

# From emerging gestures to tactile sign language

A report on a webinar presented by **Steve Rose** for Deafblind Information Australia

## About Deafblind Information Australia

Deafblind Information Australia (DBIA) is a consortium of SensesWA, Able Australia, and Deafblind Australia, formed to deliver a four-year project funded by the Australian National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), which delivers the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The NDIS is an Australian government funding system for people with disability. It provides individuals with their own funding packages to lead a life of quality and opportunity equivalent to their non-disabled peers. Funding can be used to achieve social and community connectedness, greater independence, and skill development. The NDIA also funds Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) to connect Australians with disability to services in their community and support disability sector capacity building and improvement.

It was through this latter function of the NDIA, through the National Information Program, that DBIA secured a grant to share evidence-based information about good practice in deafblindness with people with deafblindness, their families, and service providers.

## The Deafblind Information Australia webinar series

One of the ways DBIA disseminates information is through

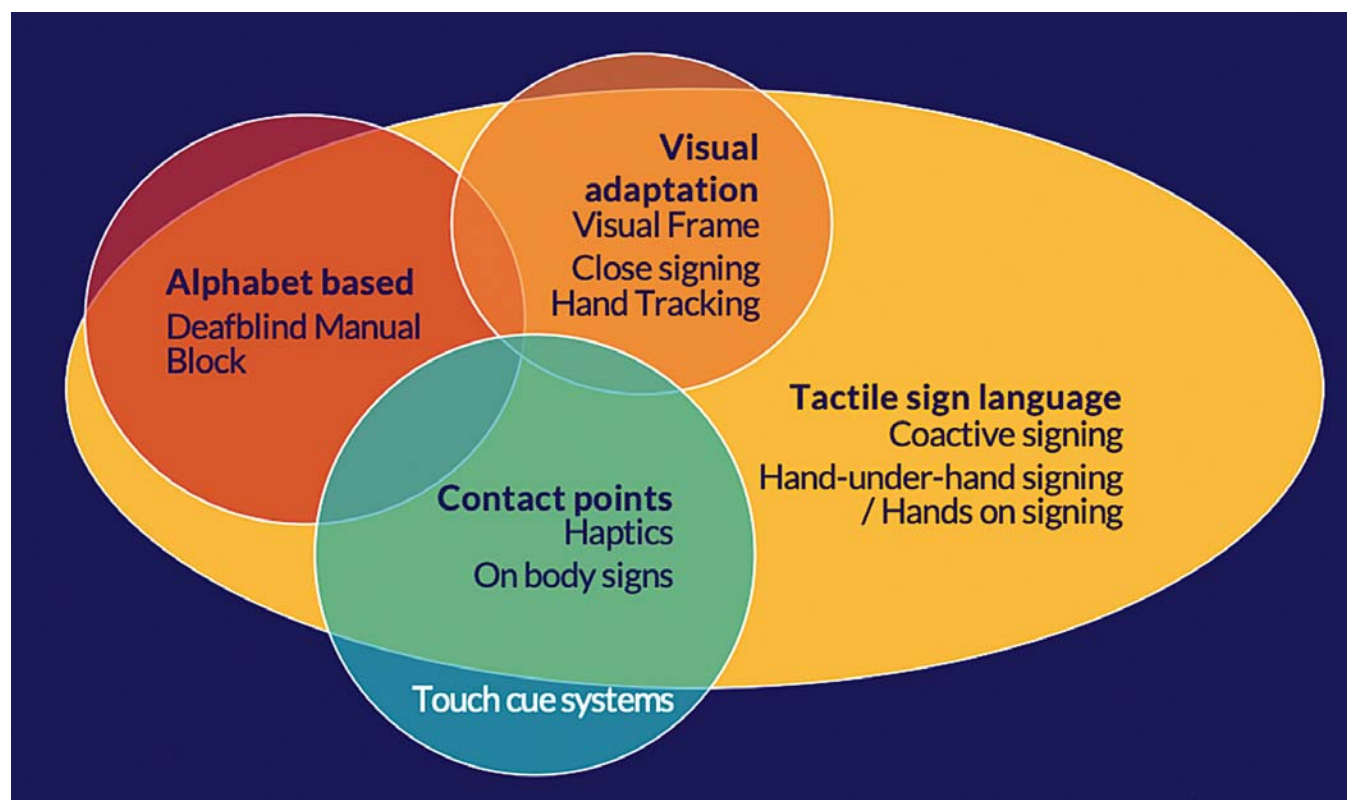
National webinars on topics relevant to deafblindness. Project staff, national, and international experts have been involved in preparation and presentation of the webinars. All webinars are recorded, Auslan-interpreted, captioned, and include a question and answer session. Recordings are available on the DBIA website. Current topics and planned topics include:

- Introduction to congenital deafblindness (four-part series)
- Parental perspective of raising a child with deafblindness, with a focus on communication
- Access needs
- Engaging and sustaining interactions
- Tools and resources.

In September 2022 we collaborated with Steve Rose to present a webinar focusing on how gestures can become signs in tactile language. The target audience included parents of children who were born deafblind, as well as practitioners supporting parents and children.

## Webinar: From emerging gestures to tactile sign language

The webinar explored key themes in the emergence of gestures and our role in recognising and supporting shared meaning.



Venn diagram of visual and tactile communicative modes in deafblindness

### Elements of tactile language

A variety of terminology is used when talking about tactile signing including tactile sign language, coactive signing, hand-under-hand signing, and hands on signing. Some systems require literacy, eg deafblind fingerspelling and the block alphabet. There are also a range of adaptations to sign to accommodate vision impairment such as visual frame, close signing, and hand tracking. There are other communication systems involving touch which are not full languages such as touch cues and social haptics (Rose, 2018).

Most individuals will require a combination of approaches or use different approaches in different contexts. Each of these terms describe features of a whole tactile language as well as ways of communication that some people may use as a sole communication mode (which can be confusing).

### Exploration, exchanges, and reciprocity

We explored the foundations of supporting exploration and differences between a *hand-over-hand* approach, which is considered controlling, and encourage prompt-dependency and how that contrasts with a *hand-under-hand* approach where the partner places their hands underneath the child's hands to share exploration of objects and the world. This latter approach is non-controlling and allows for sharing of the movement and exploration within an experience without obstructing the child's own experiences by having their hands overly-manipulated (Miles, 2003).

These exploration approaches allow for natural exchanges to be established within the tactile mode and can easily lead into reciprocal exchanges with shifts in hand position, for example, once trust and a shared experience have

been established, the partner can swap their hands from leading the exploration (hands below) to following the child in exploration (hands above or beside) whilst maintaining tactile contact. A sensitive mediation approach is central to interaction, shared experiences, and co-creation of meaning.

### Emerging gestures and individual expressions

The next part of the webinar explored the emergence of gestures and movement in the tactile mode. Understanding how gestures emerge helps us to recognise and respond to individualised movements and share meaning based on these movement experiences.

To summarise a complex model of '*Communicative relations*' (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 2013): a secure *emotional connection* (connectedness between and recognition of each other) underpins three patterns of being together; *Meaningful exploratory experiences* (a means to explore, both independently and mediated); *Closeness and contact* (proximity and distance – we need to be close); *Social interaction* (interaction based proto-conversations – about 'You and I' and eventually 'You, I, and it'). These patterns provide the best conditions for *bodily-emotional traces* (the most salient tactile moments retained by and felt within the body about how we perceive something combined with how we felt about it (Van Den Tillaart & Triulzi, 2014), and these impressions lead to touches or movements that we can see as *expressions* (individual movements related to experiences). Expressions have the potential to be met to establish shared meaning through *confirmation* (showing that we 'see' these touches and movements in a tactile way), *interpretation* (repeating or expanding this movement), and observing the *child's response* of either accepting or rejecting these interpretations.

In a practical sense, this approach is summarised in the principle of supporting tactile communication; "How do I let you know that I know what you know?"

### Cultural expressions and cultural exchanges

Treating individualised actions and gestures as signs: as actions that include location, a handshape, and a movement (Forsgren et al., 2018), and offering the child access to a cultural language (ie a signed language used in the wider community, such as British Sign Language (BSL) in the UK or Australian Sign Language (Auslan) in Australia) means that both partners are contributing to the communicative meeting place (Hart, 2010) – the deafblind child bringing their experience of the tactile world and the partner bring their experience of cultural language; this balance between perspectives and valued human connection provides the opportunity for linguistic competence to grow in both child and partner.

We concluded this part of the webinar recognising that meeting language with language offers potential for growth within the communicative meeting place mutually shared by both partners.

Steve's work considering the progression of tactile communication is explored in more depth in '*A framework for learners developing bodily-tactile communication and*

### References

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tactile sign language' available at <https://www.steverosetherapy.com/tactile-framework>

**Reflections**

- What do you feel is the equivalent of eye contact in communication with a child with deafblindness?
- When you invite a person to join you and explore something tactilely, take note of your hand position.
  - Are you offering and inviting them with your hands underneath their hands or are you directing, possibly controlling them with your hands on top of their hands?

- What might be the effect of each hand position on the person's trust in you?
- When you observe the actions and movements of a child with deafblindness, are you looking for gestures and movement that reflect those of the sighted hearing people around them or are you looking for gestures that reflect the movement and tactile aspects of activities they engage in?

You can view the webinar and other DBIA webinars on the Deafblind Information Australia website [www.deafblindinformation.org.au](http://www.deafblindinformation.org.au) see [DBIA News](#).



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