

# TX SenseAbilities

A Bi-Annual Publication about Visual Impairments and Deafblindness for Families and Professionals

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# Touch That Cake!

By Heather Withrow, DBMAT Board Member & Blogger, Austin

***Abstract: The author shares how she partnered with a cake artist to make her son's birthday cake a meaningful and accessible experience.***

*Editor's Note: We are thankful that Heather has given us permission to share another of her blog postings where she shares her insights and DeafBlind geekiness. If you haven't had the pleasure of reading Heather's blog, we invite you to visit her at <http://hexwit.blogspot.com>*

Keywords: family wisdom, DeafBlind, birthday celebration, full accessibility, tactile



*Photo of Orion enjoying a chocolate ball from his name.*

Orion had one of the most unique and DeafBlind-intriguing birthday cakes ever to celebrate his 6th birthday! This special cake was created by Tina and Amy with "that. specialty cake company," located in Austin, Texas. It had beautiful marbled blue and purple fondant, Orion's name was spelled in braille with white chocolate balls, and you can see and feel a few candied constellations along the cake's side. Inside was the chocolatiest triple chocolate I've ever tasted, so yummy that there were none left over after the party.



*Photo of a flat, round blue marbled fondant covered cake has "o r i o n" spelled in braille chocolate balls on top. Constellations are visible on the sides- Orion and the Big Dipper. Yellow balls are strung around the entire bottom circumference of the cake.*



Amy and I talked about doing a special tactile and interactive cake for Orion's 6th birthday, a great idea right from the start! I've always included candles for his birthday even though it was so awkward, perhaps a tactile oxymoron, that I wanted him to touch but then didn't want him to touch when they were lit. The chocolate balls were on top of toothpicks that were inserted on top of the cake for Orion himself to remove and enjoy thoroughly on his terms, instead of candles.



*Happy Birthday To You! (Everyone's finger pointing "You" at Orion while Dad signs "Birthday" on Orion.*

He was already fussing when we were about to present the cake to him. To let him know that we were going to have cake, I gave him a cupcake wrapper to help clue him in on what's going to happen. He's always had cupcakes for his birthday so this one was going to be a surprise in two ways, it's not cupcakes and it's awesome! The wrapper calmed him down as he crunched it in his hands. We set the cake down in front of him sitting in his red wagon, he touched the cake, picked and pulled at the fondant and once he discovered the Orion

braille in chocolate balls, he committed to eating them. He totally touched that cake! Each slice a guest had was blessed by Orion's fingerprints.



*Orion works on the last braille dot and feels Mom cutting apart the last pieces of cake.*



*Orion and his siblings pose with the cake after Orion started picking off the chocolate balls.*

Amy has a special place in Orion and our family's life. She was Orion's first teacher, even though she trained as a teacher of the deaf, when we moved to Austin just in time for the 2012-2013 school year. Amy dove in head first,

learning how to work with our precious DeafBlind 2-year-old son. We immediately saw her on the floor with him, putting herself in his skin (I'd say "his shoes" but Orion doesn't like wearing them) as well as going to workshops, taking intervener courses and geeking out on DeafBlind strategies. Orion was so very fortunate to have her on his team early on! Now the same Amy we know is in a different setting and is not a stranger to Orion. She's in the kitchen now, creating eye-catching specialty cakes with her business partner, Tina. She still does intervener work with Orion.



*Amy holds chocolate-mouthed Orion!*

Little did I know, she and my husband, Thomas, schemed up yet another awesome surprise cake to celebrate my 40th birthday. "that. specialty cake company" also made my birthday cake!



*Two tiers of cake and edible art!*



# The Greatest Love

By Ann Foxworth, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Alumnus

*Abstract: Enjoy reading about this blind adult's journey through life and how her family supported her to become independent and have a full and fulfilling life.*

Keywords: blind, school, employment

Floyd and Mary McMullen rejoiced as they welcomed their third daughter into the world. But, after four months, they sat in the pediatrician's office and were filled with fear and dismay as they listened to the doctor telling them their new baby daughter, Ann, was blind, and there was no procedure to restore her sight. Their hearts were heavy as they grieved for the loss of a normal life for their youngest child.

Floyd and Mary came from hardworking families and they had excellent problem-solving skills. They made a decision to raise Ann using the same techniques they were using with their older daughters.

And so, Ann began her "normal" life, that her parents loved her enough to give her. They allowed Ann to find her own way through exploring her surroundings, always watchful, but never, ever hovering. She learned to roller skate, ride a bike and swim. Ann was enrolled in kindergarten at age 5, and successfully and happily completed the program. At age 6, Ann was placed into a contained classroom for blind children, in a public school, where she completed first through fifth grades.

The family was forced by changing circumstances to move out of Fort Worth and the decision was made for Ann to complete her education at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) in Austin. Floyd and Mary's hearts once again breaking, on Ann's behalf, made the 200-mile journey to Austin and settled Ann into her new life as a student. As they returned home to face the imminent death of Floyd due to a lung disease, they grieved for their little girl, just 11 years old, 200 miles away from them. But they kept that hope for a "normal" life for Ann at the front of their minds and worked through their grief.

Ann was happily settling into her new school; making friends and learning how to live in a community of peers. She received the news of her father's death just three months after leaving home. Ann learned, many years later, just how desperately her father had longed to go to Austin and bring her home again, and how he had quelled that longing by reminding himself that Ann was learning to be independent and adjusting to life as a blind person.

Ann enjoyed seven happy years at TSBVI, where she studied hard, grew into a young adult, and found dreams of her own. Ann graduated with honors and set out, with a

positive outlook, into the world. She entered the Business Enterprises of Texas program, where she managed cafeterias for over seven years. She married and welcomed her son, and seven years later, a daughter. Her life was full, and that “normal” life her parents hoped for was a reality. Her days were filled with raising her children and all the challenges and rewards found in parenthood.

When her children were independent adults with their own lives, Ann at age 43 decided to start a new career. She became the first blind person to hold a position as Rehabilitation Assistant at the Division for Blind Services (DBS). She worked in this position at Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center for five years. During that time, Ann was often requested for substitute teaching needs across several departments at the Center. After five years, Ann was offered a position as a Rehabilitation Teacher, where she developed and administered a program for skills integration for students about to graduate from the Center’s programs.

Ann found another opportunity with the Division for Blind Services as a braille transcriber. Her love for teaching and producing braille made this work a perfect fit for her. After two years in the Braille Unit, Ann was presented with yet another opportunity to live her passion to promote braille as literacy for all people who are blind, in a position as Statewide Braille Consultant. She developed and administered a program for providing DBS Field and Center Rehabilitation Teachers the skills to teach braille. She wrote several manuals for use by teachers of braille, which proved invaluable to the agency’s 70 Rehabilitation Teachers across the state.

Ann is an active member of the American Council of the Blind, an organization that promotes independence and self-advocacy for all blind Americans. She is active in her church, serving on boards, committees, and community outreach programs. Floyd and Mary’s dream for their youngest daughter to have a full, productive and “normal” life has been realized. They gave the greatest gift they could; the gift of loving support, and letting go.

## Travels to Pittsburgh

By Andrea Wade, Parent

***Abstract: Learn about this family’s attendance at the recent conference of the National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation, as well as what they learned about albinism and life in general.***

Keywords: Albinism, conference, friend

My name is Andrea Wade. My husband, Sean, and I have a 7-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, who

has albinism. Albinism is an inherited condition in which people have little or no pigment in their skin, hair and/or eyes. They have inherited genes that do not make the usual amount of a

pigment called melanin. About one in 17,000 people in the U.S. have some type of albinism. Although Elizabeth was born with a head full of white hair, we didn't learn that she had albinism until she was about 6 weeks old. We understood that we needed to take necessary precautions to protect her while she was out in the sun by having her wear sunscreen, sunglasses and protective clothing. One issue that we were completely unaware of is that people with albinism always have a visual impairment and it is not something that is correctable with glasses or surgery. The degree of visual impairment varies, but many people with albinism are considered legally blind. At our most recent visit to the eye doctor, Elizabeth's corrected vision was 20/200.

Since learning that Elizabeth has albinism, we became members of a wonderful organization called NOAH (National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation). NOAH hosts a national conference every other summer and this past July was our third time attending the conference. The conference this year was in Pittsburgh and our whole family attended. In addition to Elizabeth, we have a 5-year-old son, Joseph, who does not have albinism.

The NOAH conference consists of various workshops for parents of children with albinism and adults with albinism, as well as a number of planned social activities. One of the social activities we signed up for was spending the evening at the Carnegie Science Sportsworks Center. NOAH had reserved the 12,000-square-foot building for the evening and attendees could clock how fast they can run the 10-yard dash or throw a fast ball, try a rock climbing wall, see how high they can jump, and become a human yo-yo, just to name a few! The kids and adults

had a blast trying out all of these fun activities. Now, I have to admit, I had one of those parent fail moments with my visually impaired child. Elizabeth was standing in line for her second chance at becoming the human yo-yo and Joseph was tugging on my pant leg begging me to race him in the 10-yard dash. I agreed to race him and, without even thinking, walked to the small track area (about 50 feet away). You know where this is going. Elizabeth finished yo-yo-ing herself and then couldn't find me in the place where I had been, and I obviously forgot to tell her where I was headed. We eventually reconnected, but she was in tears because she couldn't find me and I was angry with myself for being so absentminded. Lesson learned. It reminded me how much we take our vision for granted, as well as the importance of essential communication with our kiddos.



*Photo of Elizabeth and Joseph outdoors wearing sunglasses.*

Although this was our third conference, I still find myself wanting to attend multiple sessions



that are being presented at the same time! I was drawn to the scientific topics this year. There was information on the latest research in albinism. There are actually seven different types of albinism and one research question asked, “Is visual acuity different in different types of albinism?” The information presented found that, yes, it is different (in the 15 and older age group) when different types of albinism are compared. Also, since melanin is needed for development of the very back part of the eye (the fovea), could improving melanin synthesis during the time of eye development also then improve vision? Now, the pilot study involves five adults and the goal is to increase melanin production. But ultimately, the scientists are hoping to find a treatment that could be given to children during foveal development that could improve their vision. Another session I really enjoyed was “iPad Apps for Education.” Clearly, we live in a technological world and although some are resistant to how things are changing, technology advances are so useful to those with visual impairments. The presenter talked about “Genius Scan,” which allows you to scan a worksheet on your iPad, open it in “Goodreader” or “Notability,” complete the assignment (without having to strain to see that tiny print!) and then print it out or email it back to the teacher. “Notability” also allows students to organize their work in folders, which seems like a rather important task to master as our kids get older. I left this session feeling amazed at what people come up with and comforted knowing Elizabeth will have a varied group of “tools” to help her navigate school and work.



*Photo of Elizabeth and two other little girls with albinism.*

Oftentimes, what kids are learning is more important than what the adults are finding out about in their sessions. I love asking kids about their experiences to find out what impressed them most. I thought I would include some Q&A from Elizabeth and Joseph and get their insights into our trip!

**Q: What was your favorite part of the NOAH conference?**

Elizabeth: “Getting to see Sadie, my friend with albinism. She is from Canada.”

Joseph: “I got to see new people.”

**Q: What’s one thing you learned at the NOAH conference?**

Elizabeth: “That some people are there because they know people that have albinism. Not everyone at the conference had albinism.”

Joseph: “You should treat others the way you want to be treated.”

**Q: What was your favorite part about the trip?**

Elizabeth: "There was a ballroom in the hotel and we got to have a dance there Saturday night."

Joseph: "We brought snacks on the airplane."

This NOAH conference was the biggest yet with more than 1,000 people in attendance. Each conference gives us new insights and valuable information. In addition to the sessions, some of the best parts of attending are the casual conversations while at breakfast or lunch, as well as the party on Saturday evening. It is so much fun to watch the kids dance and enjoy themselves. Sometimes, I think, wow, if we didn't have Elizabeth, we wouldn't have met all of these great people, or had any of these experiences. Honestly, I knew nothing about albinism before Elizabeth was born. I didn't even know the word "albinism." Knowledge gives us a new perspective. It helps us grow in ways we didn't know we could grow! One of the facilitators of the mother's workshop I attended talked about how she tried to make everything

with her kids an "adventure"! Even the most mundane and what might be difficult activities (like sometimes having to eat lunch by yourself in the cafeteria) became adventures. That really struck a chord with me. Our goal is to look at those daily routines that can be a struggle and turn them into something fun, to put a different spin on it. I hope you can take a step back, see all that is good and enjoy your adventure, too!



*Photo of Elizabeth and Joseph in front of the skyline of Pittsburgh.*

## DeafBlind CAN at DeafBlind Camp of Texas

By Andrew Cohen, DeafBlind Camp of Texas President

***Abstract: Read about an exciting camping experience for adults with deafblindness.***

Keywords: Family Wisdom, DeafBlind camp, recreation, community, adults, Service Support Providers (SSPs)

***A Note about the use of the term DeafBlind:***

On April 6, 2016, the American Association of

the Deaf-Blind (AADB) released a statement to the community that announced they are changing the spelling of the organization to American Association of the DeafBlind, thereby eliminating the hyphen, because there "...is the

need to shift from a medical view of being a DeafBlind person to a cultural one. We now view our community as a cultural community.” This name change was “overwhelmingly passed by the active members with approximately 90%” voting in favor of the name change. Culture and language instill a sense of pride, belonging, and community.

Individuals 18 years old and above and with varying degrees of hearing and vision loss known as DeafBlind have always dreamt of a safe, fun, barrier-free place where they could learn from each other and gain rich experiences. It is no longer a dream! Jacqueline Izaguirre, Kim Huston, Todd Huston, Kelly Brittingham, and Andrew Cohen met in early March 2016. Since then, the DeafBlind Camp of Texas organization has received nonprofit status. The organization’s goal is to bring every DeafBlind individual to a safe and barrier-free place for empowerment training.

The very first and hopefully annual DeafBlind Camp of Texas (DBCTX) was held at Variety’s Peaceable Kingdom Sept. 2-5. Nearly 40 people including 10 DeafBlind individuals and 25 Support Service Providers participated in this magical journey!

Many recreational activities were offered at the camp such as climbing wall, zip line, high swing, archery, art and crafts, dancing, camp fire with s’mores, support groups, swimming, putt putt golf, slip and slide, and many more. All activities were completely accessible. Braille schedules, menus, and tactile maps were provided to braille readers. Wheelchair users were accommodated. Hayley Broadway and Kris Lund, Support Service Provider (SSP) Coordinators, assigned at least two Support Service Providers to each camper to provide

visual information, human guide, and communication. Communication was provided in whatever mode met the needs of the camper: American Sign Language including tactile, spoken English, amplified sound, or written media.

What are Support Service Providers? Unlike interveners who help DeafBlind individuals make decisions, SSPs provide support that enhances independence (for example: facilitating environmental communication, providing sighted guidance). SSPs are not personal attendants nor interpreters. DeafBlind individuals are empowered to make autonomous decisions through their SSP.

Everyone including the volunteers kept asking for more! One camper was, in fact, grouchy on the last day because she did not want the camp to end! Another camper said, “The interaction between hearing impaired and totally DeafBlind was amazing!” Students from Lamar University and Austin Community College informed us they are coming back and they will bring more volunteers!

It has been inspiring and a sheer joy to witness the dream becoming a reality. We at DeafBlind Camp of Texas hope to grow the camp on an annual basis, but we cannot do it without your help. The camp runs purely on donations. Everyone involved in the camp is a volunteer including the planning committee, the coordinators, and the SSPs. For more information, please go to [www.dbctx.org](http://www.dbctx.org) and check out our social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) for awesome pictures and videos.





*Photo of Natalie, a DeafBlind adult, in a blue bath suit experiencing the rush of cool water against her face while sliding across the water sliding.*



*Photo of Amanda, a DeafBlind young lady, having a blast with another DeafBlind friend, Patsy, at the putt-putt course with Samantha, an SSP, standing behind them.*



*Photo of Gene, a DeafBlind individual, braving the rock climbing wall on his own.*

# Mobilizing a National Family Leadership Network: Highlights from the 2016 NFADB Symposium

By Heather Withrow, Family Leader, Austin

*Abstract: A Texas family leader shares her experience at the 2016 National Family Association for Deaf-Blind Symposium, which was held in Austin, TX.*

Keywords: family wisdom, family leadership, National Family Association for Deaf-Blind, conference, Cogswell-Macy Act

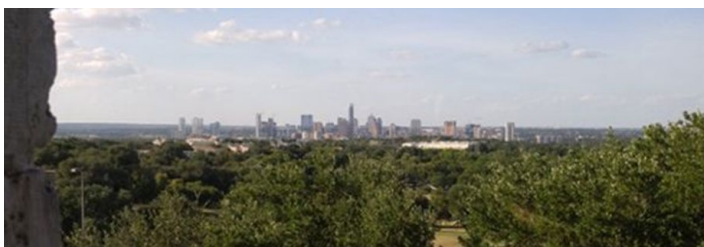
The 2016 NFADB symposium, “Mobilizing a National Family Leadership Network,” took place on the beautiful campus of St. Edward’s University, in Austin, Texas, from July 16-18. There were presentations, parent panels and group break-out sessions, buffets, cash bar, dinner out of a food truck, live music, ice cream, awards and recognitions, booths and handmade products for sale throughout the weekend. The sign language interpreter and SSP coordination was excellent. Many thanks to Susanne Morgan Morrow and Kathleen Peters for taking care of this for me and my fellow Deaf and DeafBlind attendees.



*Photo of a sign language interpreter.*

The Saturday highlights were keynote presentations by Eduardo Madera and George Stern, both from DeafBlind Citizens in Action. We were also entertained and inspired by Austin-area DeafBlind and Synthfreq sisters Crystal and Danielle Morales’ music video, “Exploring My World,” and their behind-the-scenes talk. (Editor’s Note: You can experience the song for yourself at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQSRcNwEJI> and [www.nfadb.org](http://www.nfadb.org).) There were facilitated topical tables where participants could participate in two opportunities to focus on issues that are important to them. There were 10 topics in all, including siblings, IEPs, jobs and transition.

The evening’s Mary O’Donnell Social was held in the simply elegant Maloney Room upstairs in the Main Building, from where we had a gorgeous view (already being on the top floor of a building on top of a hill). We looked out over the trees, homes and small buildings, with downtown Austin’s buildings reaching toward the sky in the distance.



*Photo of the skyline of Austin from St. Edward's University.*

On Sunday, there were great back-to-back presentations by Mark Richert on the sorely needed Cogswell-Macy Act and Robbie Blaha on qualified personnel in education. There were two separate panels on the topics of how qualified personnel made a difference in their or their kids' lives and the second panel was of parents discussing their child's DeafBlind adult life, realizing their dreams.



*Photo of Robbie Blaha speaking to NFADB with Mark Richert looking on.*

We enjoyed deliciously sweet and savory crepe dinners served out of Crepe Crazy's food truck. Crepe Crazy is local deaf-owned and-operated food business in Austin. They have two brick-and-mortar restaurants in the area. I made sure I was among the first few in line! The very last session on Monday, July 18, had attendees gather together by states, discuss ideas and actually create an action plan for following

through on them. I am pleased to report that my group, Texas, targeted July 28 as our Cogswell-Macy Act Texas Call-In Day. Many of us reported calling in and emailing our legislators' offices. As we all know, we still have work to do as we still do not have a Republican senator sponsoring our bill. My favorite part of all of this, intertwined in everything, was meeting, reuniting and talking with individuals with their own streaks of paint in this canvas of deafblindness. I got to spend quality time with baby Clarisa, who is the only other person in this world like my son Orion, and her family who came to town from Wisconsin for the symposium. I finally met in person another inspiring mother I had "met" through a Yahoo email listserv when Orion was a baby. People connected, planned, interacted, laughed, listened and made even more memories from our time together on the hilltop of St. Edward's University. It was a successful symposium and I look forward to the next one!



*Photo of the author Heather Withrow and another attendee at the NFADB Symposium.*



# The Art of Student Observation

By Chrissy Cowan, Mentor Coordinator, TSBVI Outreach Program, and Scott Baltisberger, Education Consultant, TSBVI Outreach Program

***Abstract: The authors stress the importance of observing students in their natural environments for the purpose of planning intervention and specialized instruction. Steps for the observation process are provided along with a rationale for each step.***

Key words: observation, observing students with visual impairments, skill transference, observation for planning instruction

As a TVI who changed campuses, I rarely ate lunch in the elementary school cafeterias, unless it was “enchilada day.” On one of these days I happened to spot my third-grade blind student with her peers enjoying this delicious lunch, except she was eating it with her hands. Picture that—enchiladas, beans, rice—she was a mess! Another time, stepping into the science classroom of a sixth-grade student with low vision to deliver a message, I saw that the class was working with scatter plots. My student and her teacher were struggling with this visually complex task, and fortunately I could give them some tips. I frankly had no idea what sixth-graders did in science! What bothered me about both of these situations is that they were happenstance. I realized that I periodically needed to see my students functioning in their natural environments so that I could work on the skills required to help them integrate academically and socially in my 1:1 instructional sessions. Once I worked on individual skills, I also needed to do spot checks to see if these skills were indeed transferring to these

environments. What follows are guidelines for observing both in classroom settings as well as areas outside the classroom.

## Observing in Classrooms

Observations of students in general education settings should occur in an ongoing and consistent manner. These observations not only allow you to identify challenges as they arise but also foster and maintain your relationships with the teachers of those classes.

- Be sure that the general education teacher understands that your observations are geared toward improving the skills and access of the VI student, that your role is not to critique his or her skill or presentation.
- An observation does not need to encompass the entire class period. Quite frequently, a good feeling for how things are going can be acquired within the first 15-20 minutes. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of your observation by the length of your time in the room, conclude the visit once you feel what you have observed is a good representation of a typical class.
- Try to schedule your time so that you have at least a few moments to touch base with the teacher. This allows them to verbalize any difficulties or triumphs that have occurred.

However, remember that they are on a tight schedule and may not have a lot of time to engage in lengthy problem-solving discussions. If the teacher doesn't have time, follow up with an email that asks for time to meet.

- A good deal of your VI instruction should be driven by what you observe in the general education classes. The vast majority of learning by the VI student will occur in the general education setting. The task of the TVI is to ensure that the student has full access to these learning situations. Observations will guide you as to what skills are needed to facilitate this access.
- It may be most beneficial to provide some instruction in the general education class (push in) to ensure that skills taught in pullout situations are generalized. The general education environment is very different from the pullout environment and the student may have difficulty recognizing how to apply newly learned skills.

### Observing in Areas Outside of Classrooms

- Observations of students in areas outside of classrooms should occur regularly in order to

determine challenges the student encounters, transference of VI-related skills taught, and need for new skill instruction.

- If this observation occurs in a class such as art, music, or P.E., try to schedule your time so that you have at least a few moments to touch base with the teacher. This allows them to verbalize any difficulties or triumphs that have occurred. However, remember that they are on a tight schedule and may not have a lot of time to talk. If the teacher doesn't have time, follow up with an email that asks for time to meet.
- A good deal of your VI skill instruction should be driven by what you observe. The task of the TVI and COMS is to ensure that the student has full access to these learning situations. Observations will guide you as to what skills are needed to facilitate this access.
- When you are observing a lesson led by another professional, avoid interacting with the student unless the situation is potentially dangerous or harmful.

### Observation Process

STEPS TO FOLLOW	RATIONALE
Let teacher know in advance why you need to observe your student periodically.	So she understands that you are there to (a) collaborate on adaptations for vision, (b) see if your student is transferring skills you are working on, and (c) determine further skills you need to address with the student.
Email the teacher in advance to suggest a time frame for your observation.	Avoid surprises!
Avoid interacting with or sitting near your student while observing.	You want to see how he manages on his own. This is not a "lesson" opportunity, but rather provides information for future intervention.

Avoid interrupting the teacher.	This would interrupt the flow of the lesson.
Write down your observation notes.	So that you can apply this information to recommend intervention regarding access to materials, student skills you can work on, and adaptations to the physical environment.
Avoid comments or judgments that look like you are critiquing the way the teacher teaches or the way the lesson is taught.	This tends to put people on their guard, and may hinder future observations.
Construct your observation around: The physical environment The learning materials being used The student's performance skills	This provides you with a clear focus.
Either meet with the teacher after the lesson, if convenient, or leave a note/send an email requesting a time to meet—then meet up.	This enables you to share your observations and to collaborate on student needs regarding the environment, learning materials, or student skills you can work on and she can reinforce in the classroom.
Share information from your observation with parents and other staff as appropriate.	Others may be able to reinforce your goals for the student, as well as provide more opportunities for practicing a targeted skill.

## The Development of Tactile Skills

By Ann Adkins, Education Specialist, TSBVI Outreach Program,  
and Debra Sewell & Jeri Cleveland, TSBVI Curriculum Department

***Abstract: This article provides information on the development of tactile skills in students with visual impairments, including those with low vision. It explains the importance of the Hierarchy of Tactile Skills and includes suggestions for activities and resources.***

Keywords: tactile skills, tactile learning,  
Hierarchy of Tactile Skills, tactile development,  
braille reading, tactual

Although we may typically think that only blind children need instruction in the development



and use of their tactual skills, research suggests that students with low vision may also be missing crucial information about their world. This can affect concept development, language acquisition, orientation and mobility skills, the development of independent living skills, and many other skills that affect a student's ability to acquire the information he needs about his environment and the world around him. A visual impairment affects the entire process of information gathering. Far too often we expect blind or visually impaired children to base their knowledge of the world on verbal descriptions and very limited "hands-on" experiences. This cannot compare to the almost constant barrage of incidental information that fully sighted children have received before they go to school. It is imperative that teachers of students with visual impairment understand *tactile learning* in order to provide the experiences and instruction needed by all of their students with visual impairments.

Tactile learning, by its very definition, is not the same as visual learning. Tactile learning involves the acquisition of information about the tactile qualities of objects, such as their texture, weight, or temperature, and the composition of objects, their shapes, the materials from which they're made, etc. This requires immediate proximity to the object. Tactual information cannot be gathered from a distance - if a student can't touch the object, his perceptions of that object may be wrong, incomplete, or dependent upon information from someone else. For students with low vision, being able to tactually explore an object can provide the additional information needed to confirm an impression gained visually.

Tactile learning also requires that information be gathered *over time* by systematically exploring an object one aspect at a time. This may require multiple explorations. The inability to simultaneously perceive all parts of an object means that the entire image of the object must be built-up out of an understanding of each of its components. This is clearly not as simple a task as gathering information in a single glance. A higher level of cognition may also be needed for the integration of sequential information, and without an understanding of "the whole," or the gestalt, future learning may be impaired. Research shows that while the development of tactile skills follows the same general progression in the blind child as it does in the sighted child, the blind child must develop his tactile skills to a much higher degree than his sighted peer, and blind children need more stimulation and motivation over a longer period of time (*The Blind Child in the Regular Kindergarten, 1977*).

Tactile learning simply takes more time. There are additional concerns for tactile learners as well, including limited incidental learning, fewer opportunities to share information that is learned tactually with others (reduced peer learning and interactions), and difficulty understanding the relationships between objects. Tactile learning also necessitates a lot more touching than society may accept, affecting a child's social skills, rec/leisure skills, and self-esteem.

In the best of all worlds, the development of tactile skills happens simultaneously along with concept development and language acquisition. Before children know they can reach out and touch things, the adults in their lives must intentionally create opportunities for tactile exploration and interaction. This needs to start

in infancy by increasing movement, stimulation, and access to interesting and motivating people and objects. If children do not become actively engaged in experiences and exploration at an early age, their approach to gathering information can be passive and they may not fully develop their sense of touch and their ability to learn tactually. Historically, by the time students with visual impairments enter school, they have not received enough instruction in the development and use of their tactile skills or had enough opportunities to touch and explore their world. Therefore, they may be behind in concept development, which has a long-term impact on their ability to benefit from traditional instruction. Further, if they haven't had enough opportunities to be tactile learners, they won't choose to do things tactually, and teachers may assume that they will be auditory learners. Children with visual impairments must *learn* to be active seekers of information about their world, and it is the role of the teacher of students with visual impairment (TVI) to guide educational teams in ensuring that appropriate instruction is provided for the development of tactile skills.

There are three important components of tactile skills. In order to be an efficient tactile learner, a student must have all of the following skills:

1. Motor skills (mechanical skills & hand development)
2. Cognitive skills (an understanding of the Hierarchy of Tactile Skills)
3. Sensory skills physiological tactual development (levels of tactual learning)

All of these skills are equally important and should become more integrated as the student becomes a more proficient user of his tactile

skills. In 2009, Jeri Cleveland and Debra Sewell addressed the importance of sensory skills in their article, "Early Tactile Learning" (Texas SenseAbilities, Summer 2009, <http://www.tsbvi.edu/resources/3096-early-tactile-learning>). The information below on the first two components, motor skills and cognitive skills, is also derived from their work.

### **Motor Skills - Mechanical Skills and Hand Development**

- Grasp and release
  - Rotary motion
  - Finger isolation
  - Bilateral hand use
  - Hand and finger strength
  - Tactile discrimination
  - Light touch
  - Proper finger position for braille
  - Tactile tracking skills
- (Sewell & Strickling, 2004)

### **Activities to Promote Motor Skills:**

- Using Thera-putty
- Opening doors with doorknobs
- Finger puppets
- Stress balls
- Scooping and stirring
- Dressing skills - buttoning, snapping, zipping
- Rolling cookie dough or Play-Doh into balls
- Stringing beads
- Finger painting
- Games on Talking Tactile Tablet (TTT)

## Functional Applications of Tactile Skills:

- Locating - randomly finding or intentionally searching for an object
- Exploring - getting information about the tactual properties of an object (by moving hands or by moving the object)
- Manipulating - intentional movement of an object
- Recognizing - associating an object with a memory of the object
- Comparing - discovering similarities, differences, and preferences; matching and sorting
- Communicating - using objects to request, refuse, comment and question; for choice-making, calendars
- Organizing - finding objects in their usual place; returning them to their usual place; sorting or categorizing by placement, function, attribute; gathering materials for a task  
(Smith and Levack, 1997)

## Cognitive Skills - Hierarchy of Tactile Skills: Concrete to Abstract

It is important to note that each level of the Hierarchy of Tactile Skills is equally important and that students must move through the hierarchy *in order*, mastering skills at each level before moving on to the next level. If students aren't provided with a variety of meaningful experiences at each level, braille and/or print will have little meaning to them. We often discover that students who are struggling with tactile skills, especially tactile discrimination of braille letters, have moved too quickly to succeeding levels of the hierarchy, not spending enough time at the beginning levels to completely master them. The hierarchy moves from concrete, real objects to the most abstract

of tactile concepts and skills, braille symbols and letters.

## The Hierarchy of Tactile Skills (adapted from Kershman, 1976):

- Real Objects
- Object Representations
- Graphic Representations
  - Two-dimensional objects
  - Solid embossed shapes
  - Outlines of objects
  - Raised lines (solid and broken)
  - Symbols/letters

## Activities for Real Objects:

- Touching, exploring and using familiar objects in the environment
- Exploring objects in object bags
- Creating Objects Books
- Exploring Story Boxes

## Resources for Real Objects:

- Familiar and unfamiliar objects in the environment
- Article on Object Books  
(<http://www.tsbvi.edu/component/content/article/1736-object-books>)
- Setting the Stage for Tactile Understanding (APH)
- Pre-K curriculum and instructional materials

## Activities for Object Representations:

- Side-by-side comparisons
- Real objects to toys
- Real food to play food
- Real animals to stuffed animals



- Using parts of objects to represent the whole item
- Tactile symbols

### **Resources for Object Representations**

- Real objects and things used to represent them (e.g., Play-Doh cookies, doll, toy dishes)
- Setting the Stage for Tactile Understanding (APH)
- Tactile symbols

### **Activities for Graphic Representations (two-dimensional objects, solid embossed shapes, outlines of objects, raised lines, and symbols/letters/numerals):**

- Making handprints and footprints in plaster
- Making faces out of Play-Doh
- Creating thermoform representations with the student
- Puzzles and Colorforms
- Yarn or string art

### **Resources for Graphic Representations:**

- Setting the Stage for Tactile Understanding (APH)
- Picture Maker: Wheatley Tactile Diagramming Kit (APH)
- Chang Tactual Diagram Kit (APH)
- Velcro and magnet boards

Because it takes more time to amass tactile information for building concepts, educators and parents should expect to continue instruction in these areas throughout the students' educations. The development of tactile skills is

too important to wait until students begin formal schooling and is important for students who are functionally blind and those with low vision. Parents, caregivers, teachers, and all members of the educational team of a student with a visual impairment must work together to promote the development of tactile skills - and a love for the information that can be learned tactually.

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# Tactile Books for Very Young Children

Holly Cooper, Ph.D., Early Childhood Specialist, Texas Deafblind Project,  
Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

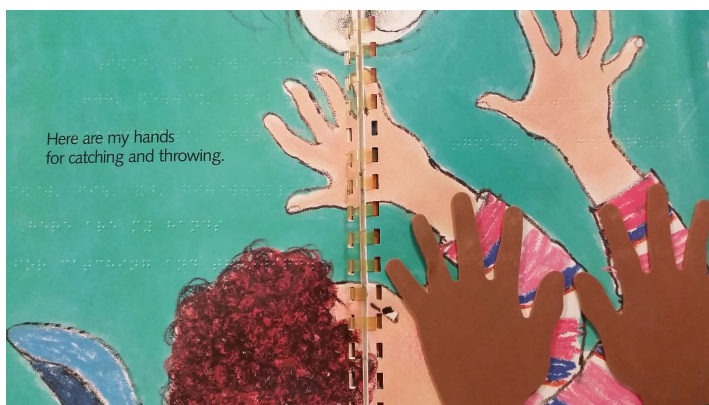
*Abstract: Media and methods for adapting mass market books to tactile and braille books, and experience books which include real objects.*

Keywords: braille literacy, tactile books, experience stories

It is amazing how early little humans show an interest in books! Typically, developing children widely show an interest in children's books by 12 months of age, and reading together with an infant is an enjoyable activity for the adult and child at age 9 months or even earlier. Experiences with books and literacy can vary widely in infancy. As with language and many other things, children from economically and educationally disadvantaged homes often have less access to books and literacy experiences. Children with disabilities are also at a disadvantage. Many of our children with visual impairment are born in very critical medical condition and remain so for a long period of time. They may be hospitalized or very fragile and have minimal opportunities to interact with people, toys, and books, or to have stories read to them. Children with severe and multiple disabilities are at a special disadvantage. Infants who are totally blind or functionally blind even without additional disabilities also have limited experiences with books, since most printed books are not meaningful and accessible to them.

## Approaches to Literacy Experiences for Very Young Children

There are two good approaches to offering literacy experiences to infants with blindness and visual impairment including those with additional disabilities: adapting books and creating books. Either approach to literacy must be based on a foundation of real experiences with real objects and people. Families, caregivers and educators must give children with disabilities a variety of experiences in the community and in nature to build a foundation of language and concepts for literacy. Children who are isolated indoors with limited opportunities to interact with others, especially other children, may not understand what many stories are about. Children who are isolated due to medical difficulties may still enjoy books with an entertaining language component such as songs and finger plays, rhythmic language and rhymes. When I select books for very young babies, I look for books related to topics with which they have direct personal experience, such as body parts, feelings, routines of the day or activities of daily living. You can often find such books, or you can create them yourself.



*Here Are My Hands Softback: disassembled, laminated, brailled, and bound with comb binding.*

### When should braille be introduced in books?

For a child who is blind or has a significant visual impairment, it is good to add braille to the book, or use a book with braille already in it.

Even if the young child is not talking yet, having the text in braille helps build literacy awareness.

When I'm reading to a child, I also like to pretend to "read" the braille with my fingers,

because that is the way the child will read, and reading tactually provides a good model for

them to imitate. Braille can be added to almost any print book by brailleing on adhesive braille

products such as American Printing House for the Blind's Brailles. (Available:

[https://shop.aph.org/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/Product\\_Brailleable%20Labels%20and%20Sheet\\_s\\_1054977P\\_10001\\_11051](https://shop.aph.org/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/Product_Brailleable%20Labels%20and%20Sheet_s_1054977P_10001_11051)) or in a pinch, clear

contact paper. Brailleable sheets can be inserted into an electronic or manual braille writer, or

purchased in tractor feed sheets that can be used with a braille embosser. Then they can be

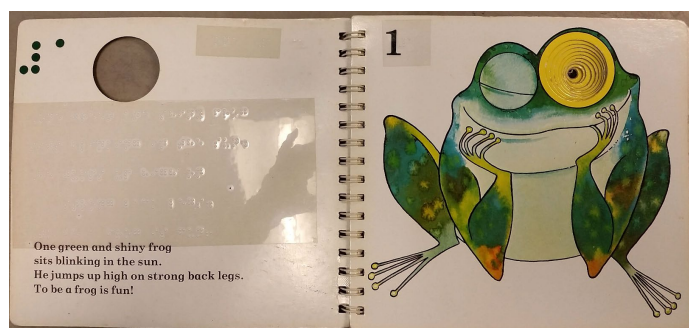
trimmed and attached to the book's pages.

Clear contact paper is not as durable, and will not stick as long. Another alternative is to

purchase a paperback book and cut the spine off and the pages apart and laminate it. The

laminated pages can be brailled on, and the

embossed dots are very durable. The book can then be reassembled with a plastic comb binding or spiral binding. Unfortunately, most books for infants and toddlers are printed on heavy cardboard for durability, so can't be put in a braille writer. For board books, Brailles are usually the best option. I also suggest using simple uncontracted or Grade 1 braille. This may be a suggestion some teachers disagree with, but I think simplifying the braille makes it more accessible to new readers because there are fewer characters and special rules.



*One Green Frog, Board book with braille added using Brailles.*

### Adding tactile features to a book

Tactile features can be added to a book, similar to some mass-market children's books such as

*Pat the Bunny*. Some stories are easier than others to illustrate tactually. Look for stories with

simple concrete references to objects with

texture that you can add, such as blankets, washcloths, spoons, combs, and similar items.

Avoid more abstract tactile illustrations such as rain, snow, ice, peanut butter, and other things

that aren't practical to add to a book.

### Creating an experience book

An alternative to finding a book and adapting it, is creating one especially for the child's use.

One beneficial approach is the use of "language experience books" or "experience books." To



create a book like this, an adult teams with the child and does an activity or participates in a special event with them. Perhaps it is going to the beach and swimming. The adult should explain to the child what will happen, then do the activity, then talk about it afterward and write a short book about it. For a child who doesn't yet have expressive language, using an activity that is repeated on a regular basis (such as going to bed) can help build language skills. For a child who is sighted, the adult and child can take photographs of the event; for a child who is blind or very young, small objects (sometimes referred to as "artifacts") can be collected and glued in the book. Such a book may include something like this:

We went on a trip in the car. I like to shake mommy's keys when we go to the car.  
(glue a key to the page)  
We drove all the way to the beach. There was sand everywhere.  
(glue some sand or sand paper to the page)  
We went swimming in the water. It was cold!  
(some things don't have an object to go with them)  
I liked to float on the noodle  
(or play with the beach ball, etc.). (include a piece of noodle or ball)  
I got really tired. Mommy dried me off with a towel.  
(glue a piece of towel to the page)  
When we got home I fell fast asleep.

Below is a book from our library at Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. It is about going horseback riding. The book's creator went to considerable effort to collect real items to be included in this book.



*Horses By Carolina, former student at TSBVI. This book is part of a collection of object and tactile symbols books at the TSBVI library.*

Clearly some experiences are easier to illustrate with tactile items glued to the page than others. Going to the rodeo might be more difficult. One farm animal feels much like another if you glue a fur sample to the page. Another way to make books is to use objects mentioned in the story but not attach the objects to the book. If you make a trip to the farmer's market, you can't glue a tomato and a cucumber to the page, but you can read the story and explore real tomatoes and cucumbers together. It is also possible to find children's books about simple familiar daily experiences and find objects to go with the story. It is important when doing this to use real objects as much as possible. Using a

plastic cucumber and tomato for the farmer's market story is not nearly as meaningful, since the weight, odor and texture of the vegetables is significantly different than toy food. Likewise, using miniature models such as toys is also usually not a good practice. Illustrating a trip to the rodeo with toy horses and cows does not give the child relevant information since toy horses bear little resemblance tactually to a real horse. In some cases, some creative license can be used, but it's good to get some advice from your child's teacher of students with visual impairment.



*Spot's Toys by Eric Hill  
book with objects mentioned in the story:  
a plastic dog bone, baby's shoe, wooden circle  
shape and ball.*

## Building a foundation of life experiences

The most important part of literacy is to build a foundation of life experiences, talk or communicate with your child in their preferred communication mode (it may be sign language) about what you are doing together, and read stories together. Take time every day to read to your child. Reading specialists recommend reading aloud to children long after they have skills to read themselves, such as up to the middle school grades. Reading aloud gives them access to information they can't read

themselves and provides a skilled reading role model. Reading together also helps to build a special bond between you and your child supported by a shared experience of storytelling.

## Resources

In addition to the resources on this site, some other good ideas for creating tactile experience books and adapting books include:

Creating and Using Tactile Experience Books for Young Children with Visual Impairments  
Sandra Lewis, Ph.D.

Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired See/Hear newsletter

<http://www.tsbvi.edu/seehear/spring03/books.htm>

Experience Stories for Functionally Blind Pre-Readers

Millie Smith

Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

<http://www.tsbvi.edu/independent-living-skills/64-graphics/1735-experience-stories-for-functionally-blind-pre-readers-1>

Experience Books

Washington Sensory Disabilities Services

<http://www.wsdsonline.org/video-library/deaf-blind-videos/experience-books/>

Teaching Emergent Literacy Skills To Kindergarten Students in a Braille/Print Program

<http://www.tsbvi.edu/preschool/66-teaching-emergent-literacy-skills-to-kindergarten-students-in-a-brailleprint-program>

AER International 2002 conference

Duncan McGregor, Ed.D. & Carol Farrenkopf, Ed.D

Typhlo and Tactus book contest  
<http://www.aph.org/research/tactile-book-contest/>

American Printing House for the Blind

Guidelines for Making Tactile Books  
<http://www.tactus.org/guidelines.html>

Typhlo & Tactus, THE International Tactile-Illustrated Book Prize

On the Way to Literacy: Early Experiences for Visually Impaired Children

[https://shop.aph.org/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/Product\\_On%20the%20Way%20to%20Literacy:%20Book%20Set%20I:%20Early%20Experiences%20for%20Visually%20Impaired%20Children\\_6-77500-00P\\_10001\\_11051](https://shop.aph.org/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/Product_On%20the%20Way%20to%20Literacy:%20Book%20Set%20I:%20Early%20Experiences%20for%20Visually%20Impaired%20Children_6-77500-00P_10001_11051)

American Printing House for the Blind

Guide to Designing Tactile Illustrations for Children's Books

<http://www.aph.org/research/illustration/>

American Printing House for the Blind Louisville, KY

Suzette Wright

## Gifts to Get Kids who are Blind, Visually Impaired or Have Additional Disabilities

By Holly Cooper, Ph.D., Early Childhood Specialist, Texas Deafblind Project, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

***Abstract: A discussion of toys appropriate for children who are in the early childhood years and have visual impairment, deafblindness, and/or additional disabilities.***

Keywords: toys for visually impaired children, toys for deafblind children

People often me ask what to get as a gift for Christmas or birthday or other special occasions for a child who has a visual impairment. Every child is unique and has their own interests, preferences, and abilities so any advice must be considered in light of what the particular child would like. Having said that, ideas are always good, and we who work in schools get a firsthand look at what makes our students excited and happy.

### Infants

Infants who are visually impaired may be premature or medically fragile, and so may not have had as much experience or interest in reaching out and exploring the world at the same age as other babies. Sometimes friends and family members give them visually cute plush toys because they are soft and safe. For little ones with vision this is fine, but babies who are blind may not like such toys. An occupational therapist once told me that it's the indistinct tactile boundaries of such toys that is aversive to them. For a tactile explorer, reaching for and knowing where the object is



when it's furry and soft is confusing. Having soft things around is fine, but look for variety. Another issue for infants and kids of all ages is plastic toys. Plastics are good because they're generally safe, sturdy, brightly colored, and easy to clean. But being surrounded by items that are virtually all plastic doesn't provide the developing mind with enough variety. Lilli Nielson in her Active Learning literature tells us to look for items of different sizes, weights, and types of materials. Having more than one item of a kind is also good. So look for safe, sturdy items made of metal, wood, and cloth. As babies gain more fine motor skills, look for items with internal movement, parts that twist, bend or spin. Most people know to look for toys that make noise, but also look for noise-producing toys that are not electronic, to provide different experiences and fine motor challenges.



*Photo of wooden rattles and teething toys that encourage exploration.*

Because our babies with visual impairment may have spent much time in the hospital and may be at risk of health problems at home, they may have spent a lot of time on their backs. So look for blankets and baby items that they can play on to have “tummy time” where they practice pushing up against gravity and reach for toys and interact with people. These

pushing-up movements are the first steps to sitting independently and later to walking.

- Wooden toys
- Plastic links to keep dropped toys nearby
- Wind-up or battery-operated musical toys
- Cloth books, board books
- Safe everyday objects



*Photo of a fabric book for babies made with textures and shapes of animals.*

## Toddlers

Typical children have the motor coordination to begin to walk around 12 months of age. Our students with visual impairment may reach this stage later due to medical issues, additional disabilities or delays due to the unique effects of blindness on the developmental milestones of early childhood. As youngsters begin to move about more independently, gross motor play dominates their time and their fine-motor and communication skills may plateau for a while. Toddlers with cortical visual impairment may make rapid gains in their visual processing skills as they move about more and gain more experience interacting with objects in space. To encourage functional gross motor skills such as crawling, cruising and walking, avoid prolonged use of devices such as baby “walkers” or standing play stations. Also, avoid overuse of equipment that confines them to a space such as the “Johnny Jump Up” or “Sit ‘n’

Spin.” These devices may keep a young child safely contained, and safety is important, but experienced vision professionals have had many experiences trying to break self-stimulatory habits such as jumping and spinning that young children with blindness may develop. So, look for items such as riding toys that the young child can self-propel, and toy grocery carts or lawn mowers, which give youngsters some support in standing and a “bumper” to provide good experiences to build on for cane use.



*Photo of a lawn mower push toy which has balls that rattle as it rolls.*

- Push toys
- Riding toys
- Nesting/stacking cups or blocks

- Safe small blocks
- Duplo blocks
- Balls: Koosh balls, Nerf balls
- Large cars and trucks
- Buckets, shovels, scoops for playing in a sandbox, water table, or outside in the garden
- Toddler books

### **Ages 3 to 5**

Around the third birthday, children usually begin to focus somewhat less on gross motor play and settle down with longer attention spans and more imaginative play. More significant gender differences may become evident at this age, with many boys interested in vehicles and things that move, and many girls interested in imaginary play, dressing up, playing family roles, and socializing. But this varies by the child and their interests!

Move away from the push-button light-and-music show toys, and instead provide:

- Blocks and Legos
- Smaller cars and trucks
- Fire trucks
- Trains or cars on a track



*Photo of a wooden train that a child can push on the track.*

- Dolls (for both boys and girls)
- Play dishes and tea sets: made of tin, plastic, or ceramic if you dare
- Metal pots and pans
- Real food on a temporary basis: apples, pears, carrots, potatoes, onions, crackers, cookies
- Clothes and old costumes to dress in (Goodwill and thrift stores)



*Photo of child-size dress-up clothes with hats, bags, and accessories.*

- Play characters and props such as Playmobil sets, doll houses with small dolls
- Recorded music and musical instruments
- Books

The early years of childhood are a time of great learning. Babies and toddlers and older children with additional disabilities are in the sensory-motor stage of learning. Choose toys that encourage sensory-motor exploration and play. For children who have advanced to the next-stage learning known as “concrete operational,” choose toys that give opportunities for social interaction, expressive language, imaginary play and learning about society and culture. Most of all, allow plenty of unstructured free time for play. One of my greatest concerns about family life as it is now is how little free, unstructured time children have. Unstructured time allows children to daydream, imagine, fiddle and be bored. Boredom pushes us all to be inventive, creative, and curious.

Thanks to Terra Toys of Austin for tolerating me while I stalked around taking photos of their many wonderful toys.

Edited from an article originally published in Texas SenseAbilities, Fall 2012

- Wearable accessories such as purses, tote bags, coin purses, hats, jewelry, cell phones, makeup mirrors, combs, belts, scarves
- Baby dolls and child dolls



# White Cane Day and What It Means to Me

By William Daugherty, Superintendent of Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

*Abstract: In this article, Superintendent Daugherty discusses the importance of White Cane Day and how it celebrates a person's abilities and independence.*

Key Words: White Cane Day, blind, visually impaired, mobility, independence

White Cane Safety Day was signed into law in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson. The "Safety" part of the law was intended to inform motorists that they must yield to a person with a white cane crossing the street. In 2011, President Barack Obama also named the day celebrated annually on October 15 as Blind Americans Equity Day. As you can see, the day has become symbolic for more than a simple tool used by people who are blind or visually impaired to safely walk from place to place. It has become a symbol for independence and capability.

This year the Austin White Cane Day Celebration was held on the campus of the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, not on the 15th, but on the 12th of October. The Austin event is often thought to be the largest in the U.S., with crowds ranging from 500 to 700. Typically, it is held downtown, and there is a march by the entire group along Congress Avenue in the brightly colored T-shirts that are custom designed each year to commemorate the celebration. When this happens, the Austin downtown shoppers and office dwellers get an up-close lesson in how cane users apply their skills. As a former

instructor of cane travel (Orientation and Mobility specialist, or O&M) who has walked a lot in urban areas under blindfold with a cane, I can tell you that it is a highly skilled activity that requires focus, sensory awareness, courage and problem-solving abilities of the highest order. Put another way, when you see someone walking around town with a white cane, you are looking at a very capable person. This is at least one way to look at the meaning of White Cane Day.

People have a range of responses to seeing a person walking around using the cane. Some see it as miraculous that anyone could do that. But it is not because of an individual's miraculous abilities. Instead, it is the result of hard work, overcoming fears, and continuous practice. Some see it as sad that a person has to tap their way through the environment. But it is not sad. Instead it is a strong symbol of independence, of not having to rely upon a sighted person to go from place to place. The more we see people with the white cane out in our communities, the more all of us will begin to see it as part of the normal fabric of the neighborhood. In Austin, I see the white cane in use practically everywhere I go. Add to this the folks who are using dog guides, those with low vision using telescopes, smart phones with navigation apps, and new technologies coming



online all of the time. White Cane Day becomes a symbol of the many ways individuals who are blind or visually impaired are achieving independence.

Many teenagers who would benefit greatly from the use of a cane, or a low-vision device such as a telescope, will fight against it because they feel it makes them look different. As more and more people are out in our communities using the cane or other devices, I can see a time

when teens will begin to think differently about it. One day soon, I'm almost certain, there will be a blockbuster movie that comes out featuring a cool, leading character that uses a white cane with great style and ability. Not like some cheesy guy that is scripted to have super-human powers, but like real-life people I personally know — like many who march in celebration on White Cane Day. That will be a cultural tipping point worth looking forward to.

## Changes in the Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program

By Tammy Martin, Program Manager, Blind Children's Program

*Abstract: In this article, Mrs. Martin provides information on the Blind Children's Program transition from DARS to HHSC.*

Key words: blind, visually impaired, Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program, Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), Health and Human Service Commission (HHSC)

By now you are probably aware that the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) no longer exists. You may be wondering why the change occurred and what it means for the services your child/family receives. Will the program continue to provide services and how will you find/contact your Blind Children's Specialist?

### Why the change?

The 84th Texas Legislative session's goal was to make the system more efficient and easier to navigate for the people who rely on state services, and Senate Bill 200 was approved to re-align the five agencies that make up the health and human services enterprise. This brought changes to the programs that made up the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services. In order to serve Texans more efficiently and effectively, the DARS programs were transferred to either the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) or to HHSC. The Blind Children's Vocational Discovery and Development Program was transferred to HHSC.

The Programs that are now a part of TWC are:

- all Vocational Rehabilitation programs, including Transition, divisions (there are two, one for the blind and one general) and services (including the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center - CCRC)
- the Business Enterprises of Texas (BET) program
- Independent Living services (IL)-Older Blind

The Programs that moved to HHSC are:

- the Blind Children's Program (BCP)
- Blindness, Education, Screening and Treatment (BEST)
- Early Childhood Intervention (ECI)
- IL- Part B
- Autism
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services
- Comprehensive Rehabilitation Services
- Disability Determination Services

### **How does this change affect the services my child receives from the Blind Children's Program?**

The services provided by the Blind Children's Program have not changed. While the Blind Children's Program now lives in the newly created department within the HHSC Medical and Social Services Division, the fundamental values and goals of the Blind Children's Program remains the same. We are committed to providing quality services to assist your child in reaching their fullest potential and becoming

a successfully employed adult. We will continue to assess the barriers that prevent your child from having a level playing field and work with you to plan, develop and deliver services that will provide the tools and training they need to overcome obstacles.

### **How do I find my Blind Children's Specialist?**

Most of the Blind Children's Specialists have moved to an HHSC office/location. They have new addresses, emails and phone numbers. Hopefully, you have received their new contact information. If not, here are some ways to contact them.

- Their new email address is [firstname.lastname@HHSC.state.tx.us](mailto:firstname.lastname@HHSC.state.tx.us)
- If you have not received your Blind Children's Specialist's new phone number, you may call Kim Harrington at 512-377-0686 and she can provide you with the number to your local office.
- HHSC Website: <https://hhs.texas.gov/>
- Blind Children's Program Website: <https://hhs.texas.gov/services/disability/blind-and-visually-impaired/blind-childrens-vocational-discovery-and-development-program>

As we embark on these changes and learn our way around the HHSC system, our number one priority remains meeting the needs of our consumers and their families. Your feedback, ideas and concerns are always welcome. Please let us know how we are doing.

# Frequently Asked Questions on Transition: Medicaid Waivers and Related Programs

By Texas Parent to Parent Pathways to Adulthood Staff

Reprinted from Texas Parent to Parent Newsletter, Winter 2015

***Abstract:** This article answers frequently asked Medicaid Waiver and related program questions.*

Key Words: Texas Parent to Parent, Medicaid Waiver Program, Medicaid, Consumer Directed Services, Community First Choice

## **What are Medicaid Waivers?**

Medicaid Waivers are long-term supports and services provided by a state/federal partnership for people who need assistance with daily living. The purpose of the waivers is to keep someone living in the community rather than in an institutionalized setting. The same income and resource limits apply as for SSI, but waivers are the one program based on the assets of the child even under age 18 rather than a family's.

## **Why is there such a long waiting list? Are there new programs?**

The State of Texas has been slow to fund these programs; however, in the legislative session of 2013, the state added waiver-type services to STAR+PLUS for people at age 21 who are nursing-home eligible. If your child receives Medicaid, she should receive a letter at age 21 directing her to select a STAR+PLUS MCO (Managed Care Organization) for health services. Another new funding source is Community First Choice (CFC) (June 2015) for people with disabilities of all ages; check with your Local

Authority for more information. Additional information on CFC is below.

## **How do I get my child on the Medicaid Waiver interest (waiting) lists?**

There are several different waivers. Call 877-438-5658 for CLASS and similar programs; contact your Local Authority for HCS and related waivers. You do not have to prove eligibility when you get on the interest list. You must keep your contact information up to date at both sites. (To find your Local Authority, go to <https://www.dads.state.tx.us/contact/search.cfm>)

## **What happens when my child's name comes up on the interest list?**

He or she will receive a registered letter from the funding agency. You will be given information about the programs and choices available. You will have to choose a case management provider. If your child proves to be eligible for that waiver, you will create a budget with the assistance of a case manager. Medicaid Waivers give choices to the recipient and family about how to use the program and which services to use from a list of available services.

## What is CDS (Consumer Directed Services)?

One of the choices for waiver services is the CDS model, which empowers the person receiving the service (or someone given that authority) to be the employer of record for attendant care and respite providers. Choosing CDS provides more control over who will work with your child than if you use care providers employed by an agency; you will also be able to pay them at a higher rate. Note that this model requires more effort on your part.

## What happens when my child is receiving one waiver service and his name comes up on another waiver?

You can only use one waiver at a time; you'll need to do the research to decide which waiver will best suit your child. It might help to talk to other parents whose children receive waiver services; call the TXP2P office to connect with community wisdom. See this chart for a comparison of all waivers: [http://www.dads.state.tx.us/providers/waiver\\_comparisons/index.html](http://www.dads.state.tx.us/providers/waiver_comparisons/index.html)

## What is Community First Choice?

The following information about CFC is taken from this website: <https://hhs.texas.gov/doing-business-hhs/provider-portals/resources/community-first-choice-cfc>

A federal option, called Community First Choice, allows states to provide home and community-based attendant services and supports to Medicaid recipients with disabilities. This option provides states with a 6 percent increase in federal matching funds for Medicaid for these services. To be eligible for Community First Choice services an individual must:

- Be eligible for Medicaid
- Need help with activities of daily living, such as dressing, bathing and eating

- Need an institutional level of care

Community First Choice Services include:

- Activities of daily living (eating, toileting, and grooming), activities related to living independently in the community, and health-related tasks (personal assistance services);
- Acquisition, maintenance, and enhancement of skills necessary for individuals to care for themselves and to live independently in the community (habilitation); providing a backup system or ways to ensure continuity of services and supports (emergency response services); and
- Training people how to select, manage and dismiss their own attendants (support management).

Texas began the Community First Choice program on June 1, 2015. This means:

- Individuals on a 1915(c) waiver interest list who meet eligibility and coverage requirements may be eligible to get Community First Choice services.
- Individuals already getting services through a 1915(c) waiver will continue to get those services as they do today from their existing providers.

To access CFC, go to your Local Authority for people over 21. (To find your Local Authority, go to <https://www.dads.state.tx.us/contact/search.cfm>.)

For those under 21, go to the Department of State Health Services (call the Texas Medicaid & Healthcare Partnership (TMHP) PCS Client Line toll free at 1-888-276-0702.



For more information, go to

<http://www.dads.state.tx.us/providers/cfc/>

General information about CFC

<https://hhs.texas.gov/sites/hhs/files/documents/doing-business-with-hhs/providers/resources/cfc/cfcfaqs.pdf>

For more information, go to

<http://www.txp2p.org/parents/pathwaysServices.html>

# Supported Decision Making: A New Alternative to Guardianship

By Megan Morgan, Policy Fellow for The ARC of Texas

Article reprinted from Texas Parent to Parent Newsletter, Winter 2015

***Abstract: This article reviews the new legislation that recognizes supported decision-making as an alternative to guardianship for adult with disabilities and provides links for additional information.***

**Key Words:** Supported decision-making, guardianship, individuals with disabilities, The Arc of Texas, blind, visually impaired

During the most recent legislative session, Texas made history by becoming the first state to legally recognize supported decision-making as an alternative to guardianship for adults with disabilities. At the heart of supported decision-making is a simple premise: All people use help to make important life decisions. Supported decision-making allows individuals to make their own decisions and stay in charge of their lives, while receiving any support they need to do so. To use a supported decision-making agreement, a person with a disability chooses an adult they trust to serve as their supporter. This may be someone like a parent, friend, or former teacher. It is important to know that the supporter cannot make a decision for the

person with a disability. The supporter can, however, help the person with a disability understand the options, responsibilities, and consequences of their decisions. The supporter can also help the person obtain and understand information relevant to their decisions and communicate their decisions to the appropriate people.

After an individual with a disability asks someone to be their supporter, they should explain to the supporter what types of decisions they need help making. When both parties feel ready, they will fill out a written plan called a supported decision-making agreement, which explains what decisions the supporter can help with and what information the supporter can access. Doctors, service providers, educators, and others are legally required to accept the agreement. This means that if the person with a

disability so desires, his or her supporter can do things like talk to doctors about private medical information, discuss service coordination with providers, and participate in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Supported decision-making agreements are an excellent self-advocacy tool that people with disabilities can use to make their own decisions while having the support they need.

Through legally recognizing supported decision-making as an alternative to guardianship, Texas is providing individuals with disabilities and their families with another option to consider as individuals transition into adulthood. To download a blank supported decision-making agreement form, please visit The Arc of Texas website at <https://www.thearcoftexas.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2016/06/Supported\\_Decision\\_Making\\_For\\_Families\\_UPDATED\\_Jan\\_2016.pdf](https://www.thearcoftexas.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Supported_Decision_Making_For_Families_UPDATED_Jan_2016.pdf)

For more information on supported decision-making, visit the websites below or contact Megan Morgan, Policy Fellow for The Arc of Texas, at [mmorgan@thearcoftexas.org](mailto:mmorgan@thearcoftexas.org) or 1-800-252-9729 ext. 7753.

National Resource Center for Supported Decision-Making  
<http://supporteddecisionmaking.org/>

Texas Guardianship Reform and Supported Decision Making  
[www.grsdm.org](http://www.grsdm.org)

## Outreach Program Honors Texas Fellows Recognizing VI Professionals in their Role as Recruiters

By Sara Kitchen, TSBVI Educational Specialist, and Ann Rash, TSBVI Early Childhood Specialist

*Abstract: The authors describe a demonstration assessment clinic event for young children with cortical visual impairment.*

The Texas Fellows program acknowledges the individual recruiters (Texas Fellow) and welcomes the new VI professional (Candidate) to the field. You are eligible to be a Texas Fellow if you were a significant person in the candidate's recruitment. Candidates must have started their training program, seeking their first certificate (TVI or O&M), after May 15, 2014.

Texas Fellows and Candidates receive additional recognition and incentives. For more information, and an application go to the following link:

<http://www.tsbvi.edu/how-do-i-become-a-vi-professional>.

For more information about becoming a Texas Fellow or working as a VI professional contact Mary Shore at [shorem@tsbvi.edu](mailto:shorem@tsbvi.edu).

## Texas Fellow

Shelly Gonzales  
Lonnie Fortner  
Tashia Ellington  
Deborah Thompson  
Janiel Hayes  
Charlotte Simpson  
Marcia Hopkins  
Kandice Burke

## Candidate

Katie Nash  
Judy Martinez  
Heather Gill  
Kelly Bevis Woodiel  
Irma Garza  
Cindy Holifield  
Jennifer Brown  
Cassidy Sherwood  
Alecia Jarrett  
Jennifer Gillispie  
Michelle Peacock

# Accessible Comics

From a blog post by Sharon Nichols, Outreach Assistive Technology Specialist

Keywords: accessible comics, accessible books

Have you heard about Comics Empower <http://comicsempower.com/about-us>? Here is an excerpt from their website:

**Comics Empower** is the online comic book shop that makes comics for the visually impaired! You will finally be able to take part in the comic book conversation! You can finally experience what has become a basic part of life and of the growing experience for so many!

**What Are Comic Books for the Visually Impaired?** The comics are translated into audio form. Pages, panels and texts are described in a way that doesn't break the rhythm of the story. Twenty-two to 24 pages of comics are translated into 30 to 35 minutes of audio recordings. Readings include the letters pages, where the editors, writers, or publishers interact with the readers.

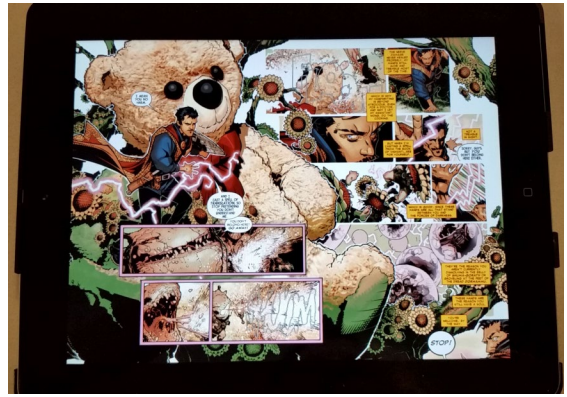
# More Accessible Comics and Books

By Holly Cooper, Ph.D., Early Childhood Specialist, Texas Deafblind Project, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Did you know many public libraries have websites that include downloadable audio books and e-books? Audio books can be downloaded from your computer to an iPod, or directly to a phone or tablet. MP3 players such as the iPod have the

advantage of being small and having long battery life for audio files. E-books can be downloaded to tablets or reading devices such as the Kindle. These devices allow users to enlarge the font size for people reading visually. Monochrome screens

such as the Kindle have a very long battery life, and the backlight feature can be brightened or dimmed. Some new reports indicate dimmer monochrome screens are less likely to keep readers awake when used before bedtime. Color screens can be easier to see for people with visual impairment and illustrations in the books are bright and clear. Graphic novels on a large color screen are lots of fun to read when enlarged on a tablet. The new iPad Pro has a screen that is 12.9 inches diagonally. Never have more books and literacy resources been more available to people who are blind and visually impaired.



*Dr. Strange battles a Giant Teddy Bear in Marvel Comics Dr. Strange #1, 2015. Displayed on an iPad.*

## Children's Books About DeafBlindness and Disability

Excerpts from Family Engagements, NCDB

***Abstract: In this article NCDB provides a list of children's books on deafblindness and general disabilities.***

Key Words: Deaf-blindness, blind, visually impaired, National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB), disability, books about the disability experience

NCDB recently received an inquiry about where to find children's books on deaf-blindness and disabilities in general. They put together a list of resources, focusing on books for preschool through 6th grade.

A great source for children's books on disability in general is the Schneider Family Book Award, given annually by the American Library Association to books about the disability experience. They give the award in three categories—birth through grade school, middle

school, and teen. Go to the link below and select a year to see the winners:

<http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/awards/1/select>

Probably easier to navigate is their bibliography of books about the disability experience (organized by age range):

[http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/sites/ala.org.awardsgrants/files/content/awardsrecords/schneideraward/2009\\_schneider\\_bio\\_children.pdf](http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/sites/ala.org.awardsgrants/files/content/awardsrecords/schneideraward/2009_schneider_bio_children.pdf)

As far as books specifically about deaf-blindness, there are a TON of Helen Keller biographies for kids out there. Just search Amazon or a library catalog to find one that's at the reading level you want.



Helen's Eyes: A Photobiography of Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's Teacher  
[http://www.amazon.com/Helens-Eyes-Photobiography-Sullivan-Photobiographies/dp/1426322224/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443837563&sr=8-1&keywords=helen%27s+eyes](http://www.amazon.com/Helens-Eyes-Photobiography-Sullivan-Photobiographies/dp/1426322224/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443837563&sr=8-1&keywords=helen%27s+eyes)

Helen Keller: Her Life in Pictures  
[http://www.amazon.com/Helen-Keller-Her-Life-Pictures/dp/0439918154/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443837713&sr=8-1&keywords=helen+keller+her+life+in+pictures](http://www.amazon.com/Helen-Keller-Her-Life-Pictures/dp/0439918154/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443837713&sr=8-1&keywords=helen+keller+her+life+in+pictures)

This next one is a biography of Laura Bridgman (slightly fictionalized). It's out of print but available on Amazon:

Child of the Silent Night  
[http://www.amazon.com/Child-Silent-Night-Fisher-Hunter/dp/0395068355/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443838656&sr=8-1&keywords=child+of+the+silent+night](http://www.amazon.com/Child-Silent-Night-Fisher-Hunter/dp/0395068355/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443838656&sr=8-1&keywords=child+of+the+silent+night)

Here's a more recent children's biography of Laura (higher reading level):

She Touched the World: Laura Bridgman, Deaf-Blind Pioneer  
[http://www.amazon.com/She-Touched-World-Bridgman-Deaf-Blind/dp/0618852999/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1443838917&sr=8-2&keywords=laura+bridgman](http://www.amazon.com/She-Touched-World-Bridgman-Deaf-Blind/dp/0618852999/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1443838917&sr=8-2&keywords=laura+bridgman)

Aside from Helen biographies, there are not many children's books out there that deal with deaf-blindness. Here are two more:

Can You Feel the Thunder?  
Thirteen-year-old Mic Parsons struggles with mixed feelings about his deaf and blind sister and his new neighbor. (Grades 4-8)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Can-Feel-Thunder-Lynn-McElfresh/dp/068982324X/>

[ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443839504&sr=8-1&keywords=Can+You+Feel+the+Thunder%3F](http://www.amazon.com/Can-You-Feel-the-Thunder%3Fref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443839504&sr=8-1&keywords=Can+You+Feel+the+Thunder%3F)

A Dog Called Homeless  
Fifth-grader Cally Louise Fisher stops talking, partly because her father and brother never speak of her mother who died a year earlier, but visions of her mother, friendships with a homeless man and a deaf-blind boy, and a huge dog ensure that she still communicates. (Grades 4-7)  
[http://www.amazon.com/Dog-Called-Homeless-Sarah-Lean/dp/0062122266/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443840903&sr=8-1&keywords=a+dog+called+homeless](http://www.amazon.com/Dog-Called-Homeless-Sarah-Lean/dp/0062122266/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443840903&sr=8-1&keywords=a+dog+called+homeless)

Here are two bibliographies of children's books that include blind characters:  
<https://www.aph.org/files/museum/BooksBlindness.pdf>  
<https://www.dcmp.org/caai/nadh264.pdf>

Here's a bibliography of picture books organized by disability:  
<http://guides.libraries.wright.edu/childrensbooksdisabilitythemes>

You can search for children's books on disability from the San Francisco Public Library:  
<http://sfpl.org>

And last but not least, Connie's New Eyes. It's the true story of a woman getting her first guide dog, starting when the dog is a puppy and following the two of them through their training and back to Connie's home and career. It's illustrated with beautiful full-page black and white photographs. Unfortunately it's no longer in print, but you can get it from Amazon:  
[http://www.amazon.com/Connies-New-Eyes-Bernard-Wolf/dp/0397316976/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443845351&sr=8-1&keywords=connie%27s+new+eyes](http://www.amazon.com/Connies-New-Eyes-Bernard-Wolf/dp/0397316976/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1443845351&sr=8-1&keywords=connie%27s+new+eyes)



## **Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired**

### **Outreach Programs**

[www.tsbvi.edu](http://www.tsbvi.edu) | 512-454-8631 | 1100 W. 45<sup>th</sup> St. | Austin, TX 78756



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