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DEAFBLINDNESS: EDUCATIONAL SERVICE GUIDELINES: THE EVALUATION PROCESS

This fact sheet has been developed to guide you through the initial evaluation process of your child with deaf-blindness. It is based on the Deafblindness: Educational Service Guidelines (the Guidelines).¹

If you are the parent of a child with deaf-blindness, your child's educational rights are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA guarantees the right to a "free, appropriate public education" to all children with covered disabilities from age 3 to 21. Deaf-blindness is a "covered disability" under IDEA.ⁱⁱ Your school district must have written policies and procedures in place to ensure that they identify each potentially eligible child, even those children not in school or in private or religious schools. Once you or a professional refers your child for an evaluation, you and a team from your district decide whether or not your child will be evaluated. You must give signed consent for your child's evaluation. It is important for your child to be evaluated, because the evaluation provides the information needed to develop an appropriate education plan for your child.

Nondiscriminatory Assessment and Eligibility Determination

Once it's determined that there will be an evaluation, a decision must be made about the assessments that will be conducted as part of that evaluation. The assessments must be racially/culturally non-discriminatory, valid for the purposes for which they are used, and provided in the language used by your child and family (such as sign language, Spanish, etc.) The evaluation must be "multi-disciplinary" (at least two professionals with different expertise). At least one team member must be knowledgeable *IN* the area of your child's suspected disability. No single test can be used to determine if your child is eligible. The evaluation must identify all areas of suspected disability, and the impact of the disability on all education areas (academic, behavioral, social-emotional, functional life skills, etc.). It must consider your child's *strengths* as well as *needs*. You must have the opportunity to share your concerns for enhancing the education of your child.

The evaluation team must use tests that are "validated" for the purposes for which they are being used; they must actually measure what they say they measure! The professionals who conduct the evaluation must have appropriate qualifications and credentials, and they must conduct the tests appropriately. The focus must be on enabling your child *to be involved in and progress in the curriculum used by children without disabilities*.

Evaluating Your Child with Deaf-Blindness

Evaluating a child with deaf-blindness to identify their strengths and needs is complicated. The Guidelines provide important information to consider.

Evaluator Knowledge & Expertise: The professionals who help evaluate your child should understand the impact of combined vision and hearing losses and be able to communicate using your child's forms of communication.ⁱⁱⁱ The evaluation team should include a deaf-blind specialist to work with other team members. A deaf-blind specialist will understand that your child's combined sensory impairments remain their primary disability even if they have other disabilities. They will help ensure that your child is not misdiagnosed and placed in inappropriate programs. IDEA requires that the evaluation be conducted in the language most likely to collect the needed information about your child's strengths and needs. So if your child uses sign-language, the evaluators must be able to communicate with your child in sign language.

Evaluation Content: The evaluation must identify your child's current levels of functioning in all areas of development. As a starting point, your child should have an ophthalmological (vision), audiological (hearing), and neurological evaluation to identify your child's sensory and cognitive (intellectual) strengths and needs. If your child has physical/ motor limitations, the evaluation must also include an assessment of your child's fine and gross motor skills.

Identifying how your child communicates is the core of the evaluation. The majority of people with deaf-blindness face great challenges in communication. Even though most children with deaf-blindness have some vision and hearing, they are often cut off from what others are saying, doing and feeling, and from what is happening around them. Communication is how people connect with others and learn. Developing your child's "receptive" and "expressive" communication abilities is the most important way to improve their quality of life.

There are no formal assessments standardized for children with deaf-blindness, so more informal and functional types of evaluation should be used for your child. The National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness has information about some evaluation tools that the team can consider.^{iv}

Evaluators should observe your child in a variety of settings to see how s/he interacts and communicates with others. Functional assessments focus on:

- ♦ Communication
- ♦ Functional vision and hearing
- ♦ Academics
- ♦ Social competence
- ♦ Daily living skills
- ♦ Leisure and recreation
- ♦ Use of technology
- ♦ Motor skills, orientation and mobility, and
- ♦ Vocational skills and interests.

For your child with deaf-blindness, functional assessments, curriculum-based assessments, interviews, and portfolio assessments (reviewing your child's homework and classwork) will often provide a more accurate picture of your child's abilities than clinical assessments. Your child's evaluation should also include assessments of *literacy* (reading and writing) and *numeracy* (math).

Your role in the evaluation: It is important that parent input is considered in the evaluation of every child with a disability, but it is particularly important in the case of a child with deaf-blindness. You have valuable information that is essential in assessing your child's strengths and determining his or her needs. You share information with the evaluation team about your child's strengths; their medical, educational, and other history; important people in your child's life; what your child likes and dislikes; how you and your child communicate; your child's daily routines; and your hopes and dreams for your child. You also share the results of any outside evaluations, including medical information; your child's strengths, needs, preferences, and learning styles; and samples of your child's school and home work, and videos of your child in a variety of settings.^v

Tips for Participating in the Evaluation Process

In preparation for the evaluation, ask questions!

- ♦ What questions do we hope will be answered by the evaluation?
- ♦ Who will be conducting the evaluation? What is their training and experience?

- ♦ In what settings will the evaluation be conducted?
- ♦ What areas will be evaluated?
- ♦ What specific tests or portions of tests will be used and why?
- ♦ Does the evaluation need to be adapted to compensate for my child's suspected disability? Does it need to be in sign or another language?

Ask for any written information on the evaluation process. Talk with other experienced parents, school representatives, or outside professionals about the evaluation process. Contact your state deaf-blind project to find out more information about evaluations for children with deaf-blindness and tools for you and the evaluation team. You can find your state deaf-blind project by going to the website of the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness at www://nationaldb.org and clicking on your state or by calling 800-438-9376.

For More Information

For more information about the evaluation process, or what to do if there are problems, contact your state Parent Training and Information Center (PTI). You can find your state's PTI at www.parentcenternetwork.org. For more detailed information about evaluation and other educational services for children with deaf-blindness, access the Guidelines by going to www.perkins.org and putting "Service Guidelines" in the search window. Evaluation can be found in Chapter 1 Foundations (Issues IV and V); Chapter 2 Education Personnel (Issues VII and VIII), Chapter 3 Assessment (Issues I-VII), and Chapter 5 Supportive Structure and Administration (Issue V). The National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness has additional information on deaf-blindness at www.nationaldb.org, or at 800-438-9376.

This fact sheet was developed in collaboration with the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network and the Perkins School for the Blind, with help from state deaf-blind projects and parents of children with deaf-blindness.^{vi}

ⁱ [Deafblindness: Educational Service Guidelines, www.perkins.org/resources/educational-publications/deafblindness-educational-service-guidelines](http://www.perkins.org/resources/educational-publications/deafblindness-educational-service-guidelines)

ⁱⁱ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines "deaf-blindness" as "concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness." Your child does not have to be completely deaf and blind to qualify.

ⁱⁱⁱ Guidelines, Chapter 1, Foundations, Issue IV.

^{iv} www.nationaldb.org/ISSelectTopics.php?topicCatID=792

^v Guideliness, Chapter 1, Foundations, Issue V; Chapter 3, Assessment, Issue VI.

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