

Supporting Deafblind/Multisensory Impaired Children and Young People Through Effective Learning Environments

What is a Learning Environment?

A learning environment includes everything around the child/young person—people, spaces, objects, and activities.

Deafblind children and Young People (CYP) receive very limited information from their surroundings, so it is essential that the information available to them is clear, meaningful, and purposeful.

Creating a Supportive Social Environment

Adults working with deafblind children and young people (CYP) play a crucial role in helping them feel secure and able to learn. Those working with the child should follow the key approaches of building trust, being consistent, helping understanding, taking time, following the child and being supportive.

Adapting the Physical Environment

The physical environment should maximise the child's ability to use their remaining senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell, movement).

Visual Considerations:

- ❖ Provide even, consistent lighting, including in toilets and changing areas
- ❖ Avoid sudden changes in light levels, or allow time for adjustment
- ❖ Use contrasting colours (e.g. doors against walls) to highlight key features
- ❖ Reduce glare by using blinds/curtains and matt surfaces
- ❖ Limit visual distractions such as:
 - Clutter
 - Busy wall displays
 - Highly patterned clothing

Auditory Considerations:

- ❖ Reduce background noise wherever possible
- ❖ Minimise echoes using carpets, soft furnishings, or wall panels
- ❖ Be aware that noisy spaces (e.g. dining halls) can be overwhelming, especially for hearing aid users

Organisation and Layout

Keep spaces tidy and uncluttered

Avoid moving furniture without informing the child

Arrange furniture to create clear, predictable routes

Reduce unnecessary movement of people in the environment

Supporting Mobility and Orientation

Design the environment to support safe, independent movement

Avoid large, open spaces without clear reference points

Create routes where children can move between solid, identifiable objects

Use of Landmarks

Landmarks help children understand where they are. They can be:

- ❖ Tactile (e.g. wall corner, textured surface)
- ❖ Visual (e.g. a sign or picture)
- ❖ Auditory (e.g. bells on a door)
- ❖ Smell-based (e.g. distinctive room smells)

Landmarks should be:

- ❖ Consistent and reliable (Be aware of using smells in places where the smell changes e.g. the lunch hall may smell different throughout the day)
- ❖ Safe to interact with
- ❖ Available at all relevant times

Sensory Considerations

Use textures to support recognition (e.g. for areas or personal belongings)

Be mindful of smells and air currents that may provide useful cues

Ensure surfaces used for touch (e.g. trailing hands) are safe and comfortable

Remove hazards, especially at head height

Reducing Distractions and Enhancing Meaning

When planning activities, ask:

- ❖ What sensory information is irrelevant or distracting? Can it be reduced?
- ❖ What information is important? Can it be made clearer or stronger?

Understanding Individual Needs

Every deafblind child/young person is unique.

Use results from vision and hearing assessments to inform planning

Adapt the environment to suit individual preferences (e.g. colour visibility, sound sensitivity)

Regularly review and adjust approaches based on the child/young person's responses

Practical Reflection Activity for Staff

To better understand the child/young person's experience:

Explore the environment using blindfolds or reduced-vision goggles and earplugs

Reflect on what is difficult, confusing, or overwhelming

Use these insights to improve accessibility

Key Message

A well-adapted learning environment can significantly improve a deafblind CYP's:

Understanding

Independence

Communication

Sense of security

Small, thoughtful changes can make a big difference.