



Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Outreach Programs | Texas Deafblind Project
www.tsbvi.edu | 512-454-8631 | 1100 W. 45th St. | Austin, TX 78756

Interactions & Connections: Following a Child's Lead in Conversation

EHDI Conference - Jacksonville, FL
March 15, 2026

Presented by

Hillary Keys, M. Ed., TDB
Early Childhood Deafblind Consultant

Authors

Edgenie Bellah
Family Engagement Coordinator
bellahe@tsbvi.edu

Hillary Keys
Early Childhood Consultant
keysh@tsbvi.edu

Heather Lightfoot
Transition Consultant
lightfooth@tsbvi.edu

Objectives

- Identify the five steps for building quality interactions (Recognize, Contact, Serve & Return, Goodbye Ritual, End Contact) and explain their role in supporting communication and belonging.
- Recognize subtle communication attempts and demonstrate how to follow another's lead and use the "serve and return" approach to strengthen communication in daily routines.
- Develop a plan to integrate these strategies into everyday interactions at home, work, or community settings.

Connection is Not Optional

It is the foundation for communication, learning, belonging, and joy.

Interaction is For Everyone

- At every age
- At every stage
- Regardless of
 - vision,
 - hearing,
 - sensory issues,
 - disabilities
 - medical issues
- We seek interaction and belonging.
- We seek interactions innately and intrinsically.
- We work at making interactions effective and enjoyable
- Because we are wired to be safe and to belong.

Copresence

- Must be present for everyone to win!
- Be fully present, engaged, and paying attention
 - Low-readability signs
 - Non-standard signs
 - Being fully present enhances our ability to understand low-readability signs.
 - Good communication partners should do detective work to better identify the meaning.
- Shared experience
 - Context
 - Tactile shape
 - Movement
 - It is often luck that the communication partner is present to observe and share in an experience.
 - Requires good observational skills to perceive the tactile/gestural expressions that refer to the shared experience.

“Be a perceptive reflective detective” (David Brown)

Five Steps for a Quality Interaction

1. Recognize
2. Contact
3. Serve & Return
4. Goodbye Ritual
5. End Contact

1. Recognize

- Become a good observer
- Notice communicative initiatives
- Presume competence
 - When in doubt, respond anyway

A quality interaction cannot occur if it is not clear to each partner that someone is initiating the interaction. As the interaction partner, as with any other human, especially congenitally deafblind individuals, it is important to communicate that we notice initiations in ways that are both accessible and meaningful. The response to the individual should be sensorially accessible.

It is also important to maintain the attitude of presumed competence! Even when the meaning is unclear, responding to any communicative attempt affirms the child. They are more likely to feel seen and continue to initiate interactions.

Rock me, baby!

- Focus on copresence and recognizing the child's cues.
- Play "start-stop-start" games.
- [Vollmar Family Facebook Reels](#)
 - What do you notice? What is happening here?
 - Is this communication? Why?
 - How did the communication partner know she was finished for now?
 - What if the communication partner is not fully present?
 - If someone who has never seen Clarissa do this is with her, would they know what to do when she kicks both legs in the recliner?

2. Contact

- We all say, "Hello!" This is the "hello" in the interaction.
 - It begins with noticing and then moving into closer proximity to one another.

- For some, this includes making physical contact after obtaining the individual's permission. (That may be a respectful touch before proceeding.)
- Greeting rituals.
 - Create a unique ritual to identify yourself and communicate who you are.
 - Ask for permission to join.
- Recognize the deep power of respectful touch when establishing contact.
 - Learn about [respectful touch](#).
 - Explore Protactile. ([Protactile Kids](#))
- Who are you?

3. Serve and Return

"[Serve & Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry](#)" on the Center on the Developing Child: Harvard University YouTube Channel: https://youtu.be/m_5u8-QSh6A

We are born to socialize

- Babies are born already interested in the people around them.
- Brains are built for socialization.
- Studies have shown babies with typical vision and hearing imitating facial expressions, imitating sounds or movements that their caregivers make, in order to get a response.

(Zeedyk, 2012)

When you don't respond

- When they don't get a response, even young babies will show distress
- in their facial expressions,
- avoidant head turning,
- and raised heart rate.
- Not responding to babies causes distress.

(Zeedyk, 2012)

An example of a lack of response is evident in the still-face experiment in 1975. After only 3 minutes of a non-responsive mother, the baby grew wary, confused, anxious, and then had a danger response.

- What are the possible consequences of missing communication attempts? Deaf? Deafblind?
- What can we do to reduce the chances of missing these attempts?

Early Infancy

- A very young infant has two jobs:
- Attach and bond with caregivers
- Organize the senses
- What happens if there is a disconnect?

(Anthony, 2023)

What if caregivers do not recognize and respond to a baby's play signals because they don't recognize them?

What if caregivers do respond, but the baby does not recognize or respond as expected?

Impact of Sensory Differences

- Disrupts attachment and bonding
- Creates stress for baby and for a caregiver who might feel incompetent
- Overstimulation and understimulation challenges
- Decreased incidental learning (looking and listening for information)

(Anthony, 2023)

Steps in a Positive Interaction

- Imitate
- Comment
- Child leads for at least three turns
- Child's topic of interest/shared attention
- Respond in the child's preferred mode (visual, auditory, tactual)

(van den Tillaart, 2015)

The child/individual serves, and we return. This is when we share attention with the child on their topic. For those with emerging communication skills or who are in an early developmental stage of interactions, this can be through imitation and participating in a turn-taking game. For those with more abstract language or developed trust with a communication partner, commenting on their topic is a serve and return interaction.

- During this early step in the interaction, it is essential that the following happen:
 - The child leads interaction for at least three serve and return cycles. Keeping the lead in the child's domain is crucial for them to build trust, confidence, and skills.
 - The topic is the child's!
 - Affirmation is given in the child's preferred mode
- The serve and return exchange continues until there is either a change in the topic or there is an exchange in leadership meaning, meaning you, as the interaction partner, take the serve for a bit.

(van den Tillaart, 2015)

“The interested person becomes the person of interest.” (Gunnar Vege)

Relate, Rupture, Repair Cycle

- In healthy relationships, roughly $\frac{1}{3}$ of our time is spent in each stage.
 - Relate - emotional intimacy
 - Rupture - the natural breakdown in the interaction
 - Repair - ongoing experiences during the repair process lead to resilience and trust
 - “Making up is more important than messing up.”
 - That moment of being heard is crucial.
 - We go through the cycle hundreds of times each day.
 - Most of the time, the cycle happens without any effort.
 - Sometimes, we have to be intentional to repair the rupture in the interaction.
 - Everyone was a student once...
 - You go off to school - rupture.
 - You feel anxious about being picked up at school - repair.
 - You see your family member, and you have a great time talking about all the things you did at school - relate.
 - Rupture can be small - even if you go across the room to get a toy, that’s a brief rupture.
 - It is during the moment of repair that the relationship becomes stronger
 - TRUST only comes during repair
 - Repair only comes after rupture
 - Once there is repair, we can all have fun
 - Trauma - If you have many ruptures and no one ever teaches you how to repair... don’t learn how to be in any other place besides rupture.
- (Zeedyk, 2016; Zeedyk, 2021)

4. Goodbye Rituals

- Convey that the interaction is wrapping up
- May take a few more serves and returns so everyone is satisfied with the closure
- Like the greeting rituals, goodbye rituals can be individualized.

5. Ending Contact

- This is when proximity is no longer within arm’s reach.
- Within the DeafBlind Community, we now have ways to convey
 - Be right back
 - Leaving

- Closure and understanding that an interaction is over is important to every human. We generally say goodbye when we finish a conversation, but a person who is deafblind might not be aware that it is finished. Think of a ritual you can use to end an interaction or use a tactile cue, such as a Protactile sign to let the individual know the conversation is over.
- Embracing the power of touch - remember, it is not just the person's hands with which you should engage, but can be, and often is, their whole body!

Review the steps of an interaction

1. Recognize
2. Contact
3. The child/individual serves, and we return
4. Goodbye ritual
5. Ending contact

Strategize

- Develop a plan
- Integrate strategies into everyday interactions at
 - home
 - work
 - community settings

Creating an Environment for Accessible Interactions

- Everyone has a name
 - Everyone has something that identifies them.
 - This may be a name sign, greeting ritual, fingerspelling, speaking, or even a tactile symbol.
- Everyone has a greeting and goodbye routine/ritual
 - When you or the person who is deafblind or deaf with disabilities initiates an interaction, identify yourself using a unique greeting ritual. You might have something that you wear each day that is unique to you that the child is interested in, or perhaps you have a special "high five," or something that you do with the student that they associate only with you. If you don't already have a unique greeting ritual, create one, and then be sure to use it each time an interaction begins.
- Embracing the power of touch
- Practicing presence
- Moments of joy through connection and play

Moments of Joy

- What we learned from Dr. Jan van Dijk
- Follow the child's or individual's lead
- Joint attention to the child's or individual's topic
- Resonance, attunement, and presence
- Create moments of joy!

“Now, in good attunement with a child, these positive feelings are released on the base of chemicals, oxytocin, [and] endorphins, which makes it rewarding for the educator to be with that child and which makes it rewarding for that person. And those are the moments of optimal joy on this limbic system.”

(Van Dijk, 2015)

Resources

[Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#)

- [Harvard University YouTube Channel](#)
- twitter.com/HarvardCenter
- Instagram: [@developingchildharvard](#)

[Nordic Welfare Centre](#)

- Free, downloadable book: [If you can see it, you can support it: a book on tactile language](#)
- Free, downloadable book: [Tactile Working Memory Scale: A Professional Manual](#)

[American Printing House for the Blind \(APH\)](#)

- Book available for purchase: [Sensing and Learning](#)

[Texas Deafblind Project](#)

- Microsite: [Communication Overview](#)

[National Center on Deafblindness \(NCDB\)](#)

- [Recursos para Familias](#)

Video Resources

[Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#)

- [Early Experiences Build Brain Architecture](#)
- [Serve and Return](#)

[Perkins School for the Blind](#)

- [The Role of the Emotional Brain](#)

[Special Books by Special Kids](#)

- [Jace's Joy \(Living Deaf-Blind and Happy\)](#)

[TED](#)

- [Molly Wright: How every child can thrive by five](#)

References

Anthony, T. (2023, November 6-9). *Building Relationships with the Child*. Meaningful Immersive Literacy Experience, Concord, NC, United States.

van den Tillart, B. (2015). *Tactile Reciprocal Interactions & BETs*. Symposium on Deafblind Education. <https://library.tsbvi.edu/Play/13204>

van Dijk, J. (2015) *The Role of the Emotional Brain*. Perkins School for the Blind. <https://www.perkinselearning.org/videos/webcast/role-emotional-brain>

Zeedyk, S. (2012). *Babies come into the world already connected to other people...* The Science of Human Connection. <https://suzannezeedyk.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Suzanne-Zeedyk-Babies-Connected-v2.pdf>

Zeedyk, S. (2021, October 21). *Rupture and Repair*. Webinar Wednesday: Adoption UK. retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfnDruBw0YI>

Hillary Keys
Early Childhood Consultant
Texas Deafblind Project
keysh@tsbvi.edu