

Deafblindness

Deafblindness means a person has combined vision and hearing impairments.

Deafblindness makes communication and other daily activities difficult.

About deafblindness

Deafblindness is a low incidence disability. Approximately 0.2 – 2% of the population have deafblindness.

There are many causes of deafblindness. These include genetics, disease, birth complications, accidents, and ageing.

Effects of deafblindness

The effects of deafblindness will vary from person to person depending on:

- age of onset of deafblindness
- degree of severity of vision and hearing impairment
- presence of additional disabilities.

Deafblindness affects:

- **learning and academic skills** – vision and hearing are our primary senses for learning. Learners with deafblindness need adapted learning environments.
- **everyday interactions and social communication** – deafblindness makes it very difficult to:
 - have conversations,
 - join in play with others,
 - develop and keep friendships
- **social, mental, and emotional wellbeing** – people with deafblindness are at risk of:
 - low self-esteem,
 - social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
 - mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression.

Common difficulties

People with deafblindness have unique issues which may change over time. Some of the common difficulties experienced by people with deafblindness include:

Communication partners lacking skills

People born with deafblindness need skilled, sensitive communication partners. They need partners who will tune into their, often individual, communicative behaviours.

People with deafblindness who communicate using adapted forms of sign language have a limited pool of communication partners who are familiar with adapted sign language.

Learning to communicate

People born with deafblindness also need skilled communication partners to help them develop formal communication skills.

People who become deafblind later in life need skilled, knowledgeable practitioners to teach them new ways of communicating in different environments.

Access to information

All people with deafblindness experience difficulty accessing written, audio and environmental information. They often need someone to pass on the information in a way which is meaningful to them.

How speech pathologists help with deafblindness

A speech pathologist will assist a person with deafblindness and their support networks to understand how their combined vision and hearing difficulties are impacting communication.

Speech pathologists assess, and support people with deafblindness and their social networks such as family members, disability support workers and aged care providers to communicate effectively.

They can recommend suitable communication options for individuals in different contexts. These might include:

- adapted sign language
- adapted picture or object symbols
- touch cues
- print or braille
- assistive technologies

Speech pathologists can also recommend ways of modifying the environment to make it optimal for communication with a person with deafblindness.

Communication is challenging for all people with deafblindness. Speech pathologists can help. They can determine the most appropriate communication methods and strategies to use.

Find out more

For more information, visit:

- Deafblind Information Australia <https://www.deafblindinformation.org.au/>
- Deafblind Resources – Able Australia <https://ableaustralia.org.au/resources/deafblind-resources/>
- Deafblind Australia <https://www.deafblind.org.au/>