What is Deafblindness?

We all must have information about the world

With typical vision and hearing, this information comes through our eyes and ears automatically without much effort

First, what is deafblindness and how does it impact overall development? We know that we all must have sensory information about the world around us in order to learn, function, and interact with others. For those of us with typically developing vision and hearing, the majority of this vital information comes to us through the major senses of vision and hearing. This automatic flow of information through the eyes and ears begins at birth and continues throughout life without much effort on our part.
What happens when there is a loss of both vision and hearing?

- Natural flow of visual and auditory information doesn’t occur
- Pieces of information may be:
  - Incomplete
  - Distorted
  - Unreliable
- Complete information cannot be accessed in a clear and consistent way

But what happens when there is a loss of both vision and hearing? For children with both vision and hearing loss, the natural flow of visual and auditory information does not occur. Bits and pieces of information may be available, but those will be incomplete, distorted, and unreliable. Enough complete information cannot be accessed in a clear and consistent way.
Either hearing loss or vision loss alone has a great impact. A child with a vision loss must rely more upon hearing to compensate for the lack of visual information. Therefore, hearing becomes critically important and must compensate for the lack of vision.
A child with a hearing loss . . . .
must rely more upon vision to
compensate for the lack of auditory
information

Vision must compensate

A child with a hearing loss must rely more upon vision to compensate for the lack of available auditory information. Therefore, vision becomes critically important and must compensate for the lack of hearing.
For children with a combined **vision** and **hearing** loss:

- **Neither sense can adequately compensate** for the lack of the other
- **Access to the clear and consistent flow of visual and auditory information is not available**

For children with combined vision and hearing loss or deafblindness, neither sense can adequately compensate for the lack of the other. Access to the clear and consistent flow of visual and auditory information that is necessary for learning, interaction, and overall development is not available. Simulations can give some idea of what the world is like with combined vision and hearing loss.

For someone with a **mild acuity loss**, amounts of visual information become unclear or unavailable. For someone with a **moderate hearing loss**, amounts of auditory information become distorted or unavailable. For someone with a **severe vision and hearing loss**, the impact can be overwhelming.
Deafblindness is a disability of access - access to visual and auditory information about people and things in the environment.

In the simplest terms, deafblindness can be defined as a disability of access—access to visual and auditory information about people and things in the environment.
The term deafblindness does not necessarily refer to total deafness and total blindness. Indeed, degrees of vision and hearing loss vary greatly. For example, one person may have a moderate visual acuity loss and a severe hearing loss.
Deafblindness

Example:  *Light perception only and a moderate hearing loss*

The combined effects of both the vision and the hearing loss are significant.

Another person may have only light perception and a moderate hearing loss.

In each of these examples even though there is some visual and auditory information available, the combined effects of both the vision and the hearing loss are significant.
In addition, many children who are deafblind have other disabling conditions such as physical disabilities, health problems, and cognitive challenges.
Overall, as a group, children who are deafblind are diverse and each has unique needs. Yet, they all share similar learning and communication challenges and the isolating effects of combined vision and hearing loss.
Although deafblindness affects all areas of development, learning is especially impacted. For children with deafblindness, learning through independent observation and exploration is difficult. Because the flow of visual and auditory information is limited, they cannot learn what they do not detect, and they are unaware of what information they’re missing. For these children, much essential information is missed, and incidental learning is greatly limited.
If we look at typical learning for children with normal vision and hearing, direct learning or that which involves hands-on experiences makes up a relatively small portion of their overall lifetime learning. Secondary learning or that which is obtained by listening to another person teach or present information, such as a teacher in a classroom, makes up a slightly greater portion of their overall lifetime learning. The largest portion of lifetime learning comes through incidental learning or that which occurs automatically without much effort simply from the flow of sensory information that is constantly available. This is the way most information is learned.
For children who are deafblind, this typical way of learning does not occur naturally. Incidental learning usually does not occur and is not effective because of the lack of access to information, and secondary learning is difficult for the same reason. Direct learning is by far the most effective way for these children to learn about the world, so hands-on experiences are essential. However, many educational settings are not generally designed for this type of learning.
Communication is especially impacted. Because of the lack of access to visual and auditory information, not only does the development of formal language become very difficult, but the basic ability to connect to other people and be a part of the world is also difficult.
Children who are deafblind miss opportunities to:

- Observe the communication of others
- Participate in communication themselves

Communication attempts may be missed or misunderstood

Children who are deafblind miss opportunities to observe the communication of others and to participate in communication themselves. Often, their own communication attempts are missed or misunderstood by others.
They may try to express their wants through behaviors that seem inappropriate to others. They may be unaware of what their actions are communicating to others, or that their actions are even being observed and interpreted by others as a form of communication. Without the ability to communicate, they may have behavioral problems. They cannot develop formal communication and interaction skills on their own.
Social and Emotional Development

Lack of access to complete visual and auditory information results in varying degrees of isolation and disconnection from the world that are incomprehensible.

For children with deafblindness, social and emotional development is also affected. The lack of access to complete visual and auditory information results in varying degrees of isolation and disconnection from the world that are incomprehensible to those with vision and hearing.
Children who are deafblind may:

- Live lives of chaos
- Find social interactions to be confusing, purposeless, and even fearful
- Detach from others and avoid interactions

Children who are deafblind may live lives of chaos with people and things coming and going randomly. They may find social interactions to be confusing, purposeless, or even fearful, so they may detach from others and avoid interactions.
Emotional bonding and trusting relationships may be difficult to achieve. Self-identity and self-determination may also be difficult to achieve. Typical educational environments may not be emotionally manageable for them.