# Encouraging reciprocity in interaction between deafblind people and their partners…

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Following from Inger Rodbroe’s introduction Bernadette van den Tillaart, who works at the Instituut voor Doven in the Netherlands, writes about the way the deafblind centre is putting these ideas into practice.

## Where do we begin?

The meaning of being human is based on social contact and togetherness with others. This togetherness can be experienced when individuals respond to each other in a natural way. It means that both partners in the exchange take a turn, that they talk about the same subject and do not misunderstand each other, and that they share each other’s experiences and feelings. When educators experience this reciprocity in their contact with the deafblind person, they tell me: “I made real contact!” The most important thing in life is to experience an overall feeling of well-being: being at ease with oneself and having just enough challenge to provide some variety. In order to reach this state of harmony we have to consider the key areas of reciprocal interaction, communication and autonomy.

This is basically the same for every human being. But, in deafblind people the ability to interact in a reciprocal way is not as well developed – because of the impairments of sight and hearing this state of reciprocity is harder to reach. For it to happen it requires:

* an insight into the way the deafblind person experiences his world
* a recognition of turn-taking from the hearing sighted partner
* a subtle understanding of patterns of interaction and the influence of deaf-blindness on that process
* the ability to read and consciously use (tactile) body language (van den Tilaart, 1999).

Reciprocal interaction is so important as it leads to feelings of social competence and well-being. When there is no safe base, the deafblind person will show symptoms of stress. Stress interferes with and undermines the ability to cope adequately with the social environment and learning (van Dijk, 1999).

## European Working Group

The understanding of this interactive process with deafblind people has developed quickly over the past few years with members of the European Working Group on Communication (Daelman, Nafstad, Rødbroe, Souriau and Visser, 1997 and 1999) and other professionals and scientists in the field publishing their ideas.

## Social interaction: education and guidance

New professionals at the Rafaël School (the deafblind department at the Instituut) need education and guidance to understand the importance of reciprocal interaction and communication for deafblind children. A member of staff who is new, needs to learn how to become a partner in this activity. This can only be done if he has an idea of the way that each deafblind person experiences the world. Staff undertake a series of training modules and during this time they experience the role of “the partner” through simulation techniques and by being with linguistic deafblind adults. This is all done with guidance and support and applied to real life situations.Social interaction:

The training module and the guidance plan are developed in parallel and the following areas of study and observation are included:

* Normal development of pattern of interaction
* Analysis of the behavior of the deafblind person
* Identifying the characteristics of interaction
* Analysis of the partner’s behaviour and the effect both people have on each other
* Analysis of the prerequisites of social interaction
* Identification from observation of the most obvious strengths and “learning moments”

All this is carried out under supervision which is based on diagnostic information and with the indispensable use of video analysis to help the process. Then a model of interaction is built and based on the experiences at Rafaël, the results of the European Working Group on Communication and Dekkers & Biemans (1994). This model functions as a practical cognitive scheme, which supports the application of the interactional principles in a contact with deafblind people.

Kishan (Right) interacting with Yvette (Left).

In greeting everyone at the breakfast table Kishan takes the initiative: he stretches out his foot and puts it on Yvette’s knee. Yvette confirms the initiative by touching his foot and saying “Ah, your foot!” Yvette interprets his as a request for a tickle game: she brushes over his foot and says “You want your foot to be tickled!” And she started the tickle game.

Kishan (Right) interacting with Yvette (Left).

Kishan has bare feet. Yvette takes the initiative by “hands-on” taking off her sock: “You have bare feet. Do you feel that I still have my socks on? I also want to have bare feet!” Kishan recognizes this movement out of the script ‘taking off my socks’ and takes the initiative to finish this movement.

### Kishan (Right) interacting with Yvette (Left).

Kishan and Yvette share the experience of the bare feet with their feet touching each other’s. Yvette makes a joke by putting on Kishan’s slipper “hands-on.” Kishan gives his full attention to Yvette’s initiative: his slipper is on Yvette’s foot, that’s strange! Yvette observes all the subtle aspects of Kishan’s behaviour.

Kishan (Right) interacting with Yvette (Left).

Kishan laughs at the joke and he directs his attention to Yvette’s face. Yvette shares his pleasure by laughing loudly with him and by “hands-on” feeling the laughter in each other’s faces. Kishan and Yvette confirm to each other that they share this experience (tactile contact with the feet) and this feeling (pleasure). In this shared meaning Yvette offers a new gesture – laughing.

## The Interaction model used at The Rafaël School

The aim is to encourage both “partners” to attune their behaviour to each other to allow reciprocity to emerge. The model has three phases and at the start it is initiated through the regulation of distance and attention. The whole thing is carefully observed. The process develops with joint activity, again carefully observed. The interpretation of this joint activity, to take account of partner responses, is crucial as this feeds back into process itself.

If the reaction of the partner is correctly interpreted and responded to, there is a mutual understanding created, which leads on to new initiatives being explored together. These can include turn taking, giving and taking the lead and sharing experiences and feelings.

We stress the importance of the concept of sensitive responsively: that is observation, correct interpretation and effective reaction (Riksen-Walraven, 1983).

The way we work requires respect from the partner for the characteristic interactional style of the deafblind person and during the analysis pointers to recognizing this are noted and the “learning moments” recognized. The agreed “learning moments” are transformed to very concrete aims (short and long term) in the personal portfolio. In guiding new members of staff some very specific points for learning need emphasis when considering social interaction:

* learning to observe by looking/hearing/feeling and distinguishing between observation and interpretation
* recognizing information processing-signals and regulation of tempo
* waiting for your turn
* confirming that you observed the reaction of the partner and understood it: creating a shared meaning
* sharing feelings: regulation of togetherness

When considering communication development the following should be emphasized:

* developing scripts, attuning prerequisites and structuring sequences
* attending to the co-regulation of the interaction-process when communication forms are used
* naming the interaction process (receptive and expressive)

These acknowledged “learning moments” are transformed into very concrete aims, which together with the aims in the portfolio lead the guidance process. The guidance plan is then set up and a variety of activities are used to support it: conversation, video-analysis, coaching, modelling, and evaluation.

Our experience has shown us that by providing guidance at critical moments reciprocity can be achieved more quickly and effectively. In the evaluation of the guidance process, and certainly after a longer period we have gained the following insights:

* the deafblind person and the partner feel themselves social more competent
* there is more motivation for more interaction and learning from the social environment
* the deafblind person becomes more active, takes more initiative, eg with self-help skills and play
* the deafblind person displays characteristics of a more secure attachment to the guided partners
* the deafblind person exhibits less self-harming or aggressive behaviour
* the deafblind person feels more frustrated when he is not understood by partners in his immediate world who have not followed the training/guidance process.

The last point indicated questions that are being addressed at the moment about guidance and training: is this offered to the individual of to the whole team. How it is effective? How can a transfer of skills be realized effectively? The results of the guidance plan and the different forms are being systematically researched now at Rafaël, by Janssen, van den Tillaart and van der Heyden.

## In Conclusion

In using this method which encourages reciprocal interaction, the deafblind person steps into the social world to build up relationships and develops his personality. He can express his needs, feels himself understood and also influences what happens in his life.

We believe this work cannot start early enough, but when necessary we also know that it works in achieving reciprocal interaction at whatever age it begins.

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