

ACCESSING SIGN LANGUAGE IN THE TACTILE MODALITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is currently a gap in information to support a family or professional who receives a recommendation that 'a young person requires tactile signing'. This paper aims to start to fill that gap.

This paper helps to signpost people to some of the existing resources that are available and it deals with initial questions that people who receive that recommendation may have.

2. WHAT IS TACTILE SIGNING?

Tactile signing is a method used by people who cannot access sign language through the use of vision, or who would benefit from the use of additional tactual information.

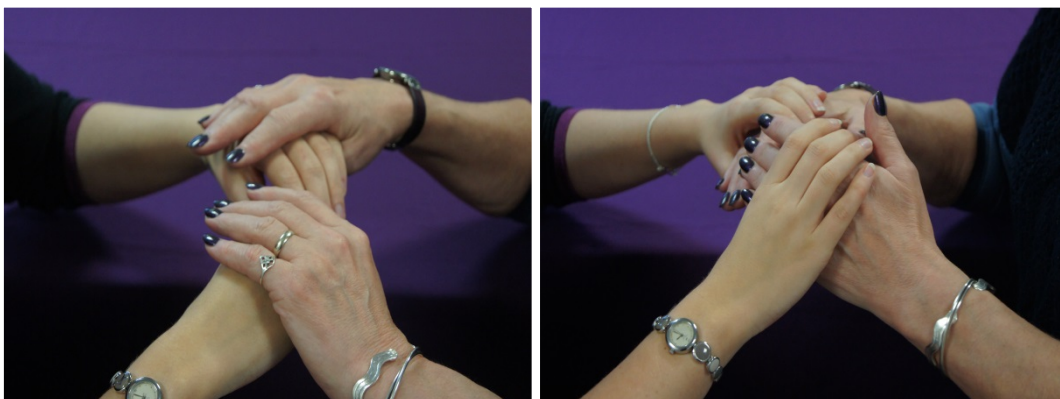
It can be the tactile adaptation of an existing sign language like British Sign Language (BSL) for example.

It can also be used to communicate and interact with people who do not use a formal language, through touch, movement and idiosyncratic signs.

3. WHAT TERMS ARE USED TO DESCRIBE TACTILE SIGNING APPROACHES?

There are many different definitions used to describe tactile strategies which can be very confusing. (Chen, Downing & Rodriguez-Gil, 2001). We have outlined the most commonly used terminology here:

- **Tactile signing:** The receiver of the message places his or her hands on the signer's hands in order to perceive the signs (Reed, Delhorne, Durlach, Fisher, 1995). Consequently, the hands of the signer will be under the hands of the receiver of the message.



Left image: The signer is on the left and the perceiver of the message is on the right.

Right image: The signer is on the right and the perceiver of the message is on the left.

- **Co-active signing:** A type of adapted signing in which an adult physically guides the child to produce signs using a hand-over-hand method (Watkins, Clark, 1991). Be aware: Co-active signing would only happen in a 'learning' situation; it is not a formal method of communication.
- **On Body signs/body signs:** The signer produces signs on areas of the receiver's body rather than on the hands (Joint, 1998).
- **Hands-on signing:** This a nationally recognised method of sign language defined by people who are deafblind. It refers to signing in which the signer places his or her hands beneath the hands of the deafblind person, allowing him or her to follow their movements and the shape of their signs. BSL and deafblind interpreters facilitate this role.

Note: This is also referred to, particularly by education professionals, as hand-under-hand or tactile signing. In this paper, we will use the term 'tactile signing'

4. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TACTILE SIGNING?

When communicating, the hands of the person who is 'speaking' should always be *under* those of the person who is receiving the message.

It is extremely important to use a respectful and positive approach.

The person who is deafblind uses his/her hands not only as tools, as sighted people primarily do, but, most importantly, as eyes, as ears, as a voice, and as a means of regulating emotions and energy. Because their hands must fulfil all of these functions, they need to be respected and interacted with very carefully and skilfully.

Controlling a deafblind person's hands is equivalent to blindfolding a sighted person or muffling the speech of a speaking person (Miles, 2008).

Consider the following principles:

- light, gentle hands offer the listener the opportunity to follow when you place your hands under theirs without any force; it is important not to lead
- tactile signing is non-controlling
- turns are taken by changing hand position
- tactile signs are made in the same way as signs would be made for a sighted person (facing the other person)
- hand positioning and placement will vary from person to person. Be flexible; as individuals, we listen and speak in many ways, this is the same in the tactile modality
- think about the concept you are portraying and be as clear as possible. Always clarify that the other person has understood
- hand-under-hand signing does not obstruct the most important parts of the child's own experience of any object he or she may be touching (Miles, 2003)

5. WHAT ARE THE PREREQUISITES FOR TACTILE SIGNING DEVELOPMENT?

There is no single 'plan' for using tactile strategies that will fit for every person who is deafblind.

For children/ young people who cannot rely on vision or hearing, the hands play an extremely important role in:

- becoming a competent and confident explorer of their environment
- helping to gain a clear understanding of where things are in the world which would provide a motivation for mobility
- helping to construct a body image and sense of self in the world
- gaining the ability to express feelings and ideas in differentiated ways

The hands of the child who is deafblind must become curious, must learn to search, explore, reach and grasp, and must become able to express an increasingly wide range of feelings and ideas all without the reinforcement that vision and hearing provide (Miles, 2003).

Communication partners can:-

- be physically and emotionally close (be available without being intrusive)
- confirm and react to the deafblind person with expressions and actions in a tactile manner
- share the world through the tactile sense. Joint exploration of objects with maximum attention being drawn to the tactile features of the environment can be an effective initial approach to developing shared tactile 'meaning'
- show emotions, expressions and actions through the body and observe and 'read' the other person's signals
- connect language to experiences that are meaningful to the child/ young person
- allow the child/ young person to know that you share the experience of touching the same object or of making the same kind of movements

6. IS THERE A STANDARD SYSTEM FOR USING TACTILE SIGNING WITH DEAFBLIND CHILDREN?

Each child/ young person who is deafblind has individual needs and preferences, so it is very important to use an individualised approach when determining the best teaching practices (Chen, Downing, & Rodriguez-Gil, 2001).

There can be two main sources for tactile signs and utterances:

1. Conventional signs and gestures – tactile sign language.
2. Personal (idiosyncratic) signs and gestures developed from the person's individual experiences.

There are two forms of conventional tactile sign language which may be described as follows:

- a. Two-handed tactile sign language is a method of communication that allows a deafblind person to receive signed communication by placing both hands on top of the other person's. This mode is often embraced by individuals who have recently learned tactile sign language, are transitioning from a visual to a tactual mode, or who are seeking to receive a fuller tactual picture of the signed method.
- b. One-handed tactile sign language is a method of communication in which the receiver places one hand on top of the communication partner's hand to receive sign language through the tactile mode. This method is typically used by fluent signers who are very skilled at tactile reception and have been using this method of communication for a length of time.

6. IS IT APPROPRIATE TO TOUCH A CHILD?

Engaging in the tactile modality can potentially lead to what could be perceived as difficult or uncomfortable situations (Hewett, 2007). These difficulties should be addressed openly and honestly on an individual basis. General rules and policies often don't hold all the answers.

To withhold touch because it may give rise to difficult or complex situations is not feasible for people who rely on the tactile modality for communication.

7. CAN TACTILE SIGNS/STRATEGIES BE USEFUL WHEN THE CHILD/YOUNG PERSON HAS RESIDUAL VISION?

There are many reasons why the use of tactile strategies may benefit a child/young person with complex needs including those with residual vision:

- all children learn through a combination of input from their senses. Because it is very concrete, tactile information will supplement visual input or clarify other sensory input (Chen & Downing, 2006)
- 'listening and talking' hands can lead to increased attention and interest, and better flow in the interaction
- the person with deafblindness can often become more active as the turn-taking becomes more distinct
- interaction through touch and movement is a meaningful way of being together and not just a step towards linguistic communication
- through touch and movements we can connect with people with congenital deafblindness as more equal partners, but as communication partners, we (sighted, hearing people) have to trust and learn to use these modalities
- it is easy to underestimate the potential impact reduced vision has on interaction. A tactile approach may open new paths to development

8. HOW CAN EMOTIONS BE EXPRESSED WHEN USING TACTILE SIGN LANGUAGE?

In standard BSL emotions are expressed through non-manual features, e.g. facial expressions, body movement and tension.

When someone is not able to see those expressions, bodily expressions like tension and muscle control become important in communicating about emotional states in the tactile modality.

'Touch can communicate a wide variety of feelings. The speed with which my hands move, the lightness or heaviness of my touch, the warmth or coolness of my hands; all of these and more can convey happiness, sadness, anger, impatience, disappointment, and a whole array of other feelings' (Miles, 2003 p9-10).

9. HOW DO I TEACH TACTILE SIGNING?

Tactile signs are produced normally as when signing to a sighted person.

Sometimes this means young children will make the signs 'backwards' for a while, because that is how they perceive the signs. This will be strongly dependent on other factors such as understanding, motor skills etc.

It needs to be stressed that in order for a deafblind child to learn the meaning of a sign it will be important to repeat it numerous times and as explained earlier, the sign should be used in a context that is meaningful.

10. HOW DO I HELP A CHILD THAT REFUSES TO USE TOUCH?

If a child is saying 'no' through his or her body movements and facial expressions, caregivers must respect his communication and alter the situation so that the child will be more likely to participate.
(Chen, Downing, 2006)

Consider the following:

- Are there other things that the child will touch and wants to engage with? Is this an option?
- Has a trusting relationship been established with the child so that he/she can feel comfortable exploring items?
- Are the child's hands respected as their means to gather information about the world?

11. TRAINING

Anyone who supports someone who is deafblind requires training in order to develop an effective way of communicating.

The content of this training will vary according to individual needs.

Training should include BSL training and specific training on tactile signing.

The level of signing competence of a communication partner in an educational setting should be at an appropriate level to develop and stretch the learner's language skills.

If you are welcoming a learner who requires tactile communication in your setting you are advised to make contact with your local sensory advisory teaching service for support in ensuring appropriate access to language and education.

The BSL Coalition and National Sensory Impairment Partnership undertook an audit of training needs in December 2014 to identify the need to develop specific training in this area. This is available on the NatSIP website.

12. USEFUL RESOURCES

Full references of resources are available in section 14.

- *Assessment of Deafblind Access to Manual Language Systems (ADAMLS)*, - Blaha & Carlson (2004)

This resource is for educational teams who are responsible for developing appropriate adaptations and strategies for children who are deafblind who are candidates for learning manual language systems. It is an assessment tool for use by experienced practitioners although it has useful considerations for tactile signing. This can be accessed online at: <http://www.dblink.org/pdf/adamls.pdf>

- *Communication and Congenital Deafblindness series* - Rødbroe, Janssen & Souriou (2006)

Four booklets written to support and inspire individuals and teams around each person with deafblindness. These focus on communication and have lots of video examples of tactile communication in practice. These are available to order online at: <http://www.deafblindinternational.org/ccd.html>

- *Do touch: Physical contact and people who have severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties.* - Hewett (2007)

This is a very helpful article about the complexities of physical contact when engaging in contact in the tactile modality.

This can be accessed online at:

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.689.5039&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

- *Feel my language*, Lundqvist, Klefstad & Seljeseth (2013)

This is a short text introducing three people using tactile signing. It includes an outline of good practice, principles and examples. There is an accompanying DVD. There is a particular focus on accessing three party interactions, establishing tactile signing in a group social context.

This is available through the Regional Centre for people with deafblindness, North Norway. This is available to order through: <http://www.unn.no/regionsenter-for-doevblinde/category21655.html>

- *Landscape of touch* - Deafblind International Tactile Working Group (2013)

This DVD with companion guide follows the experience of people both deafblind and non-deafblind, as they explore, interact and communicate with each other in the tactile world. The film offers specific images that show the shift in perspective that is required to enter the rich, unique world of tactile experience that is inhabited by people who are deafblind

These are available to order online at: <http://shop.sensescotland.org.uk/category/67-landscape-of-touch-dvd.aspx>

- *Tactile strategies for children who have visual impairments and multiple disabilities: Promoting communication and learning skills*. - Chen & Downing (2006)

This is a practical book that provides clear information on what 'touch' is. It summarises a lot of the information of Project SALUTE, which can be accessed online at: www.projectsalute.net

- *Talking the language of the hands to the hands: the importance of hands for the person who is deafblind*. - Miles (2003)

This publication helps practitioners and families to interact as skilfully as possible to facilitate the development of the hands of a person who is deafblind. It is available online at:

<http://documents.nationaldb.org/products/hands.pdf>

13. RESOURCES ADDENDUM (2019)

- *A mom's musings* - Withrow (n.d)

This parent authored blog site explores the experience of Orion Theodore and his developing use of tactile strategies and pro-tactile ASL.

It is available online at: <http://hexwit.blogspot.com/2017/03/pearls-of-touch.html>

- *If you can see it you can support it* - Nordic Welfare Centre (2019)

Aimed at professionals, parents and family members of people with deafblindness. This online book consists of information, tools and practical ideas/tips on how to support and give the best opportunities for language development in a tactile modality, so that the person with congenital deafblindness is recognised as a human being using language.

It is available online at: <https://nordicwelfare.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/If-you-can-see-it-you-can-support-it-a-book-on-tactile-language.pdf>

- *Journal of Deafblind Studies on Communication (DBSC) - (2015 onwards)*

The DBSC foregrounds knowledge that is developing in a new academic study-line that focuses on communication and deafblindness from various theoretical perspectives. The DBSC is an open access journal.

It is available online at: <https://jdbsc.rug.nl/>

- *PT Connects website* - (n.d)

ProTactile ASL is the American movement establishing tactile sign language for people with deafblindness. This website directs readers to a range of open access resources.

It is available online at: <https://protactileconnects.weebly.com/resources.html>

- *Sign acquisition in children who are deafblind* – Deuce & Rose (2019)

This chapter explores sign acquisition in children who are deafblind. It is available to purchase as a chapter or the book *Manual Sign Acquisition in Children with Developmental Disabilities*.

Available to order from: <https://novapublishers.com/shop/manual-sign-acquisition-in-children-with-developmental-disabilities/>

- *Thinking about tactile sign languages* - Rose (2018)

This short article explores the different aspects of tactile sign language and how these aspects come together to form tactile language.

It is available online at: <https://rnib.org.uk/insight-online/tactile-sign-language>

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15. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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