



Association for Education & Rehabilitation
of the Blind & Visually Impaired

Emergent Literacy and Language Development for Non-Speaking, Tactile Learners

AER INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2026

Sharing our Stories. Impacting the Future.

Language and Literacy Development

Inextricably Intertwined

Communication and Literacy Skills

- Expressive communication may include body movements, facial expressions, vocalizations, gestures, and tactile signals (Nicholas et al., 2019).
 - Represent early steps toward symbolic representation, leading to engaging with tactile representations, braille books, and environmental braille before conventional braille reading and writing.
 - Example: Reaching → hand movement → consistent tactile sign
- Tactile-bodily communication plays a central role in both language learning and early literacy development
 - Communication partners support this growth by responding consistently to the learner's actions, mirroring emotional expressions, and labeling experiences through touch or movement.
 - Over time, this reciprocal communication supports concept development, sequencing, memory, and symbolic representation, which are all core components of emergent literacy.

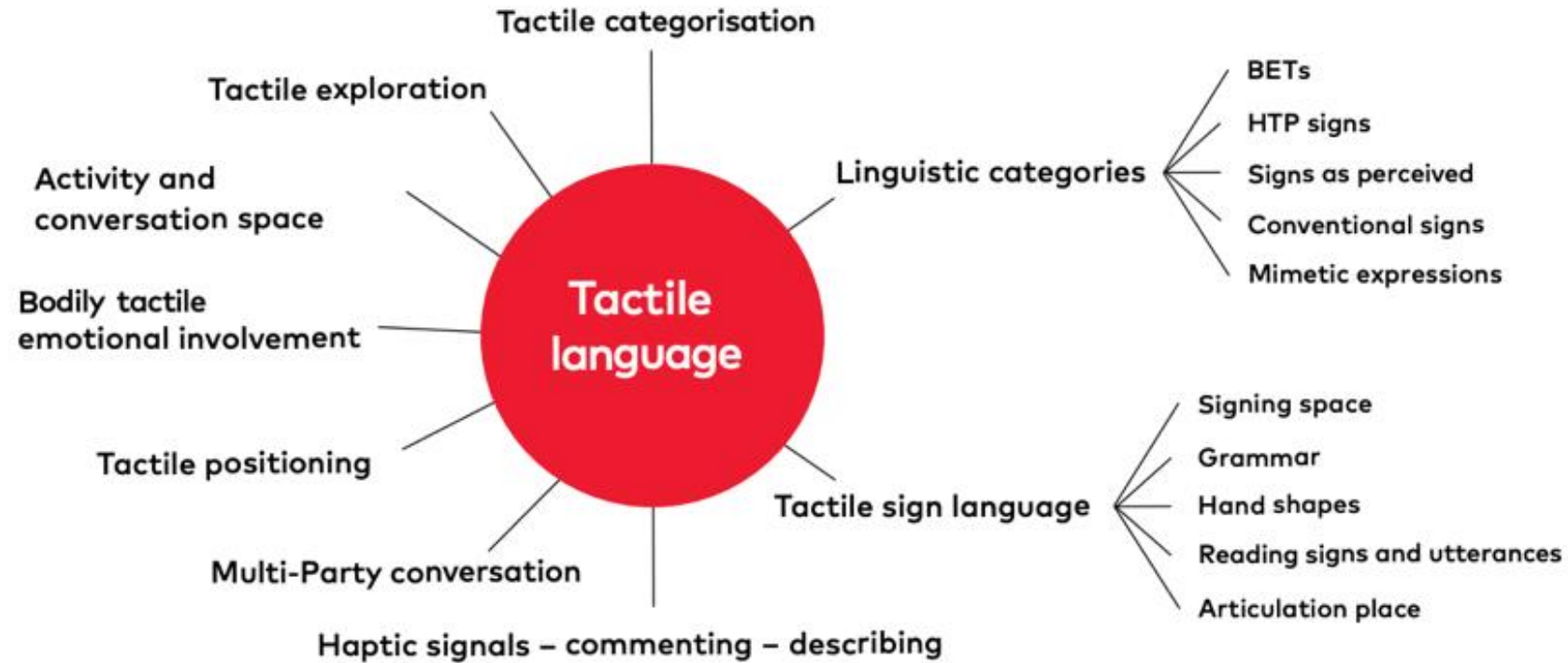
Communication and Literacy Skills Cont.

- Language development depends on:
 - Access
 - Connection
 - Shared meaning
 - Feeling safe
- When we create environments rich in tactile, emotional, and experiential communication, we establish a basis for language and literacy development grounded in the learner's perceptions and understandings of the world.

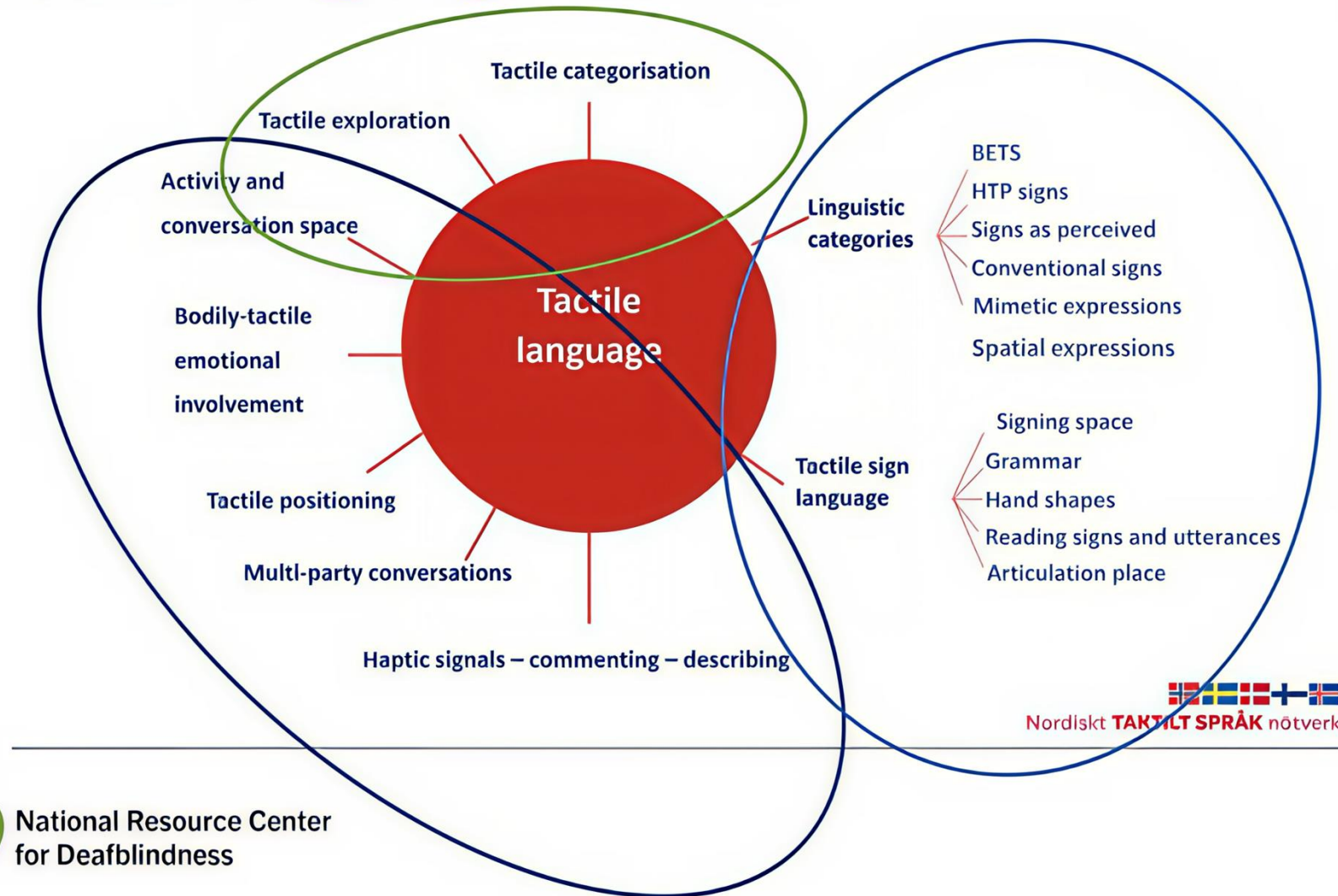
The Circle Model on Tactile Language

A deep dive into the dynamic tactile language tool and its connections to emergent literacy

The circle model on tactile language



Tactile language circle



Tactile Exploration and Categorization

Tactile Exploration & Categorization

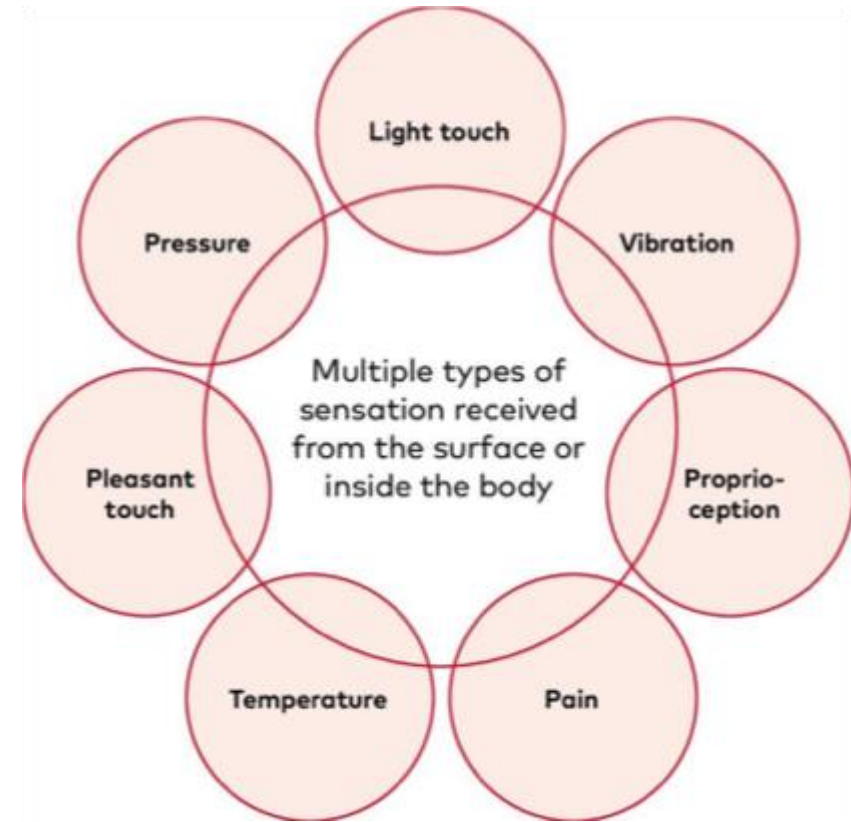
Obtain information through surface texture, temperature, flexibility, spatial position, & size in relation to the individual (Nicholas et al., 2019).

Represents primary pathway for perceptual, cognitive, & early literacy development.

Identify similarities and differences among objects & experiences, forming categories based on haptic qualities rather than visual features (Bennett et al., 2025).

Develops early literacy behaviors of sorting, matching, sequencing, & pattern recognition.

Internalized sensory representations form the foundation for later symbolic expression, narrative recall, & comprehension.



(Nicholas et al., 2019)

Linguistic Categories and Tactile Sign Language

Bodily Emotional Trace (BET)

- Embodied emotional memories formed through sensory experiences that leave a lasting impression on the body.
- Primarily developed through touch, movement, rhythm, vibration, and emotionally attuned interactions with trusted partners.
- Form narrative and meaning-making structures for non-speaking tactile learners.
- Develop memory for sequence, anticipation, and shared experience, all of which are foundational to literacy.

BETs support emergent literacy by:

- Establishing predictable beginnings & endings that mirror the structure of stories & written texts.
- Creating emotional associations with meaning-making activities (e.g., interactive read-alouds) to increase engagement and motivation.
- Supporting joint attention & turn-taking, which underlie dialogic reading and writing interactions.
- Serving as pre-symbolic memory traces that later attach to tactile symbols, object cues, signs, & braille.

BET Examples

BET In Literacy Example:

A consistent tactile greeting before engaging in dialogic read-alouds becomes a bodily emotional trace that signals “reading together.” Over time, this trace supports the learner’s anticipation of text-based interaction, functioning as an embodied equivalent of recognizing a book cover or title.



ORION IS 6 YEARS OLD. HE IS DIAGNOSED WITH:

WAARDENBURG SYNDROME 2A.
CHARACTERISTICS INCLUDE:

- SENSORINEURAL HEARING LOSS/DEAFNESS
- PIGMENTATION ANOMALIES OF THE EYES, HAIR, AND SKIN

COMMAD

A NEWLY IDENTIFIED GENETIC DISORDER. IT STANDS FOR:

COLOBAMA

OSTEOPETROSIS (ABNORMALLY DENSE BONES PRONE TO FRACTURE)

MICROPHTALMIA

MACROCEPHALY (ABNORMAL ENLARGEMENT OF THE HEAD)

ALBINISM (LACK OF PIGMENT/MELANIN IN THE SKIN, HAIR, AND EYES)

DEAFNESS

BET In Communication Example Video

Hyper Tactile Perception (HTP) Signs

- Emerge from intensive tactile exploration (examine an object's shape, texture, temperature, flexibility, and function through touch [Bennett et al., 2025]).
- The sign reflects these tactile features, conveying meaning grounded in direct sensory experience rather than visual representation.
- Rooted in tactile cognition, emphasizing understanding and symbolization through physical interaction and haptic feedback (Saluja et al., 2024).
- Tactile congruence: the sign captures the functional and sensory essence of an object as experienced through touch, highlighting that meaning is constructed through embodied interaction rather than visual abstraction (Aker et al., 2022).

HTP signs support emergent literacy by:

- Encouraging analytic thinking (identifying shape, function, and properties), which parallels how readers analyze symbols and words.
- Supporting symbol-object relationships, which is a foundational literacy skill.
- Allowing learners to generate meaningful, self-derived symbols, reinforcing the idea that symbols represent concepts.
- Preparing learners for braille discrimination, including shape, spacing, pressure, and pattern recognition.

HTP Sign Example

Using the cup at your station:



1. Close your eyes
2. Hold the empty cup in your left hand and use your right hand to examine its inner shape.
3. Set the cup aside while maintaining the shape of your right hand when you were exploring.
4. This hand shape represents the potential HTP sign for cup.
 - An HTP sign for “cup” based on its inner shape becomes a stable tactile symbol that can later be paired with a braille label or tactile symbol, supporting word–concept correspondence.

Mimetic Expressions

- Bodily expressions that originate from an individual's direct sensory and motor experiences, recreated in the same manner as the individual initially felt them.
- Rooted in the body's memory of lived experiences
 - convey meaning through gestures, movements, and tactile enactments rather than conventional linguistic forms.
- Often emerge through tactile or bodily reenactments of experiences.
- Exemplify how meaning can be communicated through the body itself, transcending visual or auditory language systems (Bennett et al., 2025).
- Embodied storytelling - represent experiences through action and movement before formal language emerges.
- Parallel early narrative skills such as retelling, sequencing, and elaboration.

Mimetic expressions support emergent literacy by:

- Enabling experience-based narratives as a precursor to written storytelling.
- Supporting temporal sequencing (what happened first, next, last).
- Conveying descriptive detail and emotion which is essential for comprehension and expressive writing.
- Bridging lived experience and symbolic representation, facilitating later transitions to signs, tactile symbols, and braille text.



(www.giphy.com, 2026)

What mimetic expression would you create based on this gif?

Mimetic Expression Example

When recalling riding a horse, the learner conveys the experience not by labeling “horse” with a standard sign, but by rhythmically moving their upper body to mimic the ride and using their hands or legs to suggest balance or reins.

The learner communicates the physical sensations and emotional experience of the activity rather than using a conventional label. Reenacting horseback riding through rhythmic movement can later be paired with tactile symbols, object cues, or braille words to represent the experience as a story.

Signs as Perceived

- Tactile signs reproduced exactly as experienced by a deafblind individual, reflecting the body-based sensory and motor memory of the original interaction.
- Learner expresses it as they felt it on their hands or body.
 - Can result in variations from conventional visual sign language forms, including reversed directionality, altered hand placement, reproduced tactile pathways, partial or fragmented signs, body-anchored signs, and idiosyncratic personal signs.
- Represent legitimate, authentic forms of language that reflect the learner's perceptual framework (Näslund & Kastrup Pedersen, 2019; Deafblind Information Australia, 2025).

Signs as Perceived support emergent literacy by:

- Demonstrating symbolic intent - a foundational skill for reading and writing.
- Reflecting individual perceptual frameworks, reinforcing that meaning precedes standardization.
- Supporting ownership of language to increase engagement with literacy tasks.
- Providing a bridge from embodied communication to more conventional tactile linguistic forms, including braille.
- Recognizing and honoring these signs as communication, paralleling the practice of valuing early scribbles and nonstandard spellings as meaningful developmental steps in emergent writers.

Conventional Signs

- Widely recognized within established visual sign languages or signed systems, such as ASL or SEE.
- May be adapted for tactile use; produced on the hands or body, simplified, or modified based on the learner's tactile experience. Meaning and form can shift depending on how they were learned and perceived
 - Important to understand context and individual experience.
- Adapted conventional signs may acquire specific tactile or contextual meanings distinct from their visual origins (Näslund & Kastrup Pedersen, 2019; Bennett et al., 2022, 2025).

Conventional signs support emergent literacy by:

- Introducing stable linguistic forms that can align with braille or print representations.
- Supporting vocabulary expansion, which is essential for reading comprehension.
- Supporting clearer communication between the learner and others.
- Facilitating the understanding that the differences between conventional signs and personal signs fosters dialect awareness.

Tactile Sign Language

- **Signing Space** Tactile signing space may differ from visual sign language, often encompassing the entire body and incorporating surrounding objects.
- **Grammar and Hand Shapes** Developed by the deafblind individual, grammar and hand shapes differ from visual sign language and draw on this 2nd subcategory. Self-created signs are valid and should be incorporated into reciprocal communication. (Bennett et al., 2025).
- **Reading Signs and Utterances** Precision and attentiveness are crucial in tactile sign language, as slight variations in movement can significantly alter meaning. Movement should be used to enhance, clarify, and reinforce themes, & convey emotions that would typically be expressed through facial expressions and gestures in verbal or visual sign language.
- **Articulation Place** The positioning of signs on the body or hands, tailored to the individual's sensory accessibility, enabling the negotiation of meaning (Näslund & Kastrup Pedersen, 2019).

Tactile sign language supports emergent literacy by:

- Establishing grammar and syntax, which transfer to understanding written language structures.
- Using movement and rhythm as tactile analogues to prosody and punctuation.
- Supporting precision and attention to detail, which is critical for braille reading and writing.
- Allowing meaning to be negotiated through articulation place and movement, reinforcing symbolic flexibility.

Bodily Tactile Space

Haptic Signals for Commenting & Describing

- Intentional, gentle touches used to convey real-time social and environmental information without interrupting ongoing tactile or signed communication.
- Typically made on the back, shoulder, or upper arm, these cues provide context such as who is speaking, emotional tone, or actions occurring in the environment that cannot be directly perceived through touch.
- [Haptics in a Coffee Shop](#)

Multi-Party Conversations

Structured interactions in which more than one communication partner engages with a deafblind individual.

Intentionally organized so everyone can participate in a sensorily accessible way (e.g., through touch, shared tactile signs, or bodily movements).

Can occur with or without conventional language, depending on the communication forms used by the participants (Worm et al., 2020).

[Using Action Signals to Facilitate a Meeting](#)

- 1 Deafblind: Waves her hand in the direction where the other person is sitting.
- 2 Interpreter: Gaze and smiles toward the deaf person.
- 3 Deaf: Orients her head toward the deafblind person, the mutual gaze is established with her interpreter.
- 4 Interpreter: Constructs embodied gestures of tapping on the deafblind person's hand. Mediating that mutual attention is established.
- 5 Deafblind: "I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU"
- 6 Deaf: "YES"
- 7 Interpreter: XXX ... (continues to mediate the utterances, looking back and forward at



Tactile Positioning

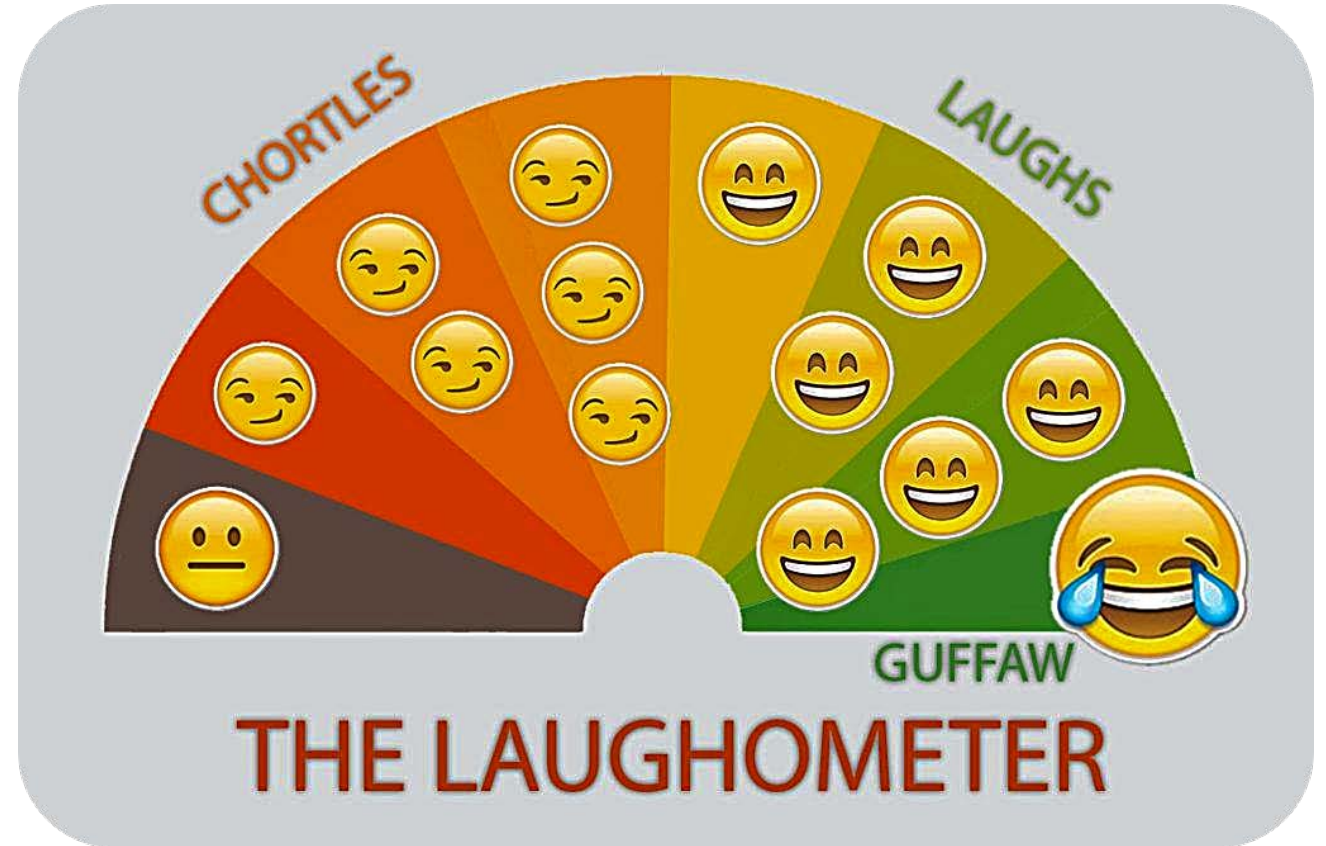
- How an individual who is deafblind and their communication partner physically orient themselves to maintain direct tactile access.
- Supports clear communication and language development by allowing both participants to feel each other's gestures, expressions, and body language.
- Communication partner can recognize and respond to the deafblind individual's bodily expressions in real time (Texas School for the Deaf, 2025).
- [Tactile Positioning](#)

Bodily Tactile Emotional Involvement

- Emphasizes the importance of emotional connection through touch.
- The communication partner actively mirrors, matches, and affirms the non-speaking individual's emotional expressions
 - Through tactile cues: changes in muscle tension, rhythm, or movement, to communicate understanding and empathy.
- This tactile emotional reciprocity builds trust and ensures that the individual feels recognized and respected as a communication partner (Texas Deafblind Project, 2025).

Example: **Laughing**

1. Mildly funny
2. Hilarious
3. Not funny



(Toren Atkinson, 2017)

Activity and Conversation Space

- **Activity Space:** the area where an action or experience occurs. It is *where* the individual and their partner are when actively engaged in an activity.
- **Conversation Space:** encompasses the tactile or signed exchanges that arise *around the activity*, whether before, during, or after it takes place.
- Separating these spaces helps clarify when the focus is on the action versus when it shifts to shared reflection or planning (National Center on Deafblindness, 2025).

Tactile Exploration

- Use the sense of touch to examine, understand, and interact with objects, materials, and environments.
- Gain knowledge about an object's shape, texture, temperature, and function.
- Form meaningful, lasting impressions that support concept development, categorization, and expressive communication (Nicholas et al., 2019).

In Conclusion

- Language development is an embodied, sensory, & social process cultivated alongside emergent literacy.
- Tactile exploration, emotional connection, & shared bodily experiences help learners develop symbolic systems that parallel the processes of early braille and print literacy.
- *The Circle Model on Tactile Language* provides a framework for understanding how tactile communication supports concept development, symbolic representation, narrative understanding, & shared meaning-making.
- Recognize & respond to tactile expressions as legitimate language & early literacy behaviors to support learners in developing rich, meaningful communication & literacy systems that reflect how they experience the world.

Questions?

Thank You

Shanna Hamilton: hamiltons@tsbvi.edu



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