NORTH CAROLINA
DeafBlind Project

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DB INTERVENER NEWSLETTER

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INTERPRETING THE WORLD: CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

Every learner interprets the world through their senses, experiences, and trusted relationships. As Interveners, we help bridge the gap between experience and understanding so that meaning can form through doing, not just hearing or seeing. When a learner feels rain on their skin, touches a puddle, and later signs "rain," that's concept development in motion—experience transformed into comprehension and language. Each new connection is a step toward independence, confidence, and belonging.

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CONNECTIONS

ECU DB Teacher Support Program Blogs

ECU TSP Website

NCDBP Facebook

NCDBP Resources

BUILDING CONCEPTS THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Concept development is about more than learning words—it's about building mental frameworks for how the world works. For individuals who are DeafBlind, these frameworks are constructed through direct, meaningful experiences.

True understanding doesn't come from labeling an object, but from knowing it. For example:

- The concept of "apple" grows from feeling its shape, smelling its sweetness, biting its crispness, and noticing that it comes from a tree.
- The concept of "bus" develops through the vibration of the engine, the wait at the stop, and the predictable routine of coming and going.

When Interveners provide repeated, consistent experiences that involve multiple senses, learners begin to attach language to experience—and understanding deepens.

"Concepts are the building blocks of understanding. Without them, language is empty." - Millie Smith, 2015

Did You Know?

Children who are DeafBlind often need dozens of real experiences before a single concept becomes meaningful. Repetition isn't just helpful—it's how understanding takes root.

Try This:

Pick one familiar routine this week (e.g., snack time). Add a new sensory element—smelling, stirring, or touching an ingredient—and describe it in the moment. Notice how your learner responds.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

"I used to think my student just liked to stir the batter over and over. Then I realized—she was learning 'smooth,' 'sticky,' 'bowl,' and 'spoon' all at once. Now we make pancakes every Friday, and those concepts are part of her world."
— Melissa, Intervener, North Carolina

HANDS-ON, MINDS-ON

Here are simple, powerful ways to promote concept development in your daily practice:

1. Start with real experiences.
2. Before introducing pictures or symbols, give learners opportunities to touch, explore, and act upon real objects.
3. Build consistent routines.
4. Repetition strengthens understanding—using the same steps, objects, and language helps concepts "stick."
5. Label in the moment.
6. Pair tactile or signed labels with experiences as they happen—when the learner feels water, sign or gesture "wet."
7. Expand across settings.
8. Connect similar experiences at home, school, and in the community to reinforce shared meaning.
9. Encourage exploration.
10. Curiosity builds concepts. Let learners explore at their own pace, using touch, movement, and anticipation.

INTERVENER INSIGHT

Choose one routine this week and describe it using all five senses.
For example: “Snack time—smooth banana, sweet smell, yellow color, soft sound when peeled.”
Now look for ways to let your learner explore those same sensory details.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

How can you turn tomorrow’s routine into a meaningful experience that builds a new concept for your learner?

Think of one everyday moment—mealtime, outdoor play, or arrival at school—and plan a small, experience-rich change. You may be surprised at how much your learner discovers.

REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Professional Frameworks
Alsop, L., & Miles, B. (Eds.). (2012). Open Hands, Open Access (OHOA) Intervener Training Modules. National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB)
https://www.nationaldb.org/products/ohoa-modules/
Comprehensive online modules covering concept development, communication, and learner-centered strategies for Interveners.

Tactile Communication & Shared Experience
Miles, B. (2003). Talking the Language of the Hands to the Hands of the Language.
National Technical Assistance Consortium (NTAC)
https://www.nationaldb.org/library/page/1936/
A classic resource describing how touch, trust, and shared experience form the foundation of communication and understanding.

Meaningful Communication
Miles, B., & Riggio, M. (Eds.). (1999). Remarkable Conversations: A Guide to Developing Meaningful Communication with Children and Young Adults Who Are Deafblind.
Perkins School for the Blind Press
A cornerstone text that provides guidance on supporting communication and concept development through real-life experiences.

Experience-Based Learning
Smith, M. (2015). Sensory Learning Kit (2nd ed.).
Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI)
https://www.tsbvi.edu/SLK
Millie Smith's framework emphasizes how sensory experiences lead to cognitive and linguistic growth.

Concept Development in Practice
National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB). (2019). Concept Development and Experiential Learning.
https://www.nationaldb.org/info-center/learning-concept-development/
Practical ideas and examples for creating meaningful, experience-based learning opportunities.

Bridging Experience and Symbolic Thought
Rowland, C., & Schweigert, P. (2000). Tangible Symbol Systems: Making the Connection with People Who Are Deafblind or Have Multiple Disabilities (2nd ed.).
Design to Learn Projects, Oregon Health & Science University
A practical approach for linking real-life experiences with tactile symbols to support communication and understanding.

REACH OUT!

Do you have questions about the role of Interveners or how they support learners with DeafBlindness? We'd love to hear from you! Contact us at: ecutsp@gmail.com

INTERESTED IN JOINING OUR COHORT?

If you know someone who would make a great addition to our DeafBlind Intervener Cohort, please share this information so they can learn more!

And if you've completed the Intervener I Training and are ready to take the next step toward your National Intervener Certification, we'd be happy to help you get started. Contact us today at: ecutsp@gmail.com.

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