

Benefits of Using Social-Haptic Communication with Children and Young People Who are Congenitally Deafblind

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Abstract This contribution presents the benefits of using social-haptic communication with children and young people who are congenitally deafblind, an area with little research particularly in the UK. It describes some situations in which social-haptic signals can be used in schools and colleges to reduce their isolation and improve their participation.

Keywords Social-haptic communication. Congenital deafblindness. Children. Young people. School.

Summary 1 Environmental Cues for Children and Young Individuals with Congenital Deafblindness. – 2 The Use of Social-Haptic Communication with Children and Young People with Congenital Deafblindness: Some Examples. – 3 Considerations for Implementing Social-Haptic Signals. – 4 Conclusions and Possible Future Research.

1 **Environmental Cues for Children and Young Individuals with Congenital Deafblindness**

Children and young people with congenital deafblindness (also referred to as multi-sensory impairments) are at risk of social isolation and being cut off from their environment, even when they have a formal communication system in place. They often miss out on real time information that is happening in the environment, and any information they do receive in real time might be fragmented and distorted, meaning they do not receive the full picture of what is happening around them.

Environmental information refers to something that happens in the environment, such as a fire alarm sounding or the noise produced by other children in the classroom. Often, congenitally deafblind people may be unsure about what those different sounds mean.

Alternatively, they may not be able to hear anything at all and may not understand certain movements around them, e.g., other people moving past them, or if they have to be moved quickly, for example, in case of emergency, in particular if many congenitally deafblind children are in the classroom at once.

Not knowing the location of a sound or the location of other people in the room can cause anxiety for some of the congenitally deafblind students. A person with multi-sensory impairment may have the impression that people often disappear and reappear very quickly.

Communication can also become very directive with these students, rather than conversational, and can often lack spontaneity.

2 **The Use of Social-Haptic Communication with Children and Young People with Congenital Deafblindness: Some Examples**

There is limited research in the UK on the use of social-haptic communication (SHC) with children and young adults who have multi-sensory impairments. There is some awareness of SHC but it does not appear to be widely used. Our experience is that staff working in schools with young people who have multi-sensory impairments are interested to learn more about this approach. SHC has been traditionally used in populations with acquired deafblindness, but we believe it can be used in populations with congenital deafblindness, too, as well as people who have a diagnosis of autism and learning disabilities.

Some social-haptic signals may be more directional or informative than others, but they are still informing the person about their environment and their surroundings and giving them support in navigating in and relating to the world around them. We present

a number of situations in which SHC can be used benefitting congenitally deafblind children and young individuals. Using a social-haptic signal in circle time in the morning, for example, can give the child or young person more information about who is in the room. This can be started off by letting them know who is next to them at first, by drawing on their back and using personal identifiers and objects of reference.

Social-haptic signals can be really useful for promoting peer relationships and turn taking, by giving tactile cues that don't interrupt the flow of interaction between two people doing an activity together.

Social-haptic signals, when drawn on the back for example, can be an effective tactile communication method for those who have tactile sensitivity in their hands and may find traditional tactile signing difficult, or for those with limited mobility.

For very last-minute changes in the environment such as fire drills, a social-haptic signal like an X on the back can be a quick effective way to communicate what is happening. This may alleviate some anxiety that congenitally deafblind students might experience when an unexpected event happens suddenly and may improve their understanding and participation in these safety drills, particularly if they are paired with a tactile symbol.

Social-haptic signals can also help students with multisensory impairment who are in mainstream school and are independent in many areas of their life but may struggle with joining in conversations with their peers and reading body language and facial expressions.

SHC may also help them with their independence and mobility skills if their communication partner can discreetly tell them where a door is, or if there is an obstacle in their path.

3 Considerations for Implementing Social-Haptic Signals

Like with all communication methods, introducing SHC successfully takes time and consistency. This involves training the relevant professionals to implement these strategies with the child or young person. These can include teachers, teaching assistants and personal assistants, amongst others. It is important to ensure that all staff have knowledge and feel confident in using social-haptic signals and see the value in using them with the children and young people they work with. In a busy school or college environment, it can be hard to find time to teach social-haptic signals and for the person to develop the understanding of what the signals mean, while also making it complement their current communication system. Therefore, it is essential that the staff have access to training and support when learning new approaches and that these are prioritised.

Even implementing one or two signals can be beneficial for the person, so we encourage starting with few signals at a time (also taking the students' capabilities into account; cf. Nicholas, Johannessen, van Nunen 2019). SHC could be introduced in an activity that the person is comfortable in and motivated by, such as a music session for example. Riitta Lahtinen and Russ Palmer talk about describing music through hand movements on the person's body, to connect them to music. Using social-haptic signals in this situation gives more information about the music the students might be hearing (through either a hearing aid or cochlear implant, or any residual hearing they might have) and any vibrations they might be feeling through the speakers or on a resonance board for example (Palmer, Lahtinen, Ojala 2012).

4 Conclusions and Possible Future Research

Increased communication about the environment means that the deafblind person is less isolated and has more interest in their environment. SHC could help the child or young person with congenital deafblindness to locate items and plan routes.

Developing guidelines for the use of SHC with children and young people with congenital deafblindness would also be a good resource for professionals to refer to. Nevertheless, an individualised approach to SHC is also needed, as different individuals may have different needs and capabilities. At Seashell Trust (<https://www.seashelltrust.org.uk/>), we hope to start implementing this approach on a small scale with some of the students who attend our college, and reviewing how it benefits them.

When implemented consistently, SHC can open up the world for the children and young people we work with.

Bibliography

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