Strategies for Parents to Use in Developing a Foundation for Literacy
Published by The Ohio Center for Deafblind Education

The Ohio Center for Deafblind Education (OCDBE) provides technical assistance services at no cost to children, birth through 21 years of age, with combined vision and hearing loss. Technical assistance includes onsite consultation, training and professional development, information dissemination, and other consultative services. In addition, the Center is responsible for maintaining an annual registry of children and youth who have been identified as deafblind within the state of Ohio. Families, service providers, and agencies supporting children and youth with deafblindness may request services at any time. For additional information, visit www.ohiodeafblind.org or call 614-897-0020.

Special Thanks

Special thanks are extended to Dr. Lynne Hamelberg, OCDBE Family Information/Outreach Specialist, for developing the content for this publication. OCDBE also wishes to thank its Technical Assistance Design and Deployment (TADD) Team whose members reviewed and provided helpful feedback that was used in the development and refinement of this publication.

The Ohio Center for Deafblind Education is primarily supported through a grant (#H326T1300192) with the Research to Practice Division, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Additional support for targeted activities is provided by the Ohio Department of Education. There are no copyright restrictions on this document. However, please cite and credit the source when copying all or part of this document. The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H326T1300192. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Susan Weigert.

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Introduction

Developing a foundation for literacy is important for all children. All children develop skills such as motor, communication, and language skills that enhance literacy development. How a child with deafblindness develops skills that lead to literacy is affected by the degree of the child’s visual and hearing impairment. Parents are the most important teachers in the development of literacy skills for their child.
The Importance of Concepts in the Development of Pre-Literacy Skills in Young Children

For all children, the contact, interactions, and activities that a parent provides facilitate the foundation for the development of concepts, which are a necessary component of the development of literacy skills. Some children with deafblindness may express language and communicate through verbalizations while others may communicate through physical responses, facial expressions, touch cues, or sign language.

Concepts are the foundation of literacy. A child’s understanding of concepts is critical in the development of literacy skills.

A concept is a word or phrase such as “running inside,” “more,” and “put your toys away” that gives meaning to communication and language. All children develop concepts through repetitive use in communication or repetitive activities beginning when the child is an infant. For a child with deafblindness, concept development is difficult to acquire and must be intentionally taught.

The stages of concept development are sequential for all children. Stages of concept development are:

1. object existence
2. object permanency
3. object differences
4. object names/labels
5. object characteristics, and

Each of these concept stages must intentionally be taught to a child with deafblindness in order for the concept to become part of the child’s memory. At each stage, the rate of concept development for a child with deafblindness is individualized and based upon the child’s degree of visual and hearing impairment and developmental needs.
Daily Routines

Beginning in infancy, daily routines provide an opportunity for a parent to develop a child’s skills and lay the foundation for the development of concepts. Daily repetitive activities such as diapering, feeding, and dressing are opportunities for a parent to provide repetitive communication and language exposure. Language exposure through repetitive activities helps the child become familiar with language that is used as part of each aspect of a daily routine and attach meaning to the language associated with the activity.

Activities to Incorporate Into Daily Routines

1. Have the child manipulate, touch, or smell objects that are used in daily routines such as dressing or eating.
2. Have the child help locate objects that are encountered during daily routines (e.g., locating spoon when eating).
3. Name or sign objects that the child is manipulating or touching (e.g., this is your diaper).
4. Describe the action that is taking place (e.g., let’s put on your shoe).
5. Describe the location of objects (e.g., the cookie is on the table).
6. Label objects the child comes into contact with during daily routines (e.g., food, shoe, books).
7. Name or sign the daily routine or action that is part of the daily routine (e.g., bath, eat).

Reading stories to a young child is often part of a daily routine. This exposes the child to the rhythm of reading and the fluctuations of a parent’s voice in the expression of the story’s characters that give meaning to the story content. Many books for young children are designed for repeated readings to enhance language, letters, letter sounds, and rhyming in addition to familiarizing the child with book orientation, page turning from right to left, and reading from left to right and top to bottom. Reading books aloud, pointing out and naming the content of pictures, and asking questions about story content are ways to reinforce language and develop concepts, all of which are significant components of literacy skills.
Strategies to Use When Reading Stories

1. Select books that have:
   • simple, repetitive words or phrases.
   • embedded textures that the child may touch
   • simple, bold pictures

2. When reading:
   • emphasize words and phrases with expressive voice, tone
   • associate objects in books with the child’s toys
   • encourage the child to imitate sounds used in the book
   • re-read books frequently to enhance the child’s familiarity with the story, sounds and words used, and the rhythm of language
   • familiarize the child with left to right reading by assisting the child in following text with a finger in book or book with braille
   • assist the child in page turning with physical assistance or prompts
   • use facial expressions, gestures, touch cues, or sign to emphasize the language of the story

The Importance of Touch

For a child with deafblindness, touch provides a means of exploring and obtaining information from the environment. Daily activities and routines are enhanced through touch. While exploring objects, a child has an opportunity to gather information and learn vocabulary related to the development of concepts such as size and texture.

Parental touch helps the child build a trusting relationship, which is necessary for the child to feel comfortable in learning skills that involve touch from other adults. A variety of experiences involving
touch support a child’s ability to learn touch cues in activities or routines as a means of communication. A child’s familiarity with touch supports the introduction of sign language if, based upon the child’s needs, sign language is introduced as a means of communication.

### Strategies for Incorporating Touch

1. Use hand-under-hand when guiding a child (e.g., picking up a spoon and guiding it to the child’s mouth).
2. Describe texture when guiding a child’s hand over an object (e.g., petting a dog and verbalizing or signing “soft” or “rough”).
3. Describe the temperature of objects (e.g., cold when eating ice cream, hot when eating soup, cold when touching snow).
4. Routinely associate a physical object to touch or touch cue with a specific activity (e.g., touch, tap, or rub a foot before shoes are put on).

### The Importance of Play

Play is an important part of a young child’s literacy development. Young children learn through their play. According to Gleason (2008, p. 5), through play, a child learns:

- Trust and anticipation that certain things will always occur
- How to make things happen
- Ways to ask for help, ask for more, ask to be done
- The power of making choices
- Better understanding of the world
- Communication and its many different forms

A child can explore new play experiences or revisit previous play experiences individually and with others. Each activity, whether new or previously experienced, provides opportunities for the introduction and repetition of concepts through touch, touch cues, language, and routines.

Play may occur in the natural environment or with toys. It may include activities that are motor oriented or facilitated with toys, individually, or with other children or adults. Toys may include sensory toys that move, have sound, and/or have texture. Other toys may imitate real life or involve media – such as crayons or play dough – that provide a child with an opportunity to create.
Each play activity provides opportunities to introduce and reinforce language and concepts.

Play occurs individually or with others. Individually, play can be facilitated to develop a child’s ability to attend and stay on task. Play that is inclusive of others helps with the development of turn-taking, cause and effect, and sequencing such as first, next, and last. Because concepts must be taught to a child with deafblindness, play offers an opportunity for a concept to be taught in the natural environment and become part of the child’s memory through the child’s repetitious engagement in the play activity.

When engaging a child in play, it is important to follow the child’s lead in identifying play activities. Language and concepts that are introduced should be associated with the child’s play. A child’s interest in the play activity helps support understanding of both language and concepts related to the activity. For example, the concepts of running and climbing can be introduced if a child is interested in play activities involving running and climbing.

Not only does play provide a basis for language and concept development, play provides an opportunity for a child to develop both gross and fine motor skills. Gross motor development is fundamental in a child’s ability to develop skills related to movement – walking, running, jumping, and climbing. Fine motor skills enable a child to develop eye-hand coordination skills necessary in daily life activities such as dressing, eating, coloring, and writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies to Incorporate Into Play</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide the sign and/or verbalize the name of the activity and the objects used in the activity (e.g., running, swinging, tag)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Describe and demonstrate with the child the action used in play (e.g., running, hopping, walking)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Describe, demonstrate, and participate in a play activity (e.g., rolling a ball back and forth; using words such as first, wait, your turn)</td>
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**Language**

For infants, language begins with the recognition and mimicking of sounds. As recognition of sounds increases, a child puts sounds together to form words. The ability for a child to communicate emerges through the development of sounds and sounds into words. A parent’s daily verbal interactions with a child with deafblindness support the child’s exposure to and recognition of sounds and opportunities to mimic sound production and eventually the formation of words.

For some children who are deafblind, language development will include the introduction and mimicking of sign. Parental verbal interactions can be embedded in daily routines such as diapering, dressing, eating, and play. The rate at which a child with deafblindness acquires recognition and mimicking of sounds and the child’s expression of words are affected by the child’s degree of visual and hearing impairment.

### Activities for Encouraging Language

1. Provide the sign or object name when introducing a new toy
2. Make and encourage sounds when interacting during daily routines (e.g., mama, dada)
3. Imitate sounds made by the child (e.g., ba ba, da da, mama)
4. Model child’s word approximations
5. Name or sign sounds in the environment (e.g., dog barking, car honking, boy crying)

**Communication**

Receptive communication—how one understands what is communicated by another—and expressive communication—how one communicates with another—are the basis of communication between individuals. Communication may be non-verbal or verbal. Non-verbal methods of communicating include body language, physical reactions, body movements, and touch cues. Others can attach meaning to each of these methods of non-verbal communication. Examples of non-verbal communication include pointing, gesturing, clapping, grimacing, or pulling away. Expressive communication involves the use of sounds, words, phrases, or sentences that communicate meaning to others. Touch cues, sign language, and verbal language are all means of expressive communication.

As with all children, the communication skills of a child with deafblindness are developed through interactions with others. For a child with deafblindness, the means of communication will be affected by the child’s developmental needs and the degree of visual impairment and hearing loss. However, turn-taking, the ability to attend, and the knowledge of vocabulary and concepts are all components of effective communication regardless of whether the child’s method of communication is non-verbal or verbal.
As a primary caregiver, parents have a critical role in developing a child’s communication skills. The skills a child acquires through parental facilitation of daily activities, touch, play, and language and concept development are important as a child learns non-verbal or verbal communication skills. The skills learned in each of these areas provide a foundation needed for effective communication for all children, including children with deafblindness. Each of these skills plays a role in developing a child’s literacy skills.

### Techniques for Supporting Communication

1. Use exaggerated facial expressions, when appropriate (e.g., surprise, happy)
2. Use body movements, to support words or actions (e.g., use fingers when counting, skipping when saying or signing “skipping”)
3. Use sign in conjunction with words
4. Point to an individual or object when stating “next”
5. Use the child’s gestures, body movements, and sign, if applicable, to understand and state the child’s intentions

### Summary

Pre-literacy skills emerge as part of a child’s development of language. Language skills, a prerequisite to the development of literacy skills, are the same for all children. The unique needs of the child with deafblindness affect the rate of acquisition of skills and the methods and strategies used to develop pre-literacy skills. A parent’s role in supporting the development of skills in the child’s natural environment is critical in supporting the child’s development of literacy skills.
References


