

First steps with the deafblind infant

The causes of deafblindness in infancy are many. Often other organs such as the heart or kidney are also involved, systemic health issues such as the thyroid, endocrine imbalances may be present and other sensations such as balance can be impacted. Some of these issues may be apparent, but others can easily be missed. Therefore, observe all behaviours carefully for what they can tell you about the infant and ensure that all health needs and medical treatments required are in place.

Vision and hearing may be impaired and not completely unavailable to the child. Many children may not get enough useful information from these senses and will therefore not respond to stimulation. Simplifying the sensory stimulation in the environment so that the infant may more easily pay attention to one sensory input, be it sound or something to look at and see whether you are able to get a response. The human voice, face and touch are the strongest and most pleasurable sources of auditory, visual and tactile input and so playing with the baby is the easiest and most effective form of intervention!

The loss of vision and hearing mean the primary ways in which the infant learns about the world are not available to the infant. The infant must touch, hold and feel what other babies learn by seeing and hearing repeatedly. Our role is to act as a bridge between the infant and the things, people and events that surround the baby. To help the baby begin on this journey, we need to establish a strong and trusting relationship with the infant and to create routines, so that they come to recognize and welcome with typical infant curiosity and discovery, something that is new or different.

The importance of hands

One basic skill we need to master as interveners is how to guide the infant's hands. If you want a child to learn how to do something – hold a cup, for example, sit behind the baby and let her place her hands on yours, as you pick up and hold the cup. This way, she feels your natural action and can reach from within the security of your hands to touch the object when she feels ready and withdraw when she feels she needs to process the information.

If you are guiding the hand to an object, always gently support the infant's arm at or below the wrist, leaving the hands and fingers free to touch or withdraw at their own pace. If you are consistent about never forcing the hand, the baby will learn to trust you and be more willing to explore along with you. Babies who are forced, will either become resistant to new experiences or very passive – both will further restrict their experience and understanding of the world.

Place little bracelets with interesting texture on the hands of infants and gently encourage one hand to discover guiding the movement from between the elbow and the shoulder

joints. Once the hands contact each other, leave them to explore! Given early experience, infants will discover their hands at around the same time as their sighted hearing peers. If you have been carrying, touching and playing with the infant, they already know you. As they discover their hands, draw their attention to yours. Wear a ring or a bracelet so they can easily identify you and begin each interaction by presenting your hand with the ring or bracelet under the infant's hand. Give them a moment to touch and think about it and then start your interaction.

As they grow, babies love simple turn taking games with the hands – clapping together, sliding fingers between theirs and taking turns to lead and follow, choose and suggest games. These games teach them the elements of conversation skills and help them anticipate that your hands can “tell” them things. As they understand this, they will learn to reach for your hands to understand something or will pay attention when you slide your hand under theirs, knowing that you are going to “say” something.

Relationship, Routines, Signals and Signs

The first goal with the deafblind infant is to establish a strong relationship where the foundations are trust and joy. If the baby doesn't learn to trust you or learn to see you as someone interesting and enjoyable, they will much prefer to stay engaged with their own body and at best tolerate your interactions. This means you must be gentle, ever alert and responsive to what they are feeling and saying with their body movements and able to offer them a fun and secure way of interacting with and discovering the world around them.

Routines provide infants with a predictable world and help them start to anticipate what is going to happen next. Take time to signal the start of a routine in a way that they understand – remember, not being able to see or hear, they will not know what is happening around them. Place your hand with the bracelet or watch on it to signal who you are; touch their shoulders firmly to signal that you are going to pick them up; let them smell the warm food and then touch their lips gently with your fingers before you begin to feed them; help them touch the towel before you take them for a bath. Over time, if you are consistent, they will show you by their body action that they know what is going to happen. Develop a signal for all routines and you will find the baby is no longer startled or afraid.

Soon, you can help your baby make a simple sign – let them smell their food, you bunch your fingers touch their lips, and then take their hand to their mouth to show them how to sign “food”. Helping your baby sign while sitting behind or side by side with them will ensure that they are experiencing the hand movement in the correct way. If you were guiding them while sitting across from them, we tend to move their hands awkwardly. As your baby grows, sing simple songs together, especially ones that have a good rhythm and a variety of signs. Find or make up songs which use the fingers, hands and arms.