

“Funny things happen
Learning and creating
I do not always see
Labels on spices and containers
So I come up with some pretty
HOT dishes...”

- Marcia McDermott
(Cooking a Meal, 2006)

Readiness Training for Living Independently on the College Campus and in the Community: Essential Skills Checklist for DeafBlind High School Students of Transition Age

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Like many students exiting secondary programs, deafblind students often lack proper preparation for life after high school. It has become apparent that more effective strategies are required much earlier than at the high school level to guarantee post-school outcomes that are reflective of deafblind students' actual aptitude and aspirations (Petroff, 1999). The exact factors that lead to clear-cut positive post-school outcomes have yet to be identified; however, a compilation of the frequently cited skill sets that determine the need for training have been gathered, and will be discussed in this chapter.

Due to the demanding academic course load required to obtain a high school diploma, many independent living and life-skills, essential for the deafblind student to live independently, are eliminated from daily school schedules. Parents and educators report that, like all secondary students, deafblind pupils are unable to pack any additional time into their already challenging educational programs (Ingraham, 2001). As a result, deafblind students are often forced to utilize time at the end of the school day, summer vacation or extended holiday breaks to address skill deficits related to independent living skills. In rare instances deafblind students have extended time at the secondary level to allow for adequate training in independent living and other essential life skills.

Defining Independence

While still in high school, or even during the middle school years, students who are deafblind should have access to secondary and post-secondary resource personnel who can offer a clear understanding of what life after high school will require (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). These key service providers can be transition coordinators, education team leaders or advocates with specialized skills in deafblindness. The specific services available can and often do include: orientation and mobility instruction, print-to-Braille transcription services, notetaking services, interpreter support services, adaptive technology evaluations and

training, funding resources for equipment acquisition, and vocational assessments to determine academic and employment potential. In addition, the student, if not already assigned, should be given chores related to personal needs and household routines. Assuming as much responsibility for personal attire, grooming, organization and social activities as early as possible will help the deafblind student gain more self-assurance and life-experience prior to entering high school. An assessment by a Rehabilitation Teacher may also be in order. Such contacts can be made through the Vision Instructor working with the student. Also, in some states, vocational rehabilitation agencies have lists of Rehabilitation Instructors who can be accessed on a contractual basis for students who may require independent living skills training in the home.

Though essential to a successful education placement for deafblind students, many students are naive about how services such as those listed above are typically coordinated. Often students exit the school system uninformed about the wide array of service options, frequency, practicality or rationale for why access to these services may help to make the educational experience both possible and positive. Even though many deafblind students have reached the age of maturity by the time the initial college semester begins, many have not been afforded the opportunity to engage in practical life experiences that involve problem solving or time management. As a result, after arriving on the college campus or entering the adult service system, scores of deafblind students often report feeling lost and before long have squandered significant time trying to figure out all the policies associated with the new academic, residential environment and new level of responsibility (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001).

The more time deafblind students are given to exercise self-determination while still in high school, the better equipped they will be upon graduating from the secondary program and taking on primary responsibility for the direction of their adult lives. Yet, for many deafblind students who are entering college, exercising this level of self-determination based on clear and thoroughly researched options may be a very new and frightening concept. This is especially true when students are not accustomed to independently making critical life decisions or problem solving.

One very engaging approach to teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills to deafblind students is through the use of board games. Games such as: Othello, Catch 21, Chess and Scrabble offer students an opportunity to plan each move and to consider the consequences of each move that is made. These games can also be played in groups or teams so that students can become familiar with the role each member of a team plays when working toward a common goal. For students whose disability preclude them from

joining sports teams in high school, the use of these competitive board games can help to create a sense of belonging and affiliation like that experienced by popular high school jocks or members of social cliques.

Getting Started

Often, as was just suggested, the road to post-school success for deafblind students begins long before high school transition plans are devised. Family members, early educators, and deafblind students put in many long hours and lots of hard work to make certain that every opportunity available for support and growth is seized and fully utilized. For deafblind students who are preparing to transition from high school to college, the need for independent living skills may be another in a very long list of essential skills needed to help ensure a successful college experience. However, many students and their parents often report that they are not really clear on what it means to have independent living skills. Independent living skills are more than just the ability to cook, clean, select appropriate clothing for weather conditions or to travel safely in the community. A very simplistic definition for independent living skills would be the ability to get through the day-to-day tasks of life, doing as much as possible by oneself (Brown et al, 1991). Knowing when to request assistance and when to exercise self-determination are also a part of independent living skills and may be based on individual maturity and comfort levels. Still, there are some basic steps that students and their families can take to develop good decision making skills.

Laying the Ground Work

While students are still in high school, every effort should be made to help them to actively participate in or even facilitate their own team meetings (Ingraham, 2001). A process such as this offers a sound approach to developing decision making skills that have an immediate impact on deafblind students' current and future needs (Brown et al, 1991; Ingraham et al, 1998; Ingraham & Anderson, 2001).

When beginning the transition process earlier, using the results from independent living readiness assessments for living in the community or on the college campus can help identify appropriate post-secondary goals the deafblind student should target during the remaining years in the education system (Ingraham, 2001). By developing self-awareness and self-determination skills prior to graduation, the deafblind student is afforded greater opportunity to practice making critical decisions. Also, the student will acquire a better understanding of important things needed to help ensure a good quality of life. However,

one very crucial word of caution for professionals and parents working with transition-aged students who have never been given responsibility for their own critical life decisions -- some students may find the process a little intimidating. Initially, many deafblind students who engage in self-determination activities and assume a greater responsibility for their daily lives may appear angry, disengaged or even weighed down. Or, some students may even believe that professionals and family members are no longer interested in or care about their well-being. When greater expectations are placed on the shoulders of deafblind students, some may feel threatened by what may be perceived as an attempt to prove they are less capable than they believe themselves to be. The *process* of developing sound decision making skills in students with such severe disabilities will require measured steps and a lot of patience on the part of all team members (Brown et al, 1991). Often, the end result of all the resistance, hurt feelings and discomfort is more capable and self-assured deafblind adults capable of assuming full responsibility for significant life choices which will directly impact their future.

Basic Skills

In order for a deafblind student to live independently a number of very basic skills will be needed. These skills include, but are not limited to: shopping, budgeting, cooking, cleaning, and creating organizational systems and demonstrating appropriate behavior when socializing with others. Parents and educators should help deafblind students begin to focus on these skills for independent life after high school. If the deafblind student has never gone to the grocery store alone or prepared a hot meal, it is best if these skills are introduced, taught and mastered before arriving on the college campus. Some cities offer grocery delivery services; however, the route to and layout of the local grocery store should always be taught if the store is physically accessible to the student. If the deafblind student did not attend a school for the blind or a specialized training program for the deafblind, it is highly unlikely that he will be familiar with the cooking or proper organizational systems used by the blind. Depending on the deafblind student's literacy level and computer skills, information on safe cooking, cleaning and labeling techniques used by blind and deafblind individuals can be accessed on line (www.visionconnection.org or www.afb.org). Also, most state vocational rehabilitation agencies and community rehabilitation programs offer very convenient options that can also be tapped. For transition-aged students who are preparing to attend college or live independently in the community following high school graduation, these resources can be very valuable. This is especially true when goals specific to independent living skills training are included in the deafblind student's IEP. Such goals

should be included in students' IEP as soon as possible; and most definitely by age 16. If the school program is unable to offer this level of training, local community rehabilitation programs for the blind or specialized training programs such as the Helen Keller National Center can be helpful resources.

Home Management Skills

Domestic skills are just some of the areas that professionals and parents working with deafblind students will want to explore prior to graduation. Moving to an apartment on or off campus may be a possibility for some deafblind students, even though many students begin their college experience living on campus in a dorm room. Members of the student's education team are encouraged to plan ahead to make sure safety is addressed (see Chapters on Emergency Preparedness and Orientation and Mobility). The use of signaling systems that either have flashing strobe lights or vibrating clip-on receivers should be investigated whether the student resides in a dorm on campus or an apartment nearby. The issue of safety is paramount so deafblind students who desire to live in their own apartment should be required to undergo an independent living skills assessment and to take part in any available training to make certain that living alone in the community can be done safely. It is strongly recommended that during independent living training the student receive instruction regarding the exact precautions to take both when inside the dorm/apartment and when accessing the local community. Learning how to safely and properly use cooking utensils, appliances and proper safety techniques for cleaning are only a few of the crucial skills that deafblind students will need to consider when preparing to move away from home.

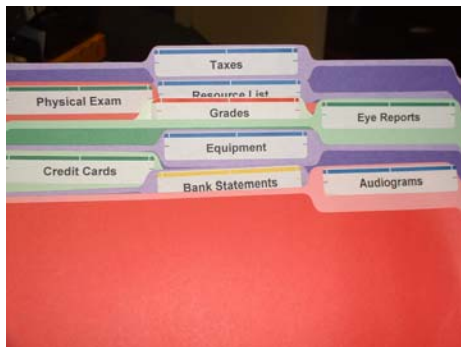
Organization

Keeping track of important documents such as reports from doctors that certify the student's disability will require a reliable organizational system. This system will include a list of the student's specific support needs, prescription medication, health insurance providers, bank and credit card statements, along with the names and contact information for important service agencies in the community. Containers that are easy to store, retrieve and have sufficient space for all the information the student will frequently access should be set up prior to the start of the college semester or before moving into an apartment in the community. During the final years of high school, deafblind students can be given responsibility for keeping track of these documents using a system at home that is similar to what will be used on the college campus or in the community. The student should receive

training in how to scan print copies of any important documents and how to store them on a portable flash drive or DVD should be provided to the student. Maintaining protected files on a home computer, portable notetaking device or in a cyber file can also facilitate quick access to important information when applying for services, employment or in the event of an emergency.

Labeling

Coupled with the need for an organizational system, the deafblind student will require a labeling system that is clear and uncomplicated. Whether the student decides to use Braille, large print, recorded audio messages or even tactile symbols, the system must be one with which the deafblind student is most comfortable and finds easy to use. Simply placing legible labels on the surface of storage containers or file folders can help the student keep track of important documents. However, the labels should be clearly written, placed on the appropriate containers, and easy to access as well as accurate. Each student's vision



File folders that are staggered are a lot easier to read when tabs are labeled using large print.

tabs that line up sequentially. Tabs that line up sequentially provide deafblind students who use tactile markings (i.e., Braille, tangible symbols, etc.) with a neatly arranged system that is not randomly scattered or difficult to track. On the other hand, third cut folders (staggered tabs) may be a lot easier when using large print labels or visual markings that would otherwise be covered up or obscured by tabs that are lined up in a single row.

Another adaptation which will afford easier reading and access for students who use Braille is to place Braille labels upside down on the reverse side of each tab which will make the label easier to read. The student can curve their fingers over the tab and read the label naturally, as opposed to removing the folder from the drawer to read it on a firm surface.

loss and organizational preference will determine which filing system and labeling method are best. For example, many file folders are offered as third cut which mean that staggered along the top of each folder are tabs where labels are placed for easy viewing. Some deafblind students who use Braille may find it more efficient and less confusing to use file folders with



For Braille readers, it is less confusing to use file folders with labels tabs that are lined up sequentially.

Another variation would be to place the Braille label upside down on the front of the tab and simply turn the file folder around. This method will help the student to both read the folder title and have easy access to the folder's contents without having to remove the folder from the file drawer. Additionally, students who use Braille may find that labeling a particular corner, the top or bottom of individual documents within folders will reduce time spent rummaging through cluttered file folders looking for a particular document. Other students have found that creating individual file folders for each important document, while somewhat tedious, is less frustrating when they are required to retain print copies of important documents.

When a file is removed from the drawer, a large binding clip, large potato chip bag clip or clothes pin can be used to mark the space in drawer where the folder should be returned (www.visionconnection.org). By far, scanning and saving print copies of printed reports conserves space and reduces the need for bulky fire retardant storage units.

Similar labeling systems can be used for labeling food containers, clothing and specialty devices. It is important to place the label in a position that can be easily and quickly accessed which can save time and lessen frustration. Arranging clothing or food containers in order of importance, frequency of use or size of container can also help reduce the amount of time spent hunting for a particular piece of clothing, food item or specialized device.

Lighting

The use of lighting both indoors and outdoors is very important to consider for students who will be living away from home. Rarely are dorm rooms or apartments equipped with sufficient lighting for students with low vision. Purchasing extra lighting that is stationary or portable may be an easy remedy. However, the student will need to check to see if electrical circuits can accommodate their adaptive technology along with additional lighting fixtures. For a number of reasons, the size of the lighting source used will be very important. There are many very powerful lights available that run on AC power or are battery operated and may serve the deafblind student well in certain situations when electrical circuits or outlets are limited. However, to prevent potential fire hazards, it is extremely imperative that any dangers associated with high intensity lights are reviewed with the student. Many college campuses prohibit the use of halogen lamps or high wattage lighting fixtures. The student should check with the Director of Student Residence Services before bringing lighting fixtures to campus. Portable high powered flashlights such as long lasting LED (Light-Emitting Diode) lights can offer illumination over an expansive area

(Chapman, 2001). But, the deafblind student should take care not to shine these LED lights directly into the eyes or toward the face of others. These powerful compact units produce intense illumination that can cause damage when exposed to unprotected eyes.

Dining Skills

Whether the deafblind student is planning to eat meals in the campus cafeteria or in a private setting, good dining skills are important. Not only will the student have to determine the level of support required to access cafeteria menu selections, but the skills required to consume the food will also need to be considered.

Choosing food based on nutrition and not the ease by which it can be consumed should be priority. For example, if the dining hall selections are pizza with the works or baked fish, baked potatoes and green beans, the deafblind student will have to decide which menu item is more nutritious and which one would be easier to eat. It may be less complicated for the student to use his hands when eating the pizza, as opposed to having to use both a knife and fork, which are required for the baked fish. Though easier to eat, the pizza may not be the healthiest choice. In a pinch, when the student is unfamiliar with how to cut meat, a request can be made to have the meat cut by the server or assistance from a friend can be sought. Nonetheless, cutting meat safely and properly is a skill that can be easily acquired and the deafblind student should practice whenever possible. Likewise, using a spoon or fork without dropping or spilling items takes practice and patience. Requesting lids for beverages or sealed containers for entrees can help lessen mishaps associated that can happen when transporting food or when moving around crowded or large dining halls. The use of a napkin as a clothes protector or other techniques to reduce spillage should be reviewed with the student at home or during high school. It can not be stressed enough how important proper dining etiquette is for all students. Practicing at home or receiving a few hours of training from a specialized program or instructor for the blind or deafblind can stave off potentially embarrassing incidents.

Time Management

By far, the biggest challenge most college students, and deafblind students in particular, admit facing during their initial college years is the ability to juggle a variety of tasks, assignments and interests. Time Management is probably the single most important skill that deafblind students will need to learn in order to be successful at college or on the job. Regardless of how capable a student is and/or how proficient when executing specific academic tasks, success may remain illusive, if he can not initiate or complete assigned

work on time. Whether the student follows a strict to-do list, has a timer, uses a watch alarm or staggered class schedule, good time management and punctuality are needed for any degree of success to be realized at the collegiate level. This will include strategies for effective study sessions and course selection based on anticipated homework. In high school some deafblind students may have been given permission to leave classes early to avoid the throngs of students moving through the hallways, but the size of the college campus may require even greater preparation. Leaving larger blocks of time in between classes, selecting courses that are in close proximity to one another and the student's dorm or the cafeteria may be best. Planning to this extent may afford the deafblind student ample time to travel in between class sessions, set up and disassemble adaptive equipment, arrange for support services or meetings with instructors.

Documenting Progress

The checklist below can be used during transition meetings or activities within the Individual Transition Plans (ITP) or with the IEP team. The skills and interests of each student will determine exactly which target areas are relevant. Providing instruction to deafblind students around self-determination and independent living is a process and may take several years before progress is realized. It is best for team members to think of ways to involve and educate students about how and why certain services are delivered. Initially students may not wish to remain in school longer in order to have these skills addressed or they may not want to forfeit holiday or vacation time for remedial instruction in cooking, cleaning or personal hygiene. But, in the long run the student will see that taking such early steps to independence and self-awareness will definitely be advantageous.

Summary

After many years of being passive and reliant on others to obtain support services and accommodations, deafblind students of transition-age must be encouraged and supported to assume a more proactive role in planning for the future. The student's support team should maintain a delicate balance between supporting, providing mock experiences and testing the student throughout this process. Requiring students to get involved earlier by taking part in, or arranging their own support services, transportation or supplementary skills training while still enrolled in high school offers a great opportunity to practice strategies/skills that will be needed once college begins. Self-discipline can be encouraged, by providing real consequences for poor time management or failure to fulfill obligations. If deafblind students are not given the opportunity to problem solve while under the tutelage

of seasoned professionals who are responsible for and experienced in facilitating the high school transition process for many students, there may be little chance such guidance will be obtained after leaving school.

The strategies and recommendations compiled in this chapter have been gathered directly from deafblind students, family members and service providers as a guide for developing this individualized readiness inventory checklist. The etiology, severity of disabilities, preferred communication mode and educational background will help team members keep in mind the individualized nature of the checklist. Not all possible support or training areas are listed. Some areas are left blank intentionally to accommodate additional skill areas for individual students. However, even though the suggested list is not exhaustive, it does offers a foundation upon which team members can design individual portfolios or training programs to prepare deafblind students to live as independent adults following high school. A more comprehensive list can be located on the Michigan Department of Education website (<http://www.cenmi.org/msdb-LIO/ILS.asp>).

**INITIAL INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS CHECKLIST FOR DEAFBLIND STUDENTS
BEGINNING COLLEGE**

Name _____
Etiology _____
Vision Loss: _____
Hearing Loss: _____
Age: _____
Gender: _____
Communication Mode: _____
Technology Needs: _____
Educational Background: _____
Other: _____

DOMAIN: Dressing

Can dress properly according to occasion (i.e., special event, weather, casual outing, etc.)

DOMAIN: Hygiene

Understands personal hygiene responsibilities and needs (i.e., grooming, proper attire, matching clothing, etc.).

Has understanding of safe sex and how to practice universal precautions.

DOMAIN: Eating Skills

Has awareness of proper dining etiquette.

Can identify nutritious food choices.

DOMAIN: Cooking/Meals

Can safely use common kitchen appliances.

Is aware of proper safety techniques for cooking.

DOMAIN: Household Chores

Knows proper procedure for domestic cleaning including: laundry, dishes, floors, bathrooms,

etc.
Is aware of current independent living skills limitations.
DOMAIN: Safety/Emergency Procedures
Understands what procedures to follow in case of an emergency (i.e., fire, flood, hurricane, tornado, blizzard, etc.).
Has knowledge of basic first aid for common accidents (i.e., cuts, burns, sprains, etc.).
Has a proven evacuation plan mapped out for campus and community.
DOMAIN: Telecommunication Skills
Can initiate and receive telecommunication correspondences using a variety of methods and devices (i.e., two-way pager, VP, TTY, email, etc.).
DOMAIN: Time Management Skills
Can initiate important tasks without prompting.
Has understanding of time management skills necessary for success.
Completes all assigned tasks in a timely manner.
Promptly arrives to each class.
DOMAIN: Money Skills
Has proven money management skills (i.e., savings account, checking account, debit card, credit card, etc.).
Has a budget that is commensurate with personal revenue.
DOMAIN: Personal Information
Knows all personal information (i.e., SSN, address, emergency contacts, medical history, medical coverage, etc.).
Assumes the lead role in locating, coordinating and scheduling any needed support services.
DOMAIN: Medical/Health Care
Is aware of safe health and fitness options (i.e., diets, exercise, nutrition, etc.).
Has a copy of all prescriptions for medications or therapy sessions.
Is aware of own personal medical history and other important health related issues.
DOMAIN: Social Skills
Has access to resources to form social network and friendships.
DOMAIN: Self-Determination
Self identifies as an individual with a disability.
Is aware of services offered through Office of Students with Disabilities.
Is aware of how to locate accommodation resources and make arrangements for services (i.e., vocational rehabilitation counselor, interpreter, CART, C-print, orientation and mobility instructors, rehabilitation instructors, adaptive technology, etc.).
Has ability to advocate for self.
Has knowledge of civil rights.
Understands how to properly request services.
Understands individual support, technology and accommodation needs.
Understands personal learning style.
Is able to identify areas of interest.
Understands the difference between and is able to establish appropriate long and short term goals.
Can differentiate between interests, hobbies and career ambitions.

Assumes the lead role in locating, coordinating and scheduling any needed support services.

Assumes responsibility for following up all team meetings or activities on executed on his behalf.

Understands civic responsibilities as member of community.

DOMAIN: Independent Living Skills

Is aware of current independent living skills limitations.

Engages in activities, tasks and programs to develop independent living skills (IEP, work experience, cooking, shopping, banking, etc.).

DOMAIN: Orientation and Mobility

Is aware of local transportation options and how to access services.

Is aware of campus layout including entrances and remote areas.

SUMMARY