How to guide a deafblind person

Two of the biggest challenges for deafblind people are to communicate with other people, and to move around safely. This will vary according to the individual and to the particular challenges they face.

Guiding a deafblind person is different to guiding a blind person – but it is a skill that can certainly be learned with practice.

Approaching a deafblind person
When you approach a deafblind person, you need to alert them that you are there and avoid startling them. For this reason, it is best to approach a deafblind person from the front and speak slowly and clearly, as this allows people to use any remaining sight and hearing they may have. If the person does not respond to this, gently, but confidently, place your hand on their shoulder or hand and leave it there (figure 1). This gives the deafblind person time to respond and to work out where you are. Remember not to remove your hand too quickly, as the deafblind person is left wondering if there really is somebody there.

The best thing to find out is how the deafblind person likes to communicate. They may tell you how they prefer to do this. Listen carefully and try what they say. If not, then the simplest method is to trace the letters of the alphabet using your forefinger on their left hand. This is called Block.

Some people use a form of tactile communication called the deafblind manual alphabet (or fingerspelling). The various letters are indicated by touching different parts of the deafblind person’s hand (figure 2). It is easy to learn and if you want to know more, please ask for Sense’s deafblind manual alphabet card.
Explaining the environment
People who are deafblind find that their awareness of their surroundings – what is around them – is often affected. This makes it difficult for them to move around independently.

It may be useful to the deafblind person for you to describe the layout of a room. Some deafblind people like to have rooms described in detail. Others prefer to be told only what they need to know. For example, they may want to know where certain people are or where the furniture they need is.

Guiding a deafblind person
Much of guiding a deafblind person is actually common sense. Obviously, safety is of utmost importance and as a guide, you need to be aware of the deafblind person’s abilities, preferences and communication methods so that they feel safe and confident being guided by you.

All deafblind people are different, so there is not one correct way to guide a deafblind person. So let the deafblind person chose a way comfortable to them. Usually, they will place their hand around your arm, just above the elbow; however they may also link arms or put their hand on your shoulder.

Keep your arm tucked in close to your body so the deafblind person can detect changes in direction and any upwards or downwards movements by feeling the way your body moves. It is easier and safer if you walk slightly in front of the deafblind person.

When approaching steps, pause slightly before you start climbing to let the deafblind person know that a change is happening. Guide the person’s hand to the handrail if they need it.

To indicate a step up, raise your arm slightly and lower your arm to indicate a step down (figure 3). You should move up or down just before the deafblind person, so they can feel your body movements and know how far to step. Some deafblind people will want to know how many steps there are.

To guide a person through a narrow space, pass your guiding arm behind your back and the person you are guiding will automatically fall into single file behind you.

“ It may be useful to describe the layout of the room”
To guide a person to a chair, place their hand on the back of the chair (figure 4). Some people can then locate the chair for themselves. Other people will like to have their hand guided to the back of the chair, and then the seat and then to be told whether there are any arms and where any tables or other furniture are nearby.

Orientation
You will need to provide a lot more information to a deafblind person than you would to a hearing-blind person. For example, outside you will need to explain when there is a lot of traffic around, or inside when you are going out onto a busy road.

Doors
When you come up to a door, you will need to tell the deafblind person how the door opens. Once they know whether the door needs to be pushed or pulled, you could put their hand on the door handle so they can open it themselves.

Communicating while guiding
Some deafblind people can be guided at the same time as communicating, whereas, others need to stop and stand still to communicate. If the guide is ahead and the person has little hearing, you might have to stop to explain an upcoming situation.

Some people are unable to use tactile communication and walk at the same time. However, some can do both and there are two ways to do this:

- The deafblind person stands on the left and holds their left hand across their body, so the guider uses their right index finger to spell out the words.
- The deafblind person is on the right and links their left arm into the right arm of the guider who still uses their right index finger to finger spell (figure 5).

Location cues
These clues tell a deafblind person where they are and where the need to go. Clues can be as simple as a change of flooring from tarmac to paving, or carpet to lino. These clues are less important when guiding, but they can help deafblind people to move round independently.
If the guide has to leave the deafblind person, it is important to leave them next to a location cue, such as a wall, and then explain exactly where they have been left and how long you expect to be gone.

Meeting a deafblind person in the street
Some deafblind people will use a red and white cane or a guide dog. The red and white indicates that the user is deafblind. Even if they use a cane or a guide dog, they still may need help in some situations, such as crossing major roads.

The most important thing is to never grab the deafblind person. Imagine walking down a dark alley at night and somebody creeps up on you grabs you, how would you react? If you grab a deafblind person, they could turn round and punch you! Again, approach the person from the front and speak slowly and clearly, or put your hand on their shoulder or hand.

Some deafblind people will carry cards with them. They carry simple messages such as: “I need to cross the road, tap me if you can help.” Take time to read the card properly and carry out exactly what it says.

Where can I go for help?
If you would like to find out more about deafblindness or the services for deafblind people in your area, require information in alternative formats including braille, large print, audio or disk or would like this factsheet to be translated into your first language please contact Sense’s Information Team.

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