



Alaska Center for  
Accessible Materials  
(AKCAM)



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Alaska  
Deafblind  
Project

## QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

October 2021

**"To achieve literacy, there must be reading. To achieve reading, it must be meaningful. To achieve meaningfulness, there must be communication. To achieve communication, there must be experience. To achieve experience, there must be opportunity. To achieve opportunity, there must be care and understanding."**

Laurie Hinzman

### Letter from the Editor

Tyler Arsen, AKCAM Coordinator

The importance of early literacy development extends far beyond childhood, particularly for students with cognitive and physical disabilities. Early assessment and intervention play a key role in the development of language and literacy skills. Every student can make progress in language development, providing that they have individualized and consistent support. While any time is the right time to seek support for your student, research shows that in the area of literacy development, "earlier is better." This newsletter explores emergent literacy practices and intervention for tactile learners and students with autism, keying in on functional ways to support tactile development and best practices for approaching literacy assessment.

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# Emergent Literacy for Tactile Learners

by Angel Black, Alaska Deafblind Project Coordinator

Literacy in its most basic form is the ability both to understand and to express one's feelings, wants, and experiences to others. Literacy is developed through our experiences and our interactions with the world. The path to literacy requires establishing communication and connecting meaning to objects, events, and people. Students with combined vision and hearing loss miss out on many of the experiences that happen incidentally for other children, but meaningful learning experiences can be provided when families, teachers, and caregivers not only build trusting relationships but also get to know these children on a deeper level. To learn what their favorite objects and activities are, and recognize their personal array of communication signals.

It takes purposeful planning to provide these important early learning experiences on which to build literacy skills. Following a student's lead provides a wealth of information about what will be most interesting and motivating to that particular child. Incorporating familiar and favorite objects, people, and activities into early learning experiences is essential to achieving the positive results we all want with our students.

## Fun with Tactile Books!

Tactile books are a great way to foster the development of literacy skills with any student with deafblindness, including those students with other significant disabilities. These can be used at home for enjoyment, to support understanding and anticipation of activities, or as an independent leisure skill. At school, tactile books are a must for supporting literacy instruction, for use in developing concepts, and honing sensory efficiency skills. However, the ability to touch in a functional way is a very important first step.

### Ideas for Use:

- To have the ability to touch and explore tactual materials, (these can be created to meet any tactual need).
- Exploring and comparing textures, learning language for textures, i.e., "this is hard, soft, rough, smooth", etc.
- Teaching comparisons long/short, hard/soft, big/small, and so on.
- Teaching shapes and counting.
- Touching things gently.
- Looking at and exploring items one at a time, and searching systematically.
- Teaching the concepts of a page: top/bottom, left/right, corners.
- Tracking left to right.

Here are some of the different types of tactile books you can create!

**Experience Books:** An experience book is a book based on an experience the child had (i.e., a trip to the zoo, a birthday party, a school activity) using objects connected with the experience. The book is then used to retrieve memories of that experience and assists the child in the language development around the experience. [Learn More](#)

**Object Books:** Object books are similar to Experience Books but may be more general than one specific experience. They can be used to explore routines (bath time, mealtime, gym class), teach counting, or reinforce concepts, such as big/little, short/tall, rough/smooth. [Learn More](#)

*“An object book is a book containing real objects. These objects should be taken from the student's activities and experiences, so they will be meaningful. This is the first type of book that should be used to introduce a tactual learner into the wonderful world of reading.”* --Smith, Millie and others (2002).

**Story Boxes:** *“A story box is a way for young children with deafblindness to experience a story. When selecting a story for the student, choose one that is simple and tells about familiar objects and concepts. Collect corresponding items in a box or bag. As you read the story to the child, allow him/her to hold the item. The number of items and complexity of the story should be suited to the child. Often, simple is better.”* --Drissel, Norma (1997). [Learn More](#)

**Theme Books:** A theme book is a book that focuses on a topic (i.e., transportation, restaurant, demographic information). The books are then used to supplement the instruction of that topic. [Learn More](#)

To have the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets you communicate effectively with those around you is one of the most important gifts we can give a student with deafblindness. It doesn't really matter what that ability looks like, at the end of the day literacy helps us all make sense of the world we live in.

More Resources:

[Literacy for Students who are Deafblind](#)

[Early Literacy for Students with Multiple Disabilities or Deafblindness](#)

References: Armstrong, K. (2018, February 7). [Tactile Activities for Pre-Braille Learners. Paths to Literacy](#) .

The US Department of Education. (n.d.). *Early Emergent Literacy*. Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss. Retrieved from Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss.

## Special Focus: Assessing Literacy Levels in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

by Tyler Arsen, AKCAM Coordinator

A wide variability in performance exists for students with ASD. While some possess age-appropriate skills, others experience significant challenges in literacy and reading comprehension. These challenges present themselves due to a variety of factors. A student with ASD might struggle with literacy because of the restrictive or repetitive behaviors that characterize their diagnosis. This tendency may lead to a fascination with words and letters, contributing to a false impression of strength in all categories of emergent literacy. In reality, a student can be proficient in decoding and test well below grade level in reading comprehension.

Restricted interests and social communication difficulties may also explain challenges in reading comprehension for students with ASD. With social-communication difficulties comes a reduced interest in shared and paired reading.

## True or False?

There are prerequisites to literacy learning. Some children will not benefit from literacy instruction due to cognitive and/or physical impairments.

**Answer:** False. Every child sits somewhere on the literacy learning continuum and can benefit from high-quality and individualized literacy instruction.

### Emergent Literacy Skills

- Early name writing
- Letter name/sound knowledge
- Print concepts
- Vocabulary knowledge
- Syntactic knowledge
- Narrative skills

## Finding the Starting Point

The assessment approach is as important as the assessment itself when evaluating literacy levels in students with ASD. Think back to the times you have taken an important test and didn't get enough sleep the night before (or were hungry, or anxiety rendered hours of studying meaningless).

Students in the ASD population are affected to a greater degree because sensory features of the environment can greatly impact the ability of children with ASD to engage in testing to the best of their ability. Executive functioning difficulties such as inattention, difficulties changing from one task to another, and difficulty inhibiting impulses are also common in ASD. These roadblocks can be intensified by distractions in the environment such as the presence of preferable items or sensory distractions.

Let's discuss a few ways that proctors can alleviate these challenges.

### Literacy Assessment Considerations for Students With ASD

<i>Environmental</i>	<i>Routine &amp; Structure</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Determine whether a familiar adult be present</li><li>• Plan assessment setting (location, at desk, on the floor)</li><li>• Observe for signs of tiredness or distress</li><li>• Observe need for short breaks/stopping assessment altogether</li><li>• Provide a space with minimal distractions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preplan and prepare assessment materials to reduce transition times</li><li>• Focus on essential elements of the task instead of factors such as eye contact or stillness</li><li>• Provide consistency in structure and timing of the assessment</li><li>• Take into account the student's usual routine (schedule assessment around preferred activities)</li></ul>

## Students With Limited Verbal Communication Skills

As with literacy, students with autism have a range of communication skills and abilities. Additional assessment considerations are necessary for students with limited verbal communication skills in order for them to perform at their

highest potential. An important factor when preparing assessments for this population is *response accessibility*.

### Response Accessibility

It is frustrating to know the answer to a question, but be able to display your knowledge because of a barrier in assessment design. Students with limited verbal communication may need specific test adaptations to fit their individual response style.

For example, given a list of words from the Basic Reading Inventory, students were asked to choose the target word *run* from a field of four words, which included three distractor words that began with the same letter and were of similar length:

Red      Rat      Run      Rip

The goal of this assessment is to determine whether the student can match speech to print—however this student has limited verbal communication. An effective adaptation would be to let the adult provide the speech and allow the child to link speech to print using a gesture or marking tool.

Often, assessment practices with students in the ASD population are not tailored enough to allow them to perform at their highest potential, leading to results that misrepresent their level of knowledge and ability. Let's give our students the best chance to show what they know with customized assessments and strategic testing environments--from there we can make real progress.

## Recommended SESA Library Resources



**Ain't Misbehavin' [DVD] : Strategies for Improving the Lives of Students who are Deaf-blind and Present Challenging Behavior** by TSBVI Video Productions, 2008

Description: Examines crucial links between behavior and the issues of communication, control, and quality of life. Discusses methods of changing behavior in children with deaf-blindness; looks at behavior management techniques, including communication;

Evelyn Moats Munger  
and Susan Jane Bowdon

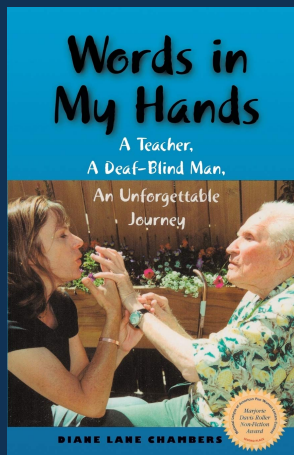
**BEYOND  
PEEK-A-BOO  
AND  
PAT-A-CAKE**

*New third edition*      Activities for Baby's  
First 24 Months

**Beyond Peek-A-Boo And Pat-A-Cake: Activities For Baby's Twenty-Four Months** by Evelyn Moats Munger and Susan Jane Bowdon. 3rd ed. New Win Publishing, Inc., c1993

Description: ...goes up to 24 months of age, offers the new parents the opportunity to take on an active role in their child's development. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to share in their baby's growth during these early

explains the reasons for exhibiting inappropriate behavior.



**Words in My Hands: A Teacher, A Deaf-Blind Man, An Unforgettable Journey** by Diane Chambers. Ellexa Press, 2005.

Description: This heartwarming narrative about the life-changing power of sign language communication is told by Diane Lane Chambers, Bert's sign language teacher. Diane finds her world transformed as well by her relationship with her unique deaf-blind student.

months in ways that are exciting and stimulating for them and the infant.



**A Coactive Sign System for Deafblind Children [DVD]** by SKI-HI Institute, Dept. of Communicative Disorders, Utah State University

Description: A DVD replication of a previous series of videotapes that teach 12 beginning coactive sign lessons deemed essential for the deaf-blind, as well as backup coactive sign vocabulary designed to supplement and expand the vocabulary of a deaf-blind child. Tactile communication.

## Remember!

The [SESA Library](#) contains a wide variety of large print books available to support readers with low vision, specific learning disabilities, and other reading challenges. Feel free to browse our collection to find a title that best suits your learner's reading level and interest! Contact our Librarian, [Anne Freitag](#), for more information.

