

# Deaf-Blind Perspectives

Volume 8, Issue 2

Winter 2000/2001

## Tactile Learning Strategies for Children who are Deaf-Blind: Concerns and Considerations from Project SALUTE

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Without reliable access to clear visual and auditory information, children who are deaf-blind must rely on additional modes of learning, such as learning through touch. For many of these children, touch is a primary mode of communication. Although a variety of tactile strategies are frequently used with children who are deaf-blind, there is little research-based evidence that validates their use. Identifying effective tactile strategies for deaf-blind children who also have cognitive or physical disabilities is particularly challenging. Project SALUTE (Successful Adaptations for Learning to Use Touch Effectively), a federally funded model demonstration project, is addressing the need for a more informed approach to the use of these methods. The goal of the project is to identify, develop, and validate tactile instructional strategies for children who have hearing loss and no functional vision, plus additional cognitive and physical disabilities.

This article discusses key issues and concerns regarding the use of tactile strategies based on Project SALUTE's initial activities—a review of publications and input from focus groups. This preliminary examination has identified that there are large gaps in what is known about tactile methods and has revealed more questions than answers regarding the use of touch with children who are deaf-blind. For example, what are the most effective ways to present information in this mode? How should children be taught to use their hands for exploration, learning, and communication? What adaptations are needed for the child who requires tactile information, but has severe physical disabilities and cannot easily control hand movements?

The following literature review and focus group findings serve as a basis for the work of the remaining three years of Project SALUTE. We hope that it also stimulates discussion and sharing of ideas and resources among families and professionals who are interested in this topic and encourages those who are using tactile strategies to analyze their use in a systematic way.

### Literature Review

We identified a number of tactile strategies commonly used with children who are deaf-blind by reviewing publications in the areas of visual impairment and blindness, deaf-blindness, occupational therapy, developmental and biological psychology, and related topics. For the most part, these strategies are not based on research, but rather on the experiences or opinions of the authors or on anecdotal reports. Few research studies have focused on tactile adaptations for children who are blind with additional disabilities (one exception is Rowland & Schweigert, 2000). Consequently, there is little empirical evidence validating tactile strategies that are used frequently with children who are deaf-blind. These specific strategies we identified are discussed below.

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**Hand-over-hand guidance.** Hand-over-hand guidance is a common strategy in which an adult puts his or her hand over a child's hand to help the child explore an object, act on an object, or make a gesture or sign (Free man, 1985; McInnes & Treffry, 1982). This hand-over-hand

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