



## CDCI Research into Practice

---

*A look at what we have learned*



---

# *Talking the Language of the Hands to the Hands*

Summarized by: Barbara Miles, Emma Nelson,  
and René Pellerin

---

### Source:

Miles, B. (2003, October). Talking the language of the hands to the hands.  
DB-Link: The National Information Clearinghouse on Children Who Are Deaf-  
Blind. Monmouth, Oregon. Retrieved: [documents.nationaldb.org/products/hands.pdf](http://documents.nationaldb.org/products/hands.pdf)

---

Center on Disability and Community Inclusion

Vermont's University Center for Excellence in  
Developmental Disabilities  
Research, Education, and Service



The University of Vermont  
College of Education and Social Services



## *An Introduction...*

---

Every child and adult who is deafblind is an individual person. Each one has his or her own communication needs and styles. The environment, including the people around the person who is deafblind, is key in giving each individual access to needed information, communication opportunities, and language.

Imagine what it would be like not to be able to see or hear, or to have very limited vision and hearing. How would you know what was going on around you? You would have to touch things in order to know about them. You would have to use your hands. Your hands and your feet would have to be your eyes for you. They would give you access to the world.

With your hands, and with the sensitive invitations from people around you, you could have access to what people around you were doing. If you were young, even though you were blind, you could “see” as people did things like eat, or get dressed, or play games. Like other children you probably would want to join in and do those things yourself.

In order to learn language, your hands could also be like ears in a way. They could give you access to language. With your hands, and with the respectful invitation from people around you, you could touch the hands of people who were using sign language, and with this access, you could learn language like nearly all children learn language – by being exposed to it from an early age and gradually making the connections that give words meaning.

It would help you if you had the opportunity to be in the midst of people who were noticing your hands, and also using their own hands as ways to communicate. If they were signing, and having fun communicating with their hands – listening and speaking -- you would probably want to use your hands more and more to express yourself. Your hands would then be like voice. You might try new games, or try imitating some of the signs you could feel. Even before that, you might babble with your hands.

## **Now — Imagine if you had limited vision and hearing, and your hands were so important to you:**

How would you want people to touch you? It would probably not feel good or help you if people controlled your hands. That would make it hard for you to explore for yourself. You might even learn to not value your own hands and what they could do, your hands might gradually feel like they were not your own, but belonged to other people.

You would probably have the best relationship with people who treated your hands with great respect – whose hands made friends with your hands. These would likely be people who approached you with sensitivity, who were responsive and inviting rather than controlling. They would probably be people who had fun interacting with your hands, who invited you to touch things but never forced you, who noticed what your hands were interested in and responded in genuine and respectful ways. You would probably trust those people and gravitate toward them.

If you were starting to use sign language, you would probably like it if people noticed what you were trying to express and let you know they heard you, even when they might not understand exactly what you meant. You would probably like people who “talked” to you with their hands -- like mothers or fathers who naturally babble and talk back and forth with their young children even before their children can speak. Don’t you think people like this who were responsive to your hands, rather than directive, would be probably be your best friends?



## •Ways to Help You Talk the Language of the Hands•

---



### 1. Watch the child's hands to learn to read them.

Rather than looking mainly at the face of a child who is deafblind, look at their whole body, and especially at their hands. You can practice this; it will become more natural over time. Can you see how this girl is exploring the toy with her hands?

Figure 1: Young girl sitting at a table with her intervener. The girl is exploring a flower shaped textured toy (bumpy, smooth, etc...) with her hands while her intervener watches her hands and smiles in a way that shows that she can see what the girl is interested in.

---

### 2. Keep noticing the hands of people who are deafblind.

This boy is deafblind and he is interested in the apple, which you can see by looking at his hands.



Figure 2: Young boy is sitting outside in the grass on his knees. He is holding an apple with both of his hands and the apple is touching his nose and his lips.

**3. It is important to be respectful when beginning tactile interactions.**

The ideal situation is when the child touches first. Then he is learning to reach out to the world. To let the child know of your presence, you can sit close to the child and wait for the child to discover you.



Figure 3: A boy is sitting on a bench beside his intervener. He is leaning toward her, with his hand on her leg. He seems to have discovered her beside him.



**4. Make your hands available for the child to use as he or she wishes.**

If your palms are turned up and your hands are relaxed, it is like you are listening. Often this will encourage a child to begin a game or a conversation.

Figure 4: A young boy with deafblindness sits on his knees beside another boy at school. His friend is lying beside him. The friend has offered his hand by laying the hand on his friend's knee. The boy with deafblindness has responded by holding on to his friend's finger.



**5. Imitate the child's own hand actions.**

If this child is blind, they will need to feel you as you copy the movements and rhythm. This can be fun!

Figure 5: A young girl sits at the table beside her intervener. She has her hand curled on her nose, in play. The intervener turns toward her and imitates this action. Her hand touches her student's hand.

---

**6. Play interactive hand games (clapping, opening and closing of fingers, crawling of fingers) frequently.**

If you play games like this often, it will encourage the child to be confident in communicating with his hands. Just like how babies enjoy back and forth babbling with their caregivers, children who are deafblind often enjoy back and forth movement play.



Figure 6: Young girl sits beside her intervener on a chair. They are playing a game patting their hands together with palms open.

**7. Set up the environment by adding items to encourage children to explore through their sense of touch.**



Figure 7: A young girl lies on her back inside a three sided structure with a clear plastic ceiling (Little Room). There are beads hanging down from the ceiling and the girl is grasping at the beads with her hands and kicking the beads with one foot.

**8. If you notice a child's hands exploring something, you can share that interest. You can let them know of your presence by gently touching them on the back of the shoulder. Then gently slide your hand down to their hand that is exploring. You need to be careful not to interrupt them, but you also need to let them know you are interested, too. This moment of shared interest is the perfect time to offer language. You can name what you are touching together. This is like using a pointing gesture and a word with a child who can see.**



Figure 8: A young girl is sitting outside on the grass with bare feet. She is sitting in front of her intervener and is using her right hand to feel and scratch the bottom of her left foot. The intervener is touching her foot also as if to say, "I see you are exploring your foot." After sharing this experience, the intervener might sign, "foot," or "scratch foot."



Figure 9: A young girl and her intervener are standing at the door. The young girl is in the arms of her intervener. The girl is watching (and maybe helping) her intervener open the screen door. The girl's hand is free, on top of her intervener's.

**9. It is easy to show a child with deafblindness what you are doing if you invite them to follow along with your hands while you do things.**

It may take some time for a child to become comfortable and curious enough to follow another's hands. The time spent establishing this trust is important and necessary. This young girl is watching with her hands while her intervener opens the door to go outside.

**10. If you give the child the opportunity to follow along while you do things, his hands will learn what the motions of the activity feel like.**

Over time, the child will likely want to do the activity himself. Children who can see have the opportunity to see others doing things. Children who are deafblind need a similar opportunity to "see" actions before being invited to do these actions themselves.



Figure 10: An intervener and a young boy are sitting at a table in the classroom. He has placed his hand on hers as she draws with a pen. He is "watching" her as she does an art activity. She is showing him how she does it.

**11. Most children learn language by hearing lots of words in the course of natural conversations and gradually begin to join in.**

**Children with deafblindness usually don't have easy access to language. Some of them need touch signs to have natural and meaningful access. The habit of following others' hands as they sign is an important habit for a child who is deafblind.**



Figure 11: A young girl sits face to face with her intervener. The young girl feels the intervener's hands as she signs "more." This girl has learned to reach out for signs. She is curious about words and language.



Figure 12: A young girl and her intervener sit on the grass. The girl's feet are inside a metal bowl of water with balls in it. The young girl has leaned her body against the intervener's body. She is resting her left hand in the intervener's open right palm. The intervener's left hand lies gently on the girl's back in what seems to be a soothing gesture.

**12. Become aware of what your hands are communicating each time you touch.**

**As you become friends with a person who is deafblind, you will probably learn that your hands can communicate a wide variety of feelings and intentions. Many children who are deafblind are sensitive to the feelings of people who touch them. It helps to know what your hands are saying when they touch.**

**Individuals with deafblindness have a lot to teach those around them about touch, hands, body language and new ways of interacting with the world. We who are friends of people with deafblindness have a great deal to learn in our conversations with these friends.**