

Selecting an Intervener for a Student Who Is Deafblind

Cindi Robinson
Deafblind Specialist and Intervener Training Coordinator
Arizona Deafblind Project

In this day and age, most special education programs use instructional aides (paraprofessionals) to assist teachers in the classroom. Some special education students are assigned a one-to-one paraprofessional based on needs identified in their individualized education programs (IEPs). An increasing number of students who are deafblind are assigned an intervener, who also works one-to-one. However, there is a significant difference between an intervener and a typical one-to-one special education paraprofessional. The primary difference is that the intervener works with a student who is deafblind, and is expected to receive specialized, in-depth training in deafblindness and deafblind educational strategies. Therefore the term "intervener" is used only for individuals working with students who are deafblind. A key role of interveners is to provide continual access to both information and communication for their students (Alsop, Blaha, & Kloos, 2000).

Finding the right person to be an intervener for a child who is deafblind is essential. The Arizona Deafblind Project has been supporting and training interveners for 10 years, and during that time we have learned a great deal about the qualities, characteristics, and training needs of effective interveners. An understanding of these is important when interviewing candidates for intervener positions. This article addresses important issues and strategies and suggests potential interview questions to help interview teams identify the best candidates.

The Arizona Deafblind Project's Experience

The Arizona Deafblind Project began its journey into the world of intervener training and support in 1997. At that time, only three other states (Utah, Texas, and Minnesota) were using interveners. As we began to develop an intervener training program, Arizona Deafblind Project staff members collaborated with professionals in these other states. Over the past 10 years, our program has expanded in both size and vision. It is currently a 2-year team-training program that includes six workshops of two or three days each, ongoing support, and onsite classroom follow-up for entire educational teams. Each team that attends the training program works with a student who has been identified as deafblind, and team members participate in assignments and activities that focus on their student. During the past 10 years, over 250 people have been trained.

Arizona intervener trainers include specialists in deafblindness, communication, vision, hearing, neurodevelopmental therapy, orientation and mobility, and occupational therapy. Trainers meet regularly to plan and review training components and to continually improve the program. Arizona trainers have developed a two-year training plan, several teaching units on specific topics, and a document entitled "Enduring Understandings for Deafblindness," which details the core beliefs and mission of the intervener initiative in Arizona.

Suggestions for Interview Teams: Overview of the Issues

Much of the decision about whom to hire as an intervener for a specific student is based on the instincts of the interview team members and their direct knowledge of the student. It is also important for the interviewers to have a clear understanding of the skills and abilities required of interveners before beginning the interview process. Because of the specialized skills and qualities that are required, questions asked in an interview with an intervener candidate should be more comprehensive than those asked of typical paraprofessional candidates. Additionally, the interview team must glean information about a candidate that they may not be able to ask for directly.

It is essential that an intervener have a strong interest in working with children who are deafblind. The team must ascertain a candidate's level of experience with children (both with and without disabilities). However, it is possible that an individual with little or no experience, but a high degree of interest and a willingness to learn, may be the best candidate. The candidate should also have realistic expectations about working with a student who is deafblind or deafblind with additional disabilities. The work can be very intense and demanding, and interveners must be able to handle the pace and intensity of the work.

An intervener should sincerely like the child with whom he or she works. The bond between an intervener and a student is critical for success because it is the foundation for a student's learning, development, and socialization. A good match between a student and an intervener in terms of personality and energy level is important. An intervener must be aware of the importance of touch and movement and cannot have difficulties with personal space or touching that would interfere with his or her ability to work with a student. Even if a student has some useable vision or hearing, most children identified as deafblind rely on touch to help them gather information and learn. The intervener will have to learn the hand-under-hand method of interacting (a technique of guiding a child's hands to explore and manipulate items), as well as work in close physical proximity to his or her student, sometimes with their bodies touching.

As stated above, interveners are *required* to have specific training in deafblindness. Many state deafblind projects offer intervener training and support to educational teams. There is also an intervener training program available online (see announcement at end of this article). The classroom teacher and the intervener for a child should attend all intervener and deafblind trainings together. Other related service providers assisting the student should also be trained in deafblindness and encouraged to attend trainings with the teacher and the intervener. This will strengthen the team and provide an understanding of deafblindness and deafblind teaching strategies to the primary decision makers on the educational team.

Interveners need good observation skills and the ability to learn *about* the child *from* the child. They must be able to incorporate the strategies demonstrated and modeled by service providers from a wide variety of disciplines. In addition, they must be able to accept feedback from these many service providers.

The ability to collaborate is essential because interveners work closely with teachers and related service providers. They should be comfortable sharing with other members of the educational team the information and techniques that work well with a student. Collaborative teaming skills

are addressed in most intervener training programs, so candidates without prior experience working on teams, but who have the ability to learn these skills, can get appropriate training.

Potential Interview Questions

The following are recommended questions to ask intervener candidates. Agency-specific questions can be added at the end (or beginning) of the questions.

1. Tell us about your experience with children, including those with disabilities.
2. Do you have experience with children who have sensory impairments—blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, or deafblind?
3. What is your educational background? Have you taken classes at the community college or university level? If so, what topics did you study?
4. Why are you applying for this position? What is your interest in deafblindness?
5. Do you have sign language skills? If not, would you be willing to learn? (*Probe whether candidates would be willing to take classes outside of work hours at a community college or at your agency. It is recommended that the intervener learn sign language before beginning to work with a student. Learning sign language along with a child is usually not advised.*)
6. Children who are deafblind use touch to learn, communicate, and move. (*Provide the candidate with a scenario to explore how he or she feels about personal space and touching and his or her comfort level to work in close proximity with a tactile learner.*) Here are two sample scenarios:

Sample scenario 1: A 12-year-old girl who is profoundly deaf and totally blind is learning to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in a home economics class. She is sitting at a table, and her intervener is sitting beside her. The student has placed her hands on top of the intervener's hands to tactilely observe the process of making a sandwich. What are your feelings about engaging in this type of activity with constant touching?

Sample scenario 2: The teacher of an 8-year-old boy with cognitive challenges and very limited vision and hearing is trying to establish reciprocal communication with the student. The student is sitting on the teacher's lap facing the teacher, and the teacher's hands are on the student's shoulders. The teacher begins rocking gently forward and backward with the student. She then stops and waits for the student to somehow indicate he wants to continue rocking. The teacher resumes the rocking, then stops again and waits for a response, then starts and stops again and waits. She repeats the process a number of times. What are your feelings about working in such close physical contact with a student?

7. What are your hobbies? What types of activities do you enjoy? (*Probe the energy level of the candidate and assess the goodness of fit with the student.*)
8. If you were selected for this position, you would need to attend an in-depth intervener training program. Would you be willing to commit to participating in training, completing all of the assignments, and possibly being gone overnight for training? (*Describe the training that is available.*)

9. This position requires ongoing collaboration and teamwork with both the student's teacher and other members of the child's educational team. Have you ever worked on a team before? Describe your experiences in this area.
10. What are your long-term goals? Where do you see yourself in five years? (*Probe whether the intervener plans to stay in the position for some length of time. Continual staff changes are extremely difficult for children who are deafblind.*)

Qualities needed in an Intervener

Creativity
Flexibility
Ability to multitask
Organizational skills
Realistic expectations
Good observational skills
Willingness to attend trainings
Good collaborative teaming skills
Willingness to accept input and feedback
Comfort with advocating on behalf of a child
Comfort with touch and close physical proximity
Willingness to learn and apply knowledge and skills
Willingness and ability to learn about the child from the child
Ability to wait, wait, wait for a student to process and respond
Ability to show rather than describe, or to show and describe simultaneously
Comfort with sharing and modeling effective student strategies with professionals
High degree of interest in working with a child with a combined vision and hearing loss

References

Alsop, L., Blaha, R., & Kloos, E. (2000). *The intervener in early intervention and educational settings for children and youth with deafblindness*. Monmouth, OR: Teaching Research, NTAC. Retrieved September 5, 2007, from National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness Web site: http://tr.wou.edu/ntac/index.cfm?path=publications/publications_briefing.html

Arizona Deafblind Project. (2000). *Arizona Deafblind Project Intervener Initiative*. Tucson: Arizona Deafblind Project.

For more information about interveners go to the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness Web site Selected Topics page: www.nationaldb.org/ISSelectedTopics.php.