



# Environments that Facilitate Learning

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[Excerpted from *Hand in Hand: Essentials of Communication and Orientation and Mobility for Your Students Who Are Deaf-Blind* (pp. 592-595). Reproduced by permission of AFB Press, American Foundation for the Blind.]

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The environments within which O&M instruction takes place can make learning easier or more difficult for the student. Well-organized, well-ordered environments in which sources of confusion and distraction have been eliminated are critical, and natural environments help ensure success by making instruction especially meaningful and helpful to students.

## STRUCTURED ENVIRONMENTS

Structured environments are created to motivate students and to facilitate the instruction and use of O&M skills and techniques. These kinds of environments are called enabling learning environments. In schools, they consist of simple uncluttered classrooms and hallways that contain stimulating and useful things for students to see and do. The environments include clear and direct pathways for moving from place to place that stimulate students to move about and are free of obstacles that block movement or are safety hazards. Once structured environments are developed and students are familiar with them, every attempt is made to keep them the same or to inform the students of any changes that are made.

Classrooms that are structured to encourage movement contain clearly identified activity areas, where students can participate in exciting learning experiences. In these classrooms, the teachers make certain that the students go to different activity centers several times a day as part of the required routines, rather than sit in the same seats all day. (Families can create similar environments at home to encourage their children to move about freely and keep themselves busy.) In structuring enabling learning environments, teachers consider students' interests and visual and auditory needs. Although most students with visual impairments benefit from environments with full illumination that do not create glare or shadows and cues that make use of bright contrasting colors, some students with specific visual disorders (for example, albinism or other conditions accompanied by sensitivity to light) benefit from more dimly lit environments. Teams need to work with teachers of students with visual impairments and O&M instructors to structure visual environments that are suitable for their students and are conducive to the students' effective use of their remaining vision.

Students who can hear sounds require learning environments in which they can use their remaining hearing. Thus, environments with extraneous ambient noises (from a ventilating

fan, for example) should be avoided as much as possible when students are listening to auditory information as they learn. Team members should work with O&M instructors and hearing specialists to create enabling learning environments in which these students are taught to use sounds in the environment to develop their awareness of the environment and their sense of orientation.

Teachers often have classrooms that contain many types of specialized equipment, including wheelchairs, walkers, prone boards, and feeding tables, and equipment that is stored in open spaces in the classroom or along walls in the hallways when not in use. Every effort must be made to store specialized equipment in other, safer places.

A student who is deaf-blind should be assigned to a permanent seat that is located in a direct line of travel to the important areas in the classroom, such as the door, the place where object cues are stored, and the bookshelf, or in a spot that requires as simple a route as possible from the student's seat to these areas. The student's seat should be marked clearly with an appropriate cue, such as a bright or uniquely textured cloth, a favorite toy or object, or a card with the student's name written in print or braille, that the student easily recognizes and understands.

All of the other rooms that the student uses regularly should be marked, so the student can easily recognize them as he or she travels from place to place. The markers that teachers use to label landmarks in the school can be the actual object cues the student uses to identify specific locations. For example, a student who uses a spoon as an object cue to represent the cafeteria recognizes the cafeteria by finding a spoon on the doorjamb beside the cafeteria. Object cues can be posted using Velcro fasteners, so they can be removed for cleaning or be replaced or eliminated when the student no longer needs them.

It may not be necessary to create a highly structured environment or make landmarks for every student. However, the team should consider the degree of structuring that may be required with planning a student's individualized O&M program.

## **UNSTRUCTURED ENVIRONMENTS**

Students develop their skills, environmental awareness, conceptual abilities, and self-confidence when their O&M instruction begins in structured environments. To prepare students to manage the day-to-day travel that is part of adult living, however, O&M instruction should be provided in both structured and unstructured learning environments.

Unstructured environments generally consist of the student's home, school, community, and workplace, which contain few modifications of adaptations. Instruction in these environments is introduced to build the student's awareness of real-life environments and to teach the

student the O&M skills he or she needs to travel in unstructured situations. A student's awareness of unstructured environments begins early, when he or she accompanies family members and friends to social events in the community. Teachers also build community and environmental awareness into classroom activities and trips in the community.

As students master O&M skills and develop confidence in their ability to travel during lessons in structured learning situations, they are gradually taught to use their skills to travel in unstructured community environments that expose them to unanticipated obstacles and situations. Because it is impossible to predict what will occur in unstructured situations, teachers initially need to assist students through these environments and explain what is taking place. For example, students may find their routes blocked or disrupted by construction, noise from a jackhammer, showers from lawn sprinklers, interruptions by strangers, and disrupting comments from passersby. They and their teachers need to spend a great deal of time experiencing the reality of the day-to-day world and interpret what these experiences mean. Through this process, the students learn to manage unanticipated obstacles, drop-offs, changes in their planned routes of travel, individuals who offer inappropriate assistance, and others' reactions and comments to them about them and individuals with disabilities in general.



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