‘Sense of Touch’ is a powerful means of conveying emotions. It starts casting its magic spell right at birth. Along with our primary sense channels – namely sight and hearing – touch also plays a vital role in the emotional well being of the child during infancy. In response to his cry when the mother just picks up the baby and gently places him close to her own body, engulfed by a feeling of security and trust, the baby falls asleep. It is neither the familiarity of the mother’s face nor her voice which reassures the baby at this stage as much as the tenderness and care conveyed through the hands that picked up the baby. This magic of touch works across the boundaries around the world. The dimension, magnitude and form of touch that is used by people may vary from one population to another, but the basic potential of touch as a means of communication remains equally powerful.

In case of people who face the challenges of functioning with limited, distorted or no input through vision and hearing, sense of touch as a means of communication assumes an even greater significance as their world lies till their finger tips can reach. Many children with deafblindness are never able to understand signed, spoken or written language but they all understand the empathy and togetherness conveyed by a gentle touch. Many an acts of touch can thus be converted into opportunities for initiating an interaction and developing long lasting relationships. It is therefore important that as professionals, we try and find ways to maximize the advantage of touch as the connecting link between a person with deafblindness and the world around. Secondly, we need to regulate the quality and amount of touching we offer as communication partner in order to nurture a positive, mutually respectful and understanding relationship. We will now look into various facets of touch as a medium of developing positive relationship.
I. **Touch that does not demand, does not command, just conveys the feeling of being together:**

All human beings at times need to take a break. A break from the rush of routine and responsibilities. People with deafblindness need it all the more. These children start their lives with a strange contradiction. On one hand they are deprived of the natural option of ‘remaining in touch’ with the world through eyes and ears. On the other hand they are forced into a series of not so happy experiences of touch right from the time they are born. Quite often they start their lives with never ending rounds of hospitals, doctor’s clinic, therapy centers and so on. The pricks, the twists and pulls are obviously not the kind of touch which would help the child perceive this world as a friendly place. Even the anxious parents and over enthusiastic teachers are most of the time into the ‘teaching mode’ keen to take the child through as many tactile experiences as possible.

However well meaning all these experiences may be, the fact remains that as a respite from all of them the child also needs at times an undemanding, non commanding touch – the kind of touch which says “Here are my hands, take them or leave them, use them the way you want, initiate them into a more interactive session or just find solace in the fact that they are there”. This is the kind of touch in which our hands are underneath the child’s hands, preferably palms up, not coaxing, not prodding but just being available. Such tactile togetherness is likely to have a very soothing or reassuring effect on a deafblind child who somehow finds it difficult to establish positive relationships with people around and attempts to initiate interaction with them often do not succeed. Here I would like to present the case study of **Yogita** a sixteen year old girl who after spending years of quite an isolated existence in school, has now moved on to Vocational Training Unit of Helen Keller Institute.

**NAME – Yogita Saxena**  
**AGE – 16 Years**  
**SEX – Female**  
**VISION – Totally Blind**  
**HEARING – No comprehension of speech but consistent response to Intonation pattern and environmental sounds.**
STRENGTHS –
- Is able to develop good orientation of an area in short period.
- Functions age appropriately in the area of motor development.
- Manages meal time independently.
- Can thread big beads with very little help.
- Can complete small pre vocational jobs like packing, sorting etc. with varying degrees of help.

MAIN ISSUE OF CONCERN-

General lack of interest in people and difficulty in forming interactive relationships.

Yogita was fine with objects and used them to stimulate herself in various ways e.g. rubbing them on cheeks or rolling them in between her hands. She however, found it very difficult to accept anybody (barring one or two people) as her communication partner. Often she would be sitting by herself looking quite content, making different movements and smiling to herself. The moment, however, somebody approached her – even a familiar person- and tried to initiate a conversation either by talking to her or touching her even in a gentle manner, she resented it and started crying loudly and biting herself. This pattern of behaviour continued for years and since social relationships as we all know provide the basis for communication development she grew increasingly isolated. It became more and more difficult to involve her in any group activity or in any activity even on 1-1 basis as she just did not want any kind of interaction with peers or teachers.

STRATEGIES USED IN PAST –

- Identifying objects that she liked and using it for some activity.
- Limiting her interaction (for the major part of the day) to those one or two people with whom she had developed some amount of relationship.
- Bringing her out of classroom – since quite often the movements and voices of people around used to upset her – and placing her in a relatively quieter corner along with her teacher.
- Starting the day with one or two activities she showed some interest in.
• Removing group play or other group activities from her schedule as she did not enjoy them at all.

All these strategies worked sporadically in a very limited sense but the gain never got transferred from one situation to another and seemed to be very short lived.

PRESENT SCENARIO –

In recent months a new approach has been adopted following a few brainstorming sessions that included everyone associated with Yogita in hostel and school. Her schedule now includes a lot of interactive sessions, music and movement sessions etc. but with a difference. No one now tries to initiate her into an interaction. She sits there with the group, a teacher sitting close to her with her hands touching Yogita’s in a relaxed manner, but not asking her to participate unless and until she herself shows some interest through the movement of her hands.

The outcome of this ‘being available but not pushing’ approach has been quite encouraging. Yogita now not only willingly participates in these interactive sessions but is also often seen smiling and initiating a hand movement/game, or giving indication that she wants the interaction to continue. Above all the trust won this way by giving her the choice to exploit the available tactile contact further or to be satisfied just with it’s undemanding presence, has helped her open up in other areas too. She is now a regular contributor to the dispatch and nursery section of our vocational training unit and this contribution comes without any resistance.

II. Shared tactile experiences:

Another strategy to help a deafblind child widen his world is to ‘explore the world together’ with him. In the absence of enough visual and auditory input, deafblind children are often very much within themselves, their own body being their sole topic of interest. Mutual Touch, in which we offer our hands as co-explorers, serves as a big motivation for them to come out of their shell and show
interest in people and objects other than themselves. Not sure of the world around, these children turn inward and are often preoccupied with their own body. When a pair of known hands acts as a bridge between this world of isolation and the world outside by not only guiding the child’s hands to explore around but also being a part of this exploration, then things are more acceptable to the child. Here our hands need to be partly under the child’s hands, exploring, feeling and moving over the topic of interest along with the child’s hands. Part of the child’s hands should be in contact with the adult’s hands – rather, over it – but part of it should be free to move over and receive first hand information from the object in question. It could be anything – an object as functional as a spoon or a comb; a soft toy or a plant in the garden; the family pet or the grandma’s spectacles or the mother’s long silky hair. The idea is to encourage the child to come out of the periphery of his own body and reach out to the world around.

The gains from this ‘exploring together experiences’:

1. The reassuring presence of the adult’s hands ready to go along with the child’s hands provides him with the security needed to venture out and explore an unfamiliar or partly familiar object.

2. They provide the basis for what is often referred to as the ‘conversation between hands’. Discovering an interesting bracelet on a friend’s wrist, or feeling the smoothness of the dog’s skin or softness of a new leaf on the plant outside together, has the same effect as a spoken or signed conversation. One partner says something, the other comments, and then the first reacts and so on. Similarly here, a visiting friend takes the child’s hand to greet and the child starts fiddling with her bracelet. The mother also joins in, her hand feeling the same motif, as if asking “Something interesting?”

3. Shared tactile exploration also gives a feeling of ‘being understood’ to the child – the manner in which pointing leads to a feeling of being attended to. The child points to something,
we shift our attention to that object. In the same manner if the child shows the slightest interest in something by touching it and we take him further by co-exploring that object, the child is assured that his initiative was worthwhile and others notice when he tries to say something. He is thus likely to be encouraged to communicate his interest in future.

A few considerations:

- **The hands exploring along with the child’s, must be the familiar ones.** Nothing can make a deafblind child retreat into his shell deeper than the advances of a pair of strange hands.
- **Initially, the topic of tactile conversation has to come from the child’s known environment.** Before we invite him to have new and varied tactile experiences, we have to stick to whatever he has developed some familiarity with during the course of routine activities. Once our hands have won his trust then his hands would be ready to be led into unknown.
- **The pace of co-exploration has to be adjusted as per the child’s wish**- If the child initially does not feel like going over a broader area or wants to take away his hands just after touching the object then we should not push him further.

**Note** – The two above mentioned approaches to the use of touch as a means of developing positive relationship, may be perceived as functioning in contradictory manner: one advocating a passive offering of hands, another one going for active co-exploration. They are not. The trust won through the former makes the second one possible in many cases as was true in Yogita’s case. In some cases the child switches from one mode to another. When tired and over stimulated he might prefer the quiet togetherness. On other occasions he might like to be actively involved.
Ill. **Touch that soothes:**

Touch as we have seen earlier is not just a means of acquiring information for children with deafblindness but also a source of shared joy and togetherness. Another way in which it can have a positive influence on the child’s emotional well being is to use it to soothe the restless body and mind of the hyperactive ones, the fussy and irritable ones and the asocial isolated ones. The most effective way to do so is to include gentle massage in the child’s schedule. Massage, if gently and properly done can have an extremely relaxing and soothing effect on the child and can also lead to bonding between the teacher and the child. We have umpteen examples of young children functioning better after massage was given to them:

**Shubham** at four used to be an extremely restless child and had problems with attention span. As a result he found it difficult to participate in any activity even for 5 minutes. The teacher started giving him massage – not in an elaborate manner but for brief periods of time. Shubham thoroughly enjoyed it and started sitting with the teacher for longer periods of time keeping his head in her lap and asking for more. Slowly this rapport was transferred to other situations also and he settled down very well.

**Anshul,** a six year old male child who was often seen fussing and crying, **Yogita,** about whom we have talked above, **Swapnil** who had frequent cold which made him very irritable - all of them responded very positively to massage and were calmed and relaxed after the massage sessions.

We thus see that ‘sense of touch’ can assume multifarious roles in case of deafblind people. It becomes their ‘**eyes and ears**’, helping them to remain connected with the world. More than that, it becomes the **seat of all their perceptions, emotions and feelings.** It is therefore important for us to be more conscious and aware of the ways in which we use our own sense of touch during our interactions with them. Constant prodding, tapping, patting, pulling and even holding and guiding in a constraining manner can be extremely disturbing for them. **We not only need to be gentle but also respectful in our manner of touching.** We need to show regard for their own preferences and options regarding the amount and manner of touching they want to receive. It would be appropriate to end this article with a poem named ‘Touch’ written by Robert Smithdas:
There is no need to speak; I understand each quick impulsive movement of your hand,
By some strange magic of the heart I guess the meaning of each gesture, each caress.

Your fingers can be gentle, firm, or kind;
or fierce when anger surges through your mind,
Or they can trace, with such exquisite grace,
the tenderness love mirrors in your face.

Oh, when I reach to take you by the hand,
It is because I need to understand
that I am not alone in this broad land.

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