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How to Create a Communication Dictionary

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It is common for teachers as well as other education and service providers to meet an individual with deafblindness and/or multiple disabilities for the first time, and not know how to communicate with that individual. They don't know the individual's means of communication. A communication dictionary can address this communication issue. A communication dictionary is a detailed "guide" to communicating with an individual who is deafblind.

Individuals who are deafblind often use a variety of means (or forms) of communication. These forms reflect the communication needs and abilities of the individuals. These forms often do not match the standard means of communication used by the larger society. Examples of some of the forms of communication used by individuals who are deafblind include: gestures, vocalizations, touch and object cues, photos and line drawings, and adapted signs/ spoken words.

The team of family members and professionals supporting an individual who is deafblind should consider designing a multi-faceted communication system for the individual. This system should be based upon a communication assessment of the individual which includes: the individual's preferences and needs; the individual's already established forms of communication; the individual's motor and cognitive abilities; and environmental conditions such as communication partners, resources, and culture. This team effort often involves a lot of planning, trial and error, and on-going reassessment.

It is highly recommended that the communication system of an individual who is deafblind be documented in an easy to use "dictionary"—particularly if the individual's communication system utilizes more than one means or form of communication. This dictionary will enable people working with the individual with deafblindness—right from the start—to communicate more easily and effectively with this individual.

Besides the individual's name and basic information regarding the individual's vision, hearing, support needs, etc., a communication dictionary should include any, or all of, the following, as appropriate:

- ❖ A written introduction on how to use the dictionary.
- ❖ A list of tangible symbols (e.g., photos/line drawings, object cues, etc.) and their meanings.
- ❖ A list of touch cues used and their meanings.
- ❖ A list of the individual's various communicative behaviors, their meanings, and the appropriate responses to be made by people supporting the individual with deafblindness.
- ❖ A list of all manual signs used. For further clarification, a line drawing of each sign should be included. If no line drawing exists, then a description of how the sign is made should be provided. In addition, it should be stated if tactile signing should be used.