), then in movements, then in people as distinct in themselves, and, only after some time, in objects themselves and what they feel like and can do. When a child becomes interested in objects for their own sakes, she understands that she is a separate being—separate from other people, and separate from objects. Selma Fraiberg has described in her wonderful developmental studies of children who are blind, *Insights from the Blind* (1976), the extraordinary process that a child without vision must go through in order to reach the stage where objects are of interest to her. In order to have such an interest in objects, a child must have a secure sense of object permanence, knowing that the objects exist even when she is not in physical contact with them. (This is the same knowledge a

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sighted child exhibits when she is able to search for an object that has been covered up.) When a child reaches this stage, the objects themselves become potential topics of conversation.

For the child with vision, the interest in objects is usually a visual interest coupled with an interest in what she can do with the objects by manipulating them. If she can hear, she will also be interested in the sounds things can make. For the child who is both blind and deaf, the growing interest in the world outside of himself is primarily of tactile, kinesthetic, and olfactory interest. In order to draw out the interest of a child who is deafblind, we must be very attuned to these senses ourselves. We must learn how to make mutual conversational topics not only out of movements, but also out of tactile experiences.

If the child who is deafblind is looking at or touching an object, whatever she is paying attention to can become a topic that the two of us can share. If a child has vision, establishing a mutual topic often happens by means of pointing. Mother will point to an object that the child is looking at and comment on it. "Look. Truck!" she may say when she sees her child noticing a truck. We can do the same thing with a child who has limited vision, making sure we point in a way that is visually accessible, and adding sign language and facial expression to our speech. Or, we can do this tactually for the child who is

blind. The tactual equivalent of a point is a mutual touch. The child needs to know that we are touching the object along with him, that we are sharing the same topic.

We need to touch carefully in a way that accomplishes three objectives. A good mutual touch

- is noncontrolling
- allows the child to know that you share the experience of touching the same object along with her
- does not obstruct the most important parts of the child's own experience of any object that she is touching.

Usually the best way to accomplish these objectives is to gently slide one or two fingertips slightly under the small finger and ring finger of the child's hands. This kind of touch is done, of course, in the context of conversation and assumes we have already approached carefully and with respect, and introduced ourselves to the child. Touching like this is a nonverbal way of saying, "I'm interested in this thing you're touching, too." After we make such a gesture, we need to pause and wait to see what the child will do, what her next turn in the conversation will be.

Paul begins to finger the fabric of the seatbelt on his wheelchair in a way that seems to me as if he is interested in it, probably in its texture. I can very gently place one or two of my fingers just a little beneath one of his fingers, so that he knows I am touching the belt along with him. This is like pointing—it is a way of letting him know I would like to have a conversation about this thing he is touching. It is as though I am saying, "Oh, yes. I see this belt, too." After I do this, I wait to see what Paul will do next. Perhaps he will push my hand away, or move his hand away from mine. I would accept this as his turn in the conversation, as if he were saying, "I don't want to talk about this right now with you." But I would not

immediately move away. I would wait, with my knee still gently touching his, and see if any other potential topics emerged. Perhaps Paul would begin to move another part of his body, and I could gently follow that. Or perhaps he would touch the belt again, in which case I might try again to touch along with him, perhaps in an even more gentle way. Each time that Paul touched something or made a movement, I would respect that as his turn in the conversation, and would try to read its meaning so that my next turn could move the conversation forward in a way that was satisfying to both of us.

If Paul accepts my gesture of touching the seatbelt along with him, what can I do then to continue our

to see what he would do for his next turn in the conversation.

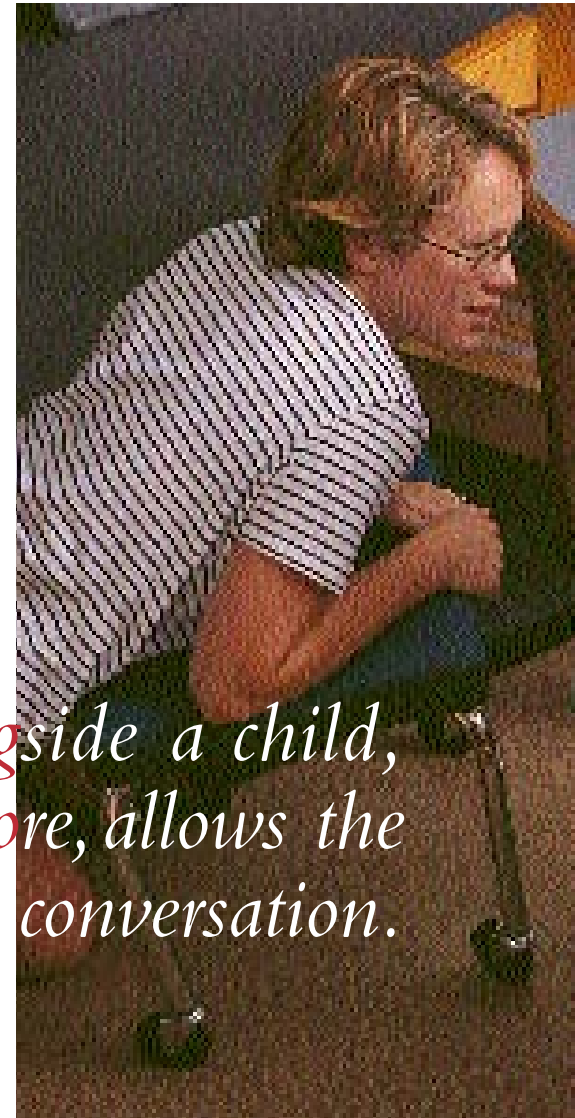
For a child without sight and hearing, and who has learned to become interested in things outside of her own body, the material world provides many, if not most, of the interesting topics. Hence, we need to pay careful attention to the objects we choose to keep in her routine surroundings. We need to make sure she has plenty of interesting items available that will draw her attention and that we can converse about. But we need also to make sure the items and decor we choose are interesting to the child, and not just to

Moving in a parallel way alongside a child, with a similar object to explore, allows the teacher to enter into meaningful conversation.

conversation? I may move my own hand to another part of the seatbelt, perhaps the buckle, and see if his hand would follow. This would be a slight expansion of his topic, a way of saying, "Look. Here's something else to touch! How do you like this one?" Or I may continue to touch the same belt along with him, but move my hand in a different rhythm than he is using and see if he noticed that. This would be like saying, "This feels interesting—when you move your hands fast like this." I might just continue to touch along with him until he did something different himself, and follow him in his next hand movement. Or, I may offer him a new object to touch, ideally one that had an interesting texture, so that I am not completely shifting the topic. This last gesture would be the equivalent of saying something like, "Oh, you like textures. Here's one I find interesting. How do you like this?" Again, I would pause and wait

us. For example, a bedroom with beautifully flowered wallpaper may be pleasing to a young girl who has sight; however, if a child is blind, an accessible multitextured wall hanging or a masonite board upon which various interesting toys or materials can be interchanged would be much more interesting. Equipment that invites pleasing movement will stimulate conversational interactions for the child whose interest is in her own body.

Exploring objects along with a child (rather than simply giving objects to the child to explore on her own) will be a way to encourage curiosity and enrich conversations. For example, if a flashlight is interesting to a child with low vision, we may want to help him to explore what makes it work. Together we can get the batteries,



unscrew the cap, insert the batteries, find the "on" button, and turn it on. As we do this, we can notice what part of the object seems to interest the child, and we can let her know in whatever way we can (touch, expressive words) that we share that interest. We can also flash the light on different objects and name them and talk about them. This is an enjoyable way of expanding topics of conversation and also empowering the child to make selections. Such a game would be especially beneficial to a child who has limited physical mobility. The light can become a way to point out things at a distance.



A similar kind of conversation can happen with a child who is blind if we have some interesting manipulative materials available. Children who are blind often enjoy vibrating toys or materials, and things that give the reward of motion when the child pushes a switch or manipulates the object in some simple way. When we present objects to a child it is very important that we do so in the context of conversation. It is much more useful to the child in the long run to be engaged in a meaningful interaction about an object than to be taught how to push a switch and then left alone with the object. The latter scenario, done

again and again, will condition the child into communicative isolation, while the former—conversing with the child about the object—holds the potential for richness of communication and social learning. (This is not to say that a child should not be allowed time to explore and manipulate objects on his own. It is only to say that if this is the way he spends most of his time, he will miss many opportunities for the kind of incidental learning that can happen during conversational play.)

Having Duplicates of Enjoyable Toys or Objects: You can initiate dialogues without having to take a

toy away from the child. You can play in a parallel way alongside the child, sometimes imitating the child's actions, sometimes introducing new ideas of things to do with the toy.

I give Paul a battery-operated toy that vibrates when it is held in the vertical position, but not when it is in the horizontal position. I give this toy to him by inviting his hand (my hand under his) to reach for the toy, which is in my lap as I sit beside him. I play with the toy first myself, allowing him to feel it, and to feel my movements as I move it so that it turns off and on. Then I release my hold on the object so that he is free to take it and experiment with it. He tentatively lifts it to his lap, but it does not go on because he has not figured out how to hold it in order to activate it.

I have another vibrating toy that is similar. When Paul seems at a loss as to how to work his toy, I invite him again to touch me as I activate my toy. Paul feels my hand with his left hand as I turn the toy off and on by tipping it up and down with my own left hand. After a while I invite Paul again to touch the toy that is in his lap. Though he can pick it up, and does, he has trouble making it vibrate. I reach over gently with my right hand to coax his hand gently from underneath. He succeeds in activating the toy, and brings his left hand over to his own toy so that he can hold it with both hands. He smiles. Slowly, the toy falls to a horizontal position, and stops vibrating. Paul drops his toy, and reaches over with his left hand toward my hands, which are on my own toy. Then he grabs my toy with both his hands and pulls it toward his body. I tease him by a little jostle of my shoulder against his, saying playfully, "You took my toy. Can I have yours?" And I reach over to his lap and take his toy. This conversation about the vibrating toys continues for quite some time, and involves many exchanges of the toys, many attempts by Paul to activate the

toy himself, and increasingly directed attempts by Paul to get my help. On several occasions Paul succeeds in activating his own toy, and I rejoice in his success by playfully putting my own vibrating toy against his so that both are vibrating together, and by saying, "Yes! You made it go!"

The play with these toys has a very different feel and result than it would if there were only one toy and if the goal were simply to teach Paul how to activate the toy. Having duplicates of the toy and exploring what the toy can do along with Paul changes what could be a hand-over-hand lesson into a conversation in which the goal is social and communicative as well as cognitive. This happens in great part because the toy is thought of as a conversational topic rather than only as a teaching tool.

As you get to know a child, you will become aware of the properties of things that engage his interest. Piaget spoke about "schemas" (patterns of acting upon objects) that children use during the sensorimotor period of their development. We can view these schemas as conversational topics in themselves, or as criteria for selecting interesting objects which can expand possible conversational topics for children. For example, if you know a child who enjoys spinning things, you may initiate a conversation by presenting him with a brightly colored top, since that is a topic that is likely to engage him. Initially, the conversation may be limited to taking turns spinning tops; later, it can expand to include both nonverbal and verbal discussion about the various properties of the tops (color, parts, actions). If you interact regularly with the child, a conversation such as this can develop over time. If you are open to it, the two of you will find yourselves developing a vocabulary of gesture and/or words that are related to

this particular topic. This development of relationship and conversation is comparable to what happens between friends over time: Topics grow and deepen as the friends explore them together.

JASON, whom we met in Chapter One, has several preferred topics. The copy machine is his favorite. Because he is a student with low vision, the flashing of light and the movement of the lens across the glass is very stimulating and interesting. A conversation with Jason may easily be struck up about the copy machine. We can, for example, notice and affirm Jason's interest in the light by pointing and signing "light" as he is looking at it. Or, we can draw a picture of the machine, with special emphasis on the light. Or, we can bring another kind of flashing light along with us as

we go with Jason to the copy machine, and compare the two lights. If we can be alert to the reasons for Jason's interest in the copy machine, then it will be easier to converse with him about it.

Our curiosity about the unique interests of a child who is deaf-blind can turn us into enthusiastic participants in any given interchange. I can productively wonder: Why does he like this object? What is it about this movement that is interesting to him? Is he interested in the light, or in the way his hand moves, or in the sound it is making? Our conversations with the child can be voyages of discovery in which we learn more about the uniqueness of the child with each interaction.

Inviting a child who is deafblind to touch your facial expression will help her understand your feelings.



Expanding the Range of Topics:

It is important to provide interesting materials as a way of broadening a child's potential conversational topics. It is also important to provide increased information about the social and material world around her. When we focus entirely on the student, we often forget to share ourselves, and this will result in a very narrow range of topics indeed. Because the child's communication circle seems necessarily limited as a result of her sensory limitations, it is crucial that we provide a broad and natural range of topics of conversation. Sharing with your student or child as much of your own life as possible, in as natural a way as is comfortable for you, is very important. Tell her about your concerns, events in your life, your feelings, your interests. Do this in whatever ways will be most understandable to her and will create the most truly mutual conversational topics for you to share. If you do this, she will have invaluable models for both linguistic and social interactions.

Often we do not share our own experiences and feelings with our students and children because we assume that the lack of a common language makes such sharing impossible. We can use ways other than language to share stories and experiences with children who are deafblind. Here are a few examples:

- Invite the child to have visual or tactual access to your facial expression. Do this often during the course of each day, particularly when you are happy about something the child has done, or something you have experienced together. Do it also when you are sad, surprised, shocked, or disappointed.
- Search for additional nonverbal ways of conveying to the child your reactions to things and

people. Develop a vocabulary of gestures. Shrugging of shoulders, shaking of head, excited movement of hands or body, and rubbing of head with hands—all of these kinds of movements and others can be felt by the child who is blind or seen by a child with some vision, and can convey a great deal of meaning. Most importantly, they build genuine relationship and expand the child's world beyond her own body and self-interests.

- Invite the child regularly to touch objects of yours or clothing you are wearing.
- Invite the child to be near you or in contact with you as you perform chores or carry on conversations in the home or classroom.
- Act out a situation that you recently experienced and show him your reaction to it.
- If he has some vision, draw pictures of things in your experience and compare them with things in his experience (your lunch selection, for example, compared with his lunch selection, or your house compared with his house).
- Bring in photographs of your family or pets or other important people in your life (or bring the pets or family members themselves!).
- Bring the child to some of your favorite places outdoors, and in the community. Show him a tree you like, a playground nearby, a restaurant you enjoy. Visit these places regularly enough for him to become familiar with them, either with his limited vision, and/or with his hands, nose, and kinesthetic sense.

How might I share some of my own experiences with Paul? Imagine that Paul has just dropped his vibrating

toy onto the floor. Rather than simply picking it up and giving it back to him, I may do this: I invite his hand to feel me as I lightheartedly slap my hands against my cheeks and say, "Oh, oh! It fell down!" Then I invite him to follow my hand as I go to pick it up off the floor, and make searching motions with my hand for a moment so that he can "see" me looking for the toy. When I find it, I pick it up excitedly, with a quick motion that he can feel, and invite him to feel my smile of satisfaction.

At lunch time I make it a point to sit beside Paul and eat something of my own as he eats his lunch. I have my own bowl, my own spoon, my own cup, and my own choice of foods. I regularly invite Paul to touch these things so that he knows they are there and that someone else is eating, too. (How else does a child who is deafblind know this?) Occasionally during the meal, I let Paul know how I am enjoying various foods by telling him nonverbally. I may wince when I take a bite of a food I do not like and let Paul feel my expression as I do so. I may also smile when I eat my favorite foods ("Pudding. Yum!!"), so that he begins to get an idea of my preferences. Each of these small and insignificant gestures is actually very important for Paul. Without them he will never have the opportunity to understand that he is part of a social world. He will not be able to converse well about feelings, opinions, foods, and preferences.

As she acquires more and more language, the child who is deafblind can find topics of conversational interest in language materials such as books, newspapers, computer software, and magazines. As she begins to read braille or large print, we need to make sure that more and more resources of this type are available to her in forms she can readily access. Here, too, our responsibility as educators and caregivers is great. If we do not provide these things, the student will not have access to them. We

need to think carefully about what we choose to provide. If we decide to interpret the newspaper, for example, what parts of it do we choose to interpret? Only the news? Or do we give the student the opportunity to know about the editorials, the comics, the ads, the advice columns, the obituaries, and the sports?

Equal Participation

Taking Turns: A Necessary

Conversational Skill: The child who is comfortable with an equal back-and-forth exchange is a child who has already learned something central to all social interactions. We are the ones who have the responsibility to teach this skill to a child. Pausing often within every conversational interaction to allow the child who is deafblind to take a turn, verbal or nonverbal, will help make his linguistic environment more natural and will draw him into it as an involved participant. Often, our conversational pauses with children who are deafblind will need to be significantly longer than they are with our friends who can see or hear or both. (See below, the discussion of “Comfortable Pacing” for a more detailed examination of the necessity of pausing.)

In addition to pausing, we must continually broaden our ideas of what constitutes a turn in an interaction with a child who is deafblind. One major reason why many children who are deafblind are not confident and equal participants in conversations is that adults who interact with them are not sufficiently tuned in to the subtlety of children’s actions. Even the smallest gesture or sound or movement may be the child’s best attempt at participation. If we notice and reward the child’s each small expression, she will be encouraged to participate more and more fully, and will take her turns

with more confidence. Some kinds of gestures or movements that could be taken as conversational turns might be things like this: a scratch of the head, a wriggle of the toes, a deep breath, a yawn, a sudden quieting of movement, or an opening and closing of the hands. These gestures could be seen as equivalent to comments like these: “My head itches,” “I’m feeling restless,” “I need to relax,” “I’m tired,” “Did you hear that noise?” or “I’m so excited.” If we respond to them skillfully (often this means the kind of tactual imitation discussed earlier), then we give them the status of conversational comments, and the child will begin to see himself as a communicator.

When I am seated beside Paul, having a conversation with him, I notice that Paul occasionally shifts his body in the wheelchair. The first time he does this, I acknowledge this shifting by gently putting my right shoulder against his left shoulder and repeating the same kind of movement he has just made, at the same time saying, “You moved.” When he makes the same movement later in our interaction, I surmise that he may be uncomfortable in his seat for some reason. I say, “Oh. You moved again. Maybe something is bothering you,” as I sign, “You move, maybe hurt.” Then I carefully check his seat for distracting things, using my hands to explore behind his back. Sure enough, I find a piece of cracker from snack time. I incorporate that into the conversation by showing it to him (I gently invite his hand, from underneath, to touch the cracker in my hand). I say, “Yes. I think you were uncomfortable. I found a cracker.” I sign, “Yes, you hurt, cracker.” Then I pause and wait for his turn. He does nothing for a few moments. I wait. After about 30 seconds, he moves his body again, this time more slightly. I put my shoulder against his, and mirror the energy of his movement, which is now quieter. I notice he now has a more relaxed expression on his

face. I sign, “Better. Cracker finished.” Then I invite him to feel as I throw the cracker in the trash.

Each time that Paul moves or changes his expression, I can accept that as his turn. I can seek the meaning in it, and can take a turn that relates to the topic that his gesture or movement seems to indicate.

In Chapter Five we will present additional specific suggestions for encouraging turn-taking or equal participation. Virtually any activity the child engages in can become an opportunity for the two of you to take turns. Not only will taking turns give the child practice in valuable conversational skills, but it will also give her the chance to know more about you. If, for example, you are sitting next to the child and eating while she is eating, and if you make sure that she has clear visual or tactual access to your actions, then she will come to know a great deal about her similarity to other people. In addition, if the two of you are taking turns eating, you will have the occasion to model a variety of skills for her: You can ask for things you want; you can comment on your reactions to different foods; you can request her help in reaching an item for you; you can thank her and so on. Whether you do these things verbally or nonverbally will depend upon her level of understanding. Either way, the taking of turns will engage her in conversational interaction.

In addition to making sure that you allow equal turn-taking, there are several other ways to ensure that there is equal participation in the conversations you have with children and adults who are deafblind.

Comments, Rather Than

Questions or Directives: If we look at our own conversations with friends, we can see that it is through comments that they are often initiated and continued.



“It’s hard to open that jar!” Comments, more than directions or questions, enrich conversations.

Though we may sometimes ask each other questions to get information, we rarely give each other directions or ask question after question. A comment such as, “It looks like it’s going to snow,” may evolve into a whole conversation about skiing, where you like to ski, and experiences of skiing. Conversations such as these occur less frequently in classrooms, particularly where children with cognitive and sensory disabilities are concerned. A child with significant disabilities will naturally need help with many daily tasks. Often, a teacher or parent or peer who frequently helps the child will begin to think of herself in the role of caregiver and will unconsciously begin to use a preponderance of directions and questions when talking with the child. This is true to such an extent that linguists who have observed this phenomenon again and again have termed this kind of language “teacherese.”

Often, in such situations, as well as in many adult-child interactions, we seldom see conversations that are characterized by a relaxed interchange of comments.

It is important to become aware of our tendency to give directions and ask questions rather than make comments and to see the ways in which this tendency can inhibit the natural flow of conversation. If you have a chance to videotape a segment of interaction with the child who is deafblind, it is useful to observe the videotape looking in particular at what kinds of functions your language performs. If you ask a lot of questions and give directives, what effect do these have on the interaction? Is there a difference between a genuine question and a “teacherese” question (one you already know the answer to such as, “What day is today?”) What about your comments? Do they affect the interactions differently?

Remember that many children are entirely conditioned to respond only to questions and directions. If you shift to making comments, it will take them a while to understand that they can offer comments of their own, and to delight in this ability. You need to be patient in your efforts to encourage this kind of equal participation in conversation.

Another useful exercise in becoming aware of the nature of your particular language environment is to spend a day with the intent of not asking any questions or giving any commands. (This is not to say that one should never ask questions or give directions, only that one should be aware of the proportions of these kinds of utterances; this exercise is useful in heightening that awareness.) See if you can think of comments that would serve as alternatives to the questions and commands you normally use. Comments serve several important conversational purposes: They are excellent language models, and they can also serve as cognitive models, exposing the student to a variety of ways of thinking about the world. When used regularly, along with pauses, they give the student the opportunity to take a turn and be an initiator in a conversation; they expand the possibilities for conversational topics in a way that questions and directives do not; they tend in general to normalize the language environment.

Here are some examples of comments that can serve as alternatives to typical directives and questions. These examples may encourage you to invent your own comments and to expand your notion of the kind of language you might want to use with your student who is deafblind.

The language in these comments may be adjusted to fit the level of the student’s understanding. Remember that comments

TYPICAL QUESTIONS/ DIRECTIVES	ALTERNATIVE COMMENTS
“Put your coat on.”	<p>Verbal: “It’s cold out today.” “I’m going to get my coat.” “Here’s your red coat.” “Here’s my new coat. It has a red collar. Here. You can touch it.”</p> <p>Nonverbal: Put on your own coat, inviting tactual or visual access.</p>
“Get ready for lunch.”	<p>Verbal: “It’s 12:15.” “I’m hungry.” “I wonder what’s for lunch today.” “Yesterday we had macaroni for lunch. I prefer salad. I hope we have salad today. I’m going to wash my hands.”</p> <p>Nonverbal: Get lunch materials, along with child.</p>
“What do you want? Crackers or cookies?”	<p>Verbal: “Look. We have two choices today. Crackers and cookies. I think I want crackers today. (Reach for crackers.) These crackers are delicious!” “I remember yesterday you ate cookies. I wonder which you will choose today.” “Look. Mary (another student) is eating cookies. She likes them.” “These cookies have chocolate chips.”</p> <p>Nonverbal: Make your own choice of crackers or cookies, allowing access. Pause.</p>
“Stand up.”	<p>Verbal: “It’s 1:00. We’re going to the gym now. I’m excited about using the trampoline.” “I see David getting ready for gym.” (Seated beside student) “I’m going to stand up now so I can get ready for gym.”</p> <p>Nonverbal: Stand up yourself.</p>
“No! Don’t touch that.”	<p>Verbal: “Here is something interesting for you to touch. Let’s explore it together” (while offering an alternative object.) “I think you are curious about that. Let’s ask John if it’s OK if we touch it together.”</p> <p>Nonverbal: Offer alternative object.</p>

can be made nonverbally as well as verbally. If you point with the simple intent of drawing attention to something, you have made a comment. If you point with the intention of asking the student to pick it up, you have made a directive. Children can tell the difference, either from your expression or from the physical quality of your gesture. Become aware not only of how your signed and spoken language is functioning (whether it includes a preponderance of questions/directives) but also of how your nonverbal communication is functioning. Try to include as much commenting as possible in that area as well. Notice, in addition, what your feeling of relationship is like when you are questioning, giving directives, and commenting. How does each of these kinds of language affect your feeling about the interaction. Does commenting allow you to have more fun? Does it engender more respect?

If you look back at my interactions with Paul, you will see that most of them, although predominantly nonverbal in nature, are nevertheless in the form of comments. The gestures that I made with him during our interactions are not directions, nor are they questions. Mostly, they comment on his topics by saying, in effect, “I see what you are doing.” Every time I imitate one of his actions or follow him, I am making a comment of this sort. My careful hand position—my hand underneath his rather than on top of it—seeks to guarantee that what I say with my hands is not directing him, but is commenting.

Comfortable Pacing

In our conversations with children who are deafblind, we must be aware of the crucial role of pacing. We have all had the experience of interacting with someone who is talking “a mile a minute,” who

never gives others the chance to interject a comment or question. Even though we have the advantage of being able to understand the language the person is using, we often will tune out because it is too difficult to follow along, and too frustrating not to be given the chance to insert a word. For the child who is deafblind, the issue is compounded by the limited opportunities he has to communicate with others and the limited opportunities to select a communication partner.

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N OUR
CONVERSATIONS
WITH CHILDREN,
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In seeking to adjust the pacing of our interactions with a child who is deafblind, we must consider factors such as the amount and type of vision loss, the extent of hearing loss, the individual child’s rate of processing information, and the child’s motor response time. To develop a feeling for all that is involved, let us think of the process of receiving and responding in a conversational setting.

- We must first be aware of the person who is “sending” the message to us. (We have talked about the importance of carefully introducing yourself each time you approach a child who is deafblind.)
- We must physically receive the message (e.g., feel or see the sign, hear the sound of the other person’s voice).
- We must mentally process what has been transmitted.
- We must think about how we wish to respond.

- We must plan a motor response to send a return message (e.g., speaking, pointing, signing).

For many people, all this happens in an instant. However, for someone who has a significant vision and hearing loss (and possibly additional processing and/or motor difficulties), this can be a very arduous task. It may require a very long time by normal conversational standards.

If we do not carefully control the pacing of our own transmittal of a message, it may be impossible for the person to receive and interpret the message. We must speak, sign, and gesture slowly enough and clearly enough for the child to be able to process the input accurately. Likewise, if we do not provide sufficient “wait time,” we can often miss the opportunity to receive the child’s thoughts, ideas or responses. Sometimes it will take a child who is deafblind several minutes to respond to a communication. Waiting this long for a response can seem like waiting an eternity to someone accustomed to living in a fast-paced culture where response time is measured in seconds or fractions of a second. You might take a moment now and let a full minute elapse while you sit in silence. A conversational pause of this length is very unusual, and often uncomfortable, for most of us. But if we do not wait, we may be interrupting the ability to have a balanced interaction. Worst of all, we may be sending the unintended message that we really are not so interested in what that person has to say.

Annie is a girl with low vision and with a profound hearing loss. She is also in a wheelchair because of cerebral palsy and has limited use of her arms. At lunch time, Annie was observed being fed by an instructor. The woman feeding Annie was putting mouthfuls

of food from a spoon into Annie's mouth. This instructor was, in effect, taking all the conversational turns herself, without waiting for Annie to have her own turn, whatever that turn might be. The instructor's sole agenda was feeding; she was not thinking about conversational pacing. At one time, as the instructor turned to speak to someone else, Annie painstakingly lifted her arm (which obviously took a lot of mental and motor effort) and reached ever so slowly toward the glass of milk. Just before Annie's hand



We must respect the child's own rhythm in conversations.

reached the glass, the instructor turned around and grabbed the glass to give Annie a drink, oblivious of Annie's turn in the interaction. This miscommunication was largely the result of failure to adjust the pacing of the interaction to suit Annie's slow, yet deliberate, motions.

The Importance of Access to Context

For people who can see and hear, the social context and physical environment provide a constant backdrop to conversational interactions, and often present conversational topics. It is important to

give the child who is deafblind access to the environment whenever possible.

Providing compensation for the sensory losses of the child who is deafblind entails a great deal of sensitivity, awareness, and effort (enjoyable effort!) on the part of teachers or caregivers. When we provide the connection between the child and what is going on around her, we enable her to step into the flow of life.

While the child is young, or developmentally young, the connection between her and the world needs to be almost always hands-on, involving close physical, auditory, or visual involvement with whatever she is experiencing. Often she will need help to reach out and explore her environment. Helping her will entail using skillful touch in order to invite her hands outward. Gentle touch, the teacher's hands under the child's, never controlling, always coaxing, is the best kind. Even though we may be tempted to put our hands on top of the child's hands in order to guide them, we need to remember that the more freedom we give her hands, the more she will be encouraged to exercise that freedom.

Providing natural and appropriate access to language is perhaps the most crucial aspect of giving the child who is deafblind access to the environment. Once satisfying and genuine conversational interactions are established, language can become part of those interactions in a natural way. The comments that form the bulk of these interactions can gradually be made using sign language, speech, object symbols, pictures, or other alternative linguistic symbols, as appropriate to each individual child. The chapter on communication modes will discuss these language forms in detail. If the child is provided access to language in appropriate modes during the

course of genuine conversations, learning will take place naturally and will be pleasurable for both child and teacher or parent.

Providing access to context will lead to richer conversational interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, and will aid immeasurably in the development of language. As a child acquires more language and reaches the levels described in the following chapters, language can begin to function as a distance sense for her. She can learn about things and communicate with people at a distance by using the power of words. We, as conversational partners, can act as eyes and ears for the child and as interpreters of language and actions in the environment. We can describe surroundings events and conversations. This is why language is so important for a person who has limited sight and hearing. One of the deep satisfactions of teaching children who are deafblind is participating in this acquisition of words and language structures. We can see their worlds broaden and their power increase, and we can experience again and again, first-hand, the miracle of language.

The Continuing Importance of Conversations

As you begin to break away from the more traditional styles of teaching and create a much more dynamic environment, you will find a dramatic increase in your student's conversational fluency and in your own enjoyment. Focusing on conversation, at whatever level and in whatever ways the child is capable, is in fact the best way to ensure healthy communication development throughout the entire course of her education. We have given examples in this chapter of some very basic kinds of conversations with children who are deafblind. But all interactions with people who are deafblind, however

simple or complex, need to be undertaken with awareness of the basic elements of a good conversation. Then these conversations can become the basis for learning language, for developing concepts about the world, and for having increasingly rich social interactions.

Virtually all of the specific teaching techniques that you will read about in this book have been developed by people who have entered into conversations with children who are deafblind and who have thereby been motivated to communicate with them in gradually more sophisticated ways. Touch cues, object schedule systems, augmentative communication methods, even braille and

sign language—all these have been invented by people who wished to have increasingly meaningful conversations with people who are blind or deaf or both (or by persons who have vision and/or hearing losses themselves).

As we seek to teach language and symbol systems to people who are deafblind, we must remember to teach them in the context of genuine conversations. The sign language words that we use, for example, will gain their meaning from the contexts in which we use them. If these contexts are composed of mutually enjoyable interactions, the meanings will be rich. Without a conversational grounding, signs or

symbols will be learned (if at all) in isolation, and will have the quality of trained responses rather than the quality of genuine language and true communication.

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 who will teach us how to have 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.

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ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES

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