

Deafblind Communication Methods



The population of people with deafblindness is diverse due to wide variation in degrees of vision and hearing loss, and in some instances the presence of other disabilities. But one thing that all people with deafblindness have in common is the need for specialised communication support.

There is no standard terminology for different deafblind communication methods and techniques so it is important to be aware that the names given to the different communication methods described in this booklet are the names used in Victoria Australia and these may be different in other States and other countries.

Visual frame sign

People with Usher's Syndrome have tunnel vision and so their field of vision is restricted. This means they will only see signs within their field of vision. Interpreters and people signing with people who use visual frame sign need to work out what their frame of vision is and keep the signs within this frame. Signs outside of their visual field such as "dog" need to be fingerspelt or the American version may be used.

Tracking

As a person with Usher's syndrome's vision deteriorates, they may start to place their palm over the wrists of the person signing to them in order to be able to track where to look to see the signs and give them extra tactile information such as the force behind the signs which helps convey the emotions behind the signs.

Tactile sign

People who use tactile sign place their hands over the hand of their communication partner to feel the signs. As facial expression is an important part of Auslan, communication partners need to give extra information to help convey the meaning of what is being signed. For example a question mark needs to be drawn they know they are being asked a question and a smiley face or the sign for laughing is used if someone is making a joke.

Social Haptic Communication

Social haptics is a tactile way of giving a person with deafblindness information. For example. the layout of a room, facial expressions of people in a group, or that you have entered or are leaving a room, features of art and music. Social haptics is not a substitute for sign language but provides the person with deafblind with additional information.

Print

Some people with deafblindness prefer to receive information in large print. Use a thick black text to ensure the print is a good size on white paper. If a computer is available, this is easier to read than print as the text is more consistent. Some people prefer black print on a white screen but due to glare some people with deafblindness prefer white on a black background.

Close range sign

Some people with deafblindness who use Auslan, need their communication partner to stand close with their hands at eye level to see the signs clearly. Work out with the person what is the best distance for you to sit or stand so they can best see the signs. You may need to sign a little more slowly so the person is better able to see all the signs and particularly with fingerspelling which can be difficult to see.

Deafblind fingerspelling

Deafblind fingerspelling is very similar to the two handed alphabet that Deaf people use, but each letter is produced onto the hand of the person who is deafblind.

Print on Palm

Using block capital letters drawn with your index finger on a person's palm is a way to communicate with someone who has difficulty hearing speech or seeing print. Print on palm is a useful way to communicate in noisy environments. Print on palm is also a way for people with deafblindness to communicate with people who do not know sign language. Messages are drawn onto the receivers palm.



Routine, key signs, pictographs, photos, touch cues, gesture, objects

Some people born with deafblindness have limited language skills or no formal communication system. These people often express themselves through vocalisations, body movements, gestures and facial expression. It is important that staff are very observant and receptive to an individual's unique range of communicative behaviours. To assist people with limited communication skills to understand what is going on it is important that communication partners stick to the person's usual routine, and use touch cues, objects, key signs, photos, or pictographs to cue them in to what is happening next. It is important that people born with deafblindness feel seen and heard by others and for someone with no formal language skills, imitating their behaviours is a good way to let them know you have seen and heard them and are interested in them and what they have to say.

Closing remarks

Communication issues pose many barriers for people with deafblindness. However, skilled, trained, sensitive and observant communication partners can help to reduce the isolation, provide important opportunities for learning and just having a good laugh with others. It is important to note that all of the methods described in this booklet are very tiring and people with deafblindness will tire more quickly when involved in long conversations.



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