



The Importance of Hands & Touch for Children who are Deafblind

A number of years ago a thought occurred to me which changed – and continues to change – the way I interact with children and adults who are deafblind. The thought went like this:

I, as a seeing, hearing person, use my hands mostly as tools. I use my fingers and thumbs to grasp things, manipulate things, hold things. (I am holding a pen right now and using it to write with. The pen, the tool, could be seen as an extension of my hand.)

Many, if not most, children and adults who are deafblind need to use their hands as tools, too. But (and here was the important part of my thought) they need also to use their hands as *eyes* and *ears* – as ways of getting information -- and as a kind of *voice* – as a primary way of expressing themselves. And, too, many also use their hands as *ways to regulate* their sensory systems – they may flap their hands or tap their heads, for example, seeking perhaps to give themselves some of the stimulation they miss through their eyes and ears. (I do similar things in less obvious forms, sometimes tapping my fingers or twisting my hair or playing with a pen.)



Realizing that a person who is deafblind uses their hands for so many functions, and realizing how important their hands are for them, I now interact differently.

One thing I almost always do now when I first meet a child who is deafblind (and also when I begin any interaction) is to notice their hands very carefully. I look to see how they are using their hands at various moments. When are they using their hands like eyes? Like ears? Like tools? Like voice? For self-stimulation? It is not always easy to differentiate functions of hands. The distinctions may be subtle. But I have found that the more I practice making these distinctions, the better I can relate to a child through her hands.

I may, for example, notice a child reach her flat hand out with sweeping motions, scanning a table in front of her: I see that she is “looking” with her hands, using them as substitutes for her eyes. Moments later I may see her pick up a cup she has found and bring it to her lips: her hands are then acting as tools. Maybe I see her set the cup down and use one finger to trace a texture on the edge of the cup: again she is looking, this time in a very careful way. Perhaps she places her hand flat on the table in front of her to feel the vibrations of heavy footsteps walking

by: her hand has become an ear for a moment, feeling the sound. She may then reach toward where she supposes the footsteps to be coming from, in a gesture that seems to say, “Come here!” or “Who is that?!”: her hands at that moment become like a voice for her. If she is left alone for some time, she may begin tapping her head with her fingertips: this might be a way of giving herself needed stimulation.



Sometimes I cannot differentiate the functions with my eyes alone. Just watching a child touch an object or another person may not let me know whether she is really “looking” with her hands or whether she is just casually glancing, using his hands for self-stimulation rather than for getting information. But, if I offer my own hands, then I can feel for myself the quality of her touch. My own hands can listen and tell me whether hers are genuinely receptive, or absent-minded, or eagerly expressive. Sometimes when I interact with a child’s hands I close my own eyes for a few

moments so that I can better concentrate on my own sense of touch, and so I can enter her tactile world for at least a short time. This practice in interacting with the child’s hands, while keeping in mind these various functions of hands, improves my skill in relating.

There are several gestures that I use a great deal now during the conversations that my hands have with the hands of a child who is deafblind. One thing I often do is what I have just described: I simply offer my hands to theirs in a receptive way, usually palms-up, under their hands. I have found that children can tell when my own hands are listening to theirs. If my hands are open, flexible, relaxed, and alive, the child nearly always responds by either exploring or gesturing or initiating a game. This gesture is equivalent to saying, “I’m here with you, and I’m listening carefully. What do you have to say?” And who doesn’t like to be listened to?

When a child initiates a movement game with her hands, I can respond with my own movements, in resonance with hers. We can together make a conversation with our hands that can develop over time. We can take turns, we can invent new movements, we can come to know each other’s hands. Often with very young children, or with children who are not yet curious about the world of objects, this is a fine beginning point, and can lead to building a trusting relationship and to a child’s gradual growing interest in the world of objects outside her own body or the bodies of others.

Another very powerful gesture is what I might call “joint tactile attention,” which is the tactile equivalent of the pointing gesture so often and naturally used with a child who can see. “Look!” says father. “A dog!” And he points to what they are both looking at. This is a crucial step in language development, and must be replicated in the tactile mode for a child who is blind or who doesn’t use her vision for getting information.

Joint tactile attention begins with noticing what a child is paying attention to with her fingertips or hand, and then touching along with her in a way that lets her know that I “see” it, too. A relevant story comes from a pre-school classroom: a four-year-old child who was blind (and could speak) came to school one day and said to her teacher, “Look! I got a new ribbon for my hair!” Her teacher said, “It’s lovely!” The little girl said, “Wait! You didn’t see it yet!” Whereupon the teacher, realizing her mistake, touched the ribbon. Then the teacher said, “Yes. It’s lovely.” Only then did the girl smile. The girl, of course, hadn’t felt the teacher’s hand touch the bow so she thought the teacher hadn’t seen it. [footnote: Story from Peg Palmer, BESB, Connecticut, USA.] Satisfactory conversations between sighted people and young blind or deafblind children must initially include joint tactile attention. I must touch many things along with a child in order for her to know that I have “seen” them.

There must be many experiences of joint tactile attention in order for language to have a mutual referent or topic. That touch, however, is very delicate and requires much practice on the part of teachers and conversation partners. I must touch without controlling, and I must be sure that the child knows with her own fingers or body that I “see” the object, too, and that I see the details of the object in the ways that the child does. Often this means moving my fingers just alongside a child’s fingers as they scan, or putting my fingers just under her last two fingers (not the first ones – they are the ones that get the most information and I don’t want to interfere with their perception) as she moves her whole hand.

I have been practicing this skill for twenty years, and still I need to learn its subtleties with each new child I meet. One key I’ve found is to actually become interested in the particular textures and shapes that interest the child I am engaged with. If I only do this as a technique, and not with genuine interest, children can usually tell, and either push me away or lose interest themselves.



Once a child is accustomed to sharing joint tactile attention with me, and once she is comfortable with my hands as an interesting and responsive part of her tactile world, then I can name things we touch together using gestures, signs, speech, pictures, objects – whatever symbolic modes are most comfortable and accessible for her. Language can become grounded in our looking together at the world, just as it is for the sighted child when father sees his toddler looking at a dog and points, saying, “Dog! Look at the dog!”

I can also invite the child's hands outward into the world and encourage her sense of exploration. With my hand under the child's hand, which rests comfortably on mine if I have been patient in making friends with her hands, I can move my hand toward something I want her to touch ("see" with her hand). I can touch the object or person myself, I can explore it myself, and the child can discover it for herself. If she is uncomfortable, she can pull away, as long as I leave her hand free. My experience over twenty years is that a child whose hands are respected with careful non-controlling touch becomes gradually more trusting and curious about the world around her, more expressive with her hands, and stronger as an individual. Our hands, after all, are agents of the self. They are ways of expressing ourselves in the world and of acting on the world. And for blind and deafblind children they are also crucial ways of knowing the world. Touching together, we can learn together, and together we can become respectful of the world's myriad textures and shapes. Together we can learn to feel more and more the aliveness of everything around us.



Addendum: For a child who has little or no use of her hands, these same principles apply. It is only that rather than looking to her hands for clues for how she learns about the world, I need to look at her whole body. Perhaps it is through her feet that she knows things or people most surely. Or perhaps it is with her arms. Or with her face. In each of these instances, I must find a way to make joint tactile attention by making careful contact with her in a way that will let her know that I "see" what she sees, however she sees it. The individual way of doing this will vary from child to child, as each child knows the world in her unique ways. And for each child, the conversation partners need to be continually attentive to these unique ways of knowing, and continually seeking ways to explore the world together with the child.

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See also: Barbara Miles, "Talking the Language of the Hands to the Hands," DB-LINK publications, available at <http://nationaldb.org/>

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All we see is possibility

