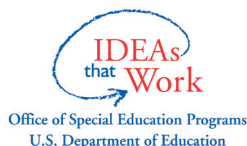# ACTIVE LEARNING
NCDB Practice Guide

NCDB Practice Guides outline the essential components of instructional practices commonly used with children who are deaf-blind. For more information on Active Learning, go to nationaldb.org.

National Center on Deaf-Blindness

IDEAs that Work
Office of Special Education Programs
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The term "active learning" is used in a variety of educational contexts. As described in this guide, however, it refers to an instructional approach developed by Lilli Nielsen—a Danish psychologist—for promoting the learning and development of children who have significant support needs. Nielsen's Active Learning involves a range of strategies, including developmentally appropriate, enriched environments that foster independent learning. It is most effective for children of any age who are functioning at a developmental age of birth to 48 months, although it can be used with children at higher development levels. Practitioners using this approach must have specific training on its underlying theory and methods.

Practice Rationale

Because children who are deaf-blind have limited access to auditory and visual information in their environments, they often lack sensory input that provides motivation to explore their environments. This is especially true of those with extensive support needs. Active Learning strategies compensate for this by providing motivating environments and natural opportunities within a child's reach that promote curiosity, learning, and engagement. This leads to the development of higher physical, cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

Essential Components

Each bolded item below is an essential component of Active Learning. The bullets are the skills a teacher or other adult using this approach with a child or youth who is deaf-blind would display if implementing the components correctly.

Assessment and Planning

The teacher or other practitioner

❑ Reviews prior assessment reports and documentation of the child's hearing and vision, fine and gross motor skills, and emotional and cognitive development

❑ Conducts or arranges for additional assessments if existing reports do not provide sufficient information

❑ Determines, through observation, input from caregivers and teachers, and prior documentation, the child's preferences for activities, objects, materials, and sensory input (including those that are disliked or not well-tolerated)

❑ Develops an Active Learning plan, in collaboration with the family and other team members, based on the child's abilities, preferences, and learning goals

❑ Includes in the plan how to use Active Learning strategies and equipment to help the child achieve learning goals and to access the general education curriculum and expanded core curriculum

❑ Uses the plan consistently and updates it as the child's abilities and preferences change (a minimum of once per year)

❑ Collaborates with other early intervention or educational team members to ensure that Active Learning is used consistently with the child

Engaging Learning Environments and Materials

The teacher or other adult

❑ Works with the family at home, or with team members in early intervention or educational settings, to create a variety of learning environments in which the child can safely move and explore

❑ Ensures that learning spaces and materials have features appropriate for the child's sensory learning channels, including opportunities for tactual exploration

❑ Ensures a variety of objects or materials of interest to the child are positioned close to the child's body, within their reach and/or visual field

❑ Places items so the child will come in contact with them naturally through their movements (e.g., mounted on wall, hanging within reach, positioned near the feet)

❑ Provides consistent, designated times throughout the day for the child to interact with, explore, and compare a variety of objects or materials

❑ Designs independent learning and play spaces and materials that build on the child's current skills, interests, and developmental level

❑ Ensures that learning environments have limited visual and auditory distractions

❑ Selects and uses Active Learning equipment (e.g., resonance board, little room, support bench, HOPSA dress, activity wall) based on the child's needs and abilities

Characteristics of Engaging Environments

- **Objects and materials that arouse the child's curiosity**

- **A variety of preferred textures and materials**

- **Objects and materials that provide immediate auditory or tactile feedback**

- **Authentic objects whenever possible**

- **Objects and materials that can be independently explored**

Independent Play and Exploration

During independent play and exploration times, the teacher or other adult

- ❏ Over time, provides additional activities and objects that are similar to those the child enjoys (changing only one environmental feature at a time)

- ❏ Includes a few materials and activities that are at a slightly higher developmental level than the child's current level to provide a challenge for the child

- ❏ Collaborates with specialists (e.g., physical and occupational therapists) to make accommodations for the child's positioning or other needs due to physical or medical conditions

- ❏ Avoids interrupting a child who is independently exploring or playing (this does not mean not interacting with the child but instead waiting until they indicate a desire to share their experience or take a break)

- ❏ Allows the child's attention to naturally shift to whatever objects, materials, or spaces in the environment that are of interest

- ❏ Avoids directing the child's movement or attention in any way, such as by manipulating the child's hands or by giving verbal directions

- ❏ Gives the child plenty of time to explore, experiment, and compare objects and materials

- ❏ Does not leave the child alone in the learning environment but observes (or supervises another staff member who is observing) and documents the child's interests, activities, and engagement as they explore the environment

Developmentally Appropriate Interactions

The teacher or other adult uses Nielsen's "Five Phases of Educational Treatment" as appropriate for the child's level of emotional and social development. The phases gradually encourage the child's independence over time.

❏ **PHASE 1**
Technique of Offering
Offers the child objects and allows them to touch and explore if they desire; does not react if they choose not to explore an object (i.e., allows the child to determine the extent of engagement based on their interest)

❏ **PHASE 2**
Technique of Imitation
Imitates the child's actions with the same or a similar object alongside the child without making any demands on them

❏ **PHASE 3**
Technique of Interaction
Interacts with the child by playing simple games, such as taking turns manipulating an object; waits for the child to take a turn without trying to persuade them to act

❏ **PHASE 4**
Technique of Sharing the Work
Without making any demands on the child, offers to work with them on simple activities or tasks

❏ **PHASE 5**
Technique of Consequence
Uses tasks and activities with the child that show the child that actions they take can have consequences (e.g., "If you put your cup on the desk, I can pour you some juice")

Observation and Documentation

The teacher or other practitioner

❏ Documents the child's activities and progress through efficient, structured data collection

❏ Provides guidance and supervision to the child's intervener or paraeducator on their role in observing the child and documenting the child's activities

❏ Uses observational data to assess the child's progress and inform changes, adaptations, and modifications to learning spaces, materials, equipment, and activities

You'll know the practice is working when the child…

- **Who is typically unengaged or sleepy much of the time is more awake and active**

- **Is more curious about and interested in what is around them**

- **Begins to initiate interactions with others and with materials in their environment**

- **Shows more trust and confidence when engaging with others and the environment**

Learn More

NCDB Practice Guides are created using a process adapted from the Practice Profile format developed by the National Implementation Research Network (Metz, 2016). Although NCDB Practice Guides do not provide extensive information about how to implement practices, they outline their essential components. This makes them a useful tool for state deaf-blind project personnel and practitioners to identify training and coaching needs related to specific practices for children who are deaf-blind. They also serve as quick reminders of the purpose and key elements of a practice.

To learn more, visit **Active Learning** (nationaldb.org/info-center/educational-practices/active-learning) and **Active Learning Space** (activelearningspace.org/principles).

For additional topics, visit **NCDB's Practice Guides** (nationaldb.org/info-center/professional-development/practice-guides).

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