

Early Literacy: Braille and the Young Child

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How do I know if my child needs braille?

I am writing just as I would speak to a group of parents and family interventionists because I want the information to come across as if we were sitting and talking. In return, I ask that the reader feel free to contact me to ask questions or make comments. Here's how you can reach me:

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Tactile more than visual

I think all of us ask, "How and when do we teach an infant or toddler braille?" This is a much debated issue, but it really is as individual as the child in question. Much of decision making about a young child is based on observation. The observation you should make about the child's learning preference is whether the child is a tactual and auditory learner or if vision is the way a child receives information from the environment.

So first, watch your child and determine if your child is accomplishing tasks tactually or visually. One way to do this is to put a high contrast object in the child's hand. If the child looks at the object before putting it in the mouth, then the learning may be visual. If the child appears to smell or feel of the object, or if the object immediately goes to the mouth without any visual observation, then the learning may be tactual and olfactory.

Now, some infants put objects in their mouths before observing at all, so try other activities such as placing a high contrast object nearby and see if the infant locates it visually and reaches for it or stares at it. If not, put it nearer and nearer until you place it in the child's hand. Then watch for visual or tactual observation.

Sound localization is not paired with visual contact

Another cue for tactual learning preference is sound location. If the young child turns the eyes toward familiar sounds, such as the mother's or father's voice, then visual contact is preferable. If the child hears the familiar voice and stops to listen without turning toward the sound to "look", then auditory learning may be the preference. The auditory learning is paired with tactual learning to increase the information from the child's environment. The child who uses auditory skills will usually depend on tactile cues to add more details to the information taken through aural cues.

What does this mean to the parent or teacher of this young child? This means that if vision is not the primary source of information, other senses must be utilized to tell the child about the world. It is important to determine which of the senses to stimulate with the young child.

Concrete language is preferred over incidental learning through vision

Children who are tactual and auditory learners prefer concrete experiences that are explained verbally rather than learning incidentally from visual cues the way a sighted child typically learns. How do you know if the child prefers concrete experiences? Let's examine one activity for the young child.

The visual learner - Scenario #1: The child leaves the front door and walks down the sidewalk to the curb. At the curb the parent takes the child's hand and says, "Look both ways to see if a car is coming." The child looks up and down the street and says, "No cars coming." When it is safe they cross the street and walk to the neighbor's door. They knock on the door. The neighbor opens the door and the child sees his friend. The child walks in and follows the friend to the play area. The parent stays in the room with the other adult while the children play.

The tactual learner - Scenario #2: The child leaves the front door and using sighted guide (or demanding to hold the adult's hand) follows the parent down the sidewalk to the curb. The child strays from the sidewalk to touch the grass and find the location of the sidewalk in relation to the yard. The parent says to the child, "We're at the curb and that is where the street is. Cars are coming down the street. Do you hear the cars? Listen for the cars and tell me when you think that there are no cars coming toward us." The child explores the height of the curb, bends down to touch the curb and grass, and listens for cars. The child says, "No cars coming." Then the parent says, "Billy lives across the street. You and I will cross the street." They cross the street and walk up the sidewalk. The child again explores the sidewalk and grass. The parent guides the child up the stairs. He explores the entrance to the home. The parent tells him to knock on the door. The child finds the door and knocks. His friend opens the door, and the parent tells the child, "Billy opened the door." The friend tells the child to come in the house. The child takes his parent's hand. The parent puts the child's hand on the arm of his friend, Billy, and he takes the child to the play area. The parent tells the child where the play area is in relation to the parent and the front door.

The child plays with the friend by exploring the toys and the play area and asking questions.

Both scenarios concluded with the children playing together, but the second scenario took more time and explanations. The tactual learner had to have the concrete information about sounds from cars, the shape of the curb, and what "across the street" meant. The visual cues that the sighted child would receive incidentally had to be consciously taught to the child who learns tactually. The parent had to point out specific auditory information to the child and help him use that sense for information gathering.

If your child tends to need more information like the child in Scenario #2 does, then he or she may be a tactual learner. A child has the natural curiosity to ask questions and explore. If the exploration and language cues are oral and tactual most of the time, then the child is asking for information through senses other than vision.

When a parent or teacher determines that the child is a tactual learner, activities and reading experiences, beginning at an early age, should focus on exploration of the environment. Verbal information rather than printed information will be the basis for the child's receptive language, and his expressive language will need a lot of reinforcement to build a solid language base for learning. These early experiences are the foundation for reading readiness for any child but are more intense for the child who is a tactual learner.

Early experiences for braille readiness

Readiness skills begin with early experiences during every day activities in the home and other familiar settings. If the young child prefers tactual learning, braille is needed in the home for labels on items where the visual learner would see print or pictures for identification. Marking the child's name in braille on personal belongings is very important. Marking other items with objects, rubber bands or tactual stickers helps for location of favorite foods, clothing, or toys. For example, a rubber band may be placed around a box of breakfast food so that the child can find it in the cabinet. For clothing, sewing a French knot in the collar or waist band will let the child identify the piece of clothing. You can also make a disposable tactual marker by brailleing onto adhesive backed paper which can be placed on items.

If the child goes to nursery school or play school, items in the classroom should be marked with braille wherever print or pictures are normally used. Bulletin boards should have objects for touching and be at a level where the child can reach and explore. This motivates the child to explore the environment with his hands, an important readiness skill for orientation and mobility as well as reading. Put the child's name on his desk and mark personal items such as the "nap pad" or coat hook in braille.

Remember, a child who uses visual cues does not actually read print at a young age, but associates the print with what he hears. Braille is the reading medium for the tactual learner, so braille must be presented just as print is presented to the visual learner. Pairing print and braille is appropriate so the family and others can interpret the braille with the child. This reinforces literacy at a young age and involves many readers in the process.

Social skills paired with early reading skills

Social activities such as using the phone are important for early learning experiences. Marking the number "5" with puff paint or a braille marker helps the child orient to the phone pad. If the "#" key and "*" keys are used, then those must be identified. Phone numbers can be written in braille or put on a tape recorder so that the child can "look up" numbers just as sighted children do. Matching the numbers with the phone pad is done by very young sighted children, so matching may be done with tactual cues, also. Using the phone is a social reinforcement and creates a "larger world" for the child who is a tactual learner.

Early reading experiences

Parents can read to the young child with books that have large print and braille. Many popular children's books are available commercially with this adaptation. It is also easy to braille a clear plastic sheet to go over the print. The child learns just by touching the page that the person reading is actually getting the words from a medium that is located on the page. If braille is available in children's books, the child will "read" tactually on the page and recognize the words just as the visual learner does. If the child searches for the braille words on the page rather than looking at pictures and printed words, then the road to reading tactually has begun!

Another resource for early reading is the radio reading service on National Public Radio (NPR) stations. This program reads aloud newspapers, books, and magazines over the radio. Your local public radio station can tell you when these programs are scheduled in your area. A child can learn listening skills from this service and hear news and books at a certain time each day. The newer televisions have a "SAP" channel that can be activated to receive the radio reading on the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) television channel. This allows the tactual learner to improve listening skills while listening to topics that are interesting to other family members.

Other methods of reading for the young child may include pairing taped books with braille and print books. The braille can be added to the book so that the child can read independently. This makes a nice independent leisure time activity. All children need to have a quiet time to read and be alone so that Mom and Dad can have some quiet time, too.

Braille as a literacy medium

Braille is one form of communication and is the substitute for visual reading and writing. A child who is a tactual learner should receive braille as soon as possible so that class reading time is not spent learning braille.

Games can be one "play" method for teaching braille. Children have the rhythm games, sequencing games, and spelling games in which the tactual learner can participate. Board games can be easily modified for braille or tactual cues. Playing "school" or other real life simulations provide a good opportunity to include braille. Let the child type on a computer modified with voice output and a screen reader program. If they have access to a braille translation program with a braille printer they can print out and read stories.

Tactual learning for children with other disabilities

Sign language and braille

For the child with deafblindness, braille can be paired with sign language at a very early age much the same way a deaf child pairs the print alphabet and words with sign. Concepts can be taught with sign and braille simultaneously so that reading, writing, and speaking are all developed at the same time. The visual learner puts all of these concepts together at the same time, so the child with sensory loss can do the same.

Multiple disabilities and literacy

Children with multiple disabilities learn at varying rates but should receive information for literacy. If tactual learning and auditory learning are needed, activity boxes, communication boards, and other technology may be necessary for supplemental communication. Sometimes braille is not the child's best medium, but can be used functionally to help the child identify personal items or places. This type of functional reading provides the child with a degree of independence.

If the child cannot receive information visually or orally and has other disabilities such as cerebral palsy or other orthopedic disabilities, a team of professionals must work with the family to find the appropriate intervention for literacy. Through existing technology and homemade devices, communication and literacy are possible for children at a variety of levels.

Braille is the way the tactual learner reaches out to the world to communicate individual thoughts and learn the thoughts of others. Braille is literacy for the tactual learner.

Editor's Note: I would like to thank Dr. Sanspree for taking time to contribute to this edition of SEE/HEAR since she is such a busy individual. She is the coordinator of the teacher training program in visual impairments at UAB and is the project director of the Alabama 307.11 Deaf Blind Project. She administers programs in low vision, golf for blind golfers, camps for children with visual impairments, and low vision support groups.

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