

# New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Deaf-blindness

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## **[Slide 1] Welcome**

Welcome to the New Mexico TEAM technical assistance module on making eligibility determinations under the category of deaf-blindness. This module will review the guidance of the NM TEAM section on deaf-blindness. During this module, you will sometimes be referred back to a different module or other resources for additional information. We encourage you to have a copy of the NM TEAM available and open to the section on deaf-blindness for reference during this module.

## **[Slide 2] Learner Objectives**

After successfully completing this module, you will have the knowledge to use evaluation data effectively to make an eligibility determination under the category of deaf-blindness. Specifically, you will be able to: understand the federal definition of deaf-blindness, identify some common characteristics of deaf-blindness and the associated educational impact, and recognize special considerations for assessment for children with known or suspected deaf-blindness. Additionally, you will understand the highly recommended and potential components of an evaluation for deaf-blindness, know the criteria required for eligibility under the category of deaf-blindness, and understand how to document the team's eligibility determination decisions.

## **[Slides 3- ] Definition**

[Slide 3] When teams are making eligibility determination decisions, IDEA outlines a two-step approach. Each of these steps involves responding to a specific question—the first question is “Does the child have a disability as defined by IDEA?” and the second question is “Does the child require specially designed instruction as a result of this disability?”

This module will walk you through answering those two questions. First, we'll talk about the definition of deaf-blindness, as defined by IDEA, to help you begin to better understand the disability itself. Next, we'll talk about the impact of the disability on educational performance to help you understand when a child might require specially designed instruction as a result of deaf-blindness. Later, after establishing this basic framework, we'll talk more specifically about the evaluation components and the eligibility determination decisions.

IDEA's definitions of disability terms are the cornerstones of eligibility determination decisions. The definition, combined with comprehensive assessment data, including detailed information about the child's background, educational strengths and needs, and other pertinent factors, helps schools, educators, and parents determine if the child is eligible for and in need of special education and related services. Please take a moment to read the IDEA definition of deaf-blindness and then we'll take a closer look at it.

[Slide 4] Now let's take a closer look at the definition. This definition of the disability will help teams answer the question: “Does the child have a disability as defined by IDEA?”

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The definition of deaf-blindness is fairly straightforward. To be identified as a child with deaf-blindness, the child must have both hearing and visual impairments. The specific degree of the impairments isn't as important as the relationship between them. A child with deaf-blindness will have needs that are unique from children with hearing impairments and from children with visual impairments. Where children with impairment in only one sensory area will be able to use the other area to compensate for some of their difficulties, children with deaf-blindness will not. These children will demonstrate significant difficulties with communication, development, and participating in their educational environment.

It is important to remember that this disability must adversely affect the child's educational performance in order for him to be found eligible for special education and related services. We'll talk about this second step to eligibility determination decisions by first talking about educational performance in general and then looking specifically at issues related to deaf-blindness.

### **[Slides 5-11] Educational Performance**

[Slide 5] To determine the impact of a disability on a child's educational performance, the team needs to answer the question: "Does the child require specially designed instruction as a result of this disability?" If a child with a disability does not require specially designed instruction, then the child would not qualify under IDEA and teams should consider the implementation of a Section 504 plan or other classroom interventions to address the child's needs.

[Slide 6] According to IDEA, specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to meet the unique needs that result from a child's disability. This includes special education.

[Slide 7] In New Mexico, services provided by a speech-language pathologist may also be considered special education, not simply a related service, if the services meet the requirements outlined in the New Mexico Administrative Code, typically referred to as NMAC.

[Slide 8] When evaluating a child for potential eligibility for special education and related services under the eligibility category of deaf-blindness, according to IDEA, it is important that teams remember to consider three aspects of the child's educational performance. This includes the child's ability to: be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum, participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities, and be educated and participate with other children with and without disabilities.

[Slide 9] Teams are probably most familiar and most comfortable with the first of these areas: determining if a child's disability results in a need for specially designed instruction in order to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. While this includes academic progress, it may also include social skills, problem solving, communication, and other general curriculum areas.

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[Slide 10] Second, it is also important for teams to consider whether a child needs specially designed instruction in order to participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities, such as recess, sports, choir, drama, and other clubs or school-related activities. For example, a child with deaf-blindness may be performing satisfactorily in classroom activities because of the amount of supports inherent in the classroom environment. However, this child may have difficulty with participation in extracurricular activities, like soccer or choir, because of the interaction between his disability and the nature of the activities. According to IDEA, this child may be found eligible for special education and related services because of the impact of his disability on his ability to participate in these activities. An example of this might be a child with deaf-blindness who requires supplementary aids and services to participate in after-school clubs. It is important to recognize that IDEA doesn't guarantee children access to competitive teams or groups **because** of their disability. However, they should be permitted the same opportunity as other children to try out for the activities and/or teams. The New Mexico Activities Association provides guidance regarding academic eligibility for participation for children enrolled in special education programs.

[Slide 11] The third and final area for teams to consider is the child's ability to be educated and participate with other children, including those with and without disabilities. This is essentially a question of educational environment. For example, a child with deaf-blindness may be able to access the general **curriculum** and participate in extracurricular activities, but because of his disability, it may be especially difficult for him to be educated in the general education classroom. This is not a discussion about where services will be delivered, but what services are necessary. For example, an eligibility determination team, or EDT, may determine that a child with challenging behaviors needs specially designed instruction in order to develop and support appropriate classroom behaviors and interactions. Other examples include a child with attention difficulties who requires specially designed instruction to learn strategies to improve his attention and focus in the classroom, or a child who needs specially designed instruction in the form of social skills interventions in order to participate in activities with peers. Where the first question teams ask relates to access to curriculum, this question addresses the educational setting for the child.

Now that we've talked in general about educational performance, let's look specifically at the possible adverse effects of deaf-blindness on a child's education.

### **[Slides 12-16] Characteristics and Educational Impact**

[Slide 12] We're going to highlight some of the developmental areas that are commonly impacted by deaf-blindness to help teams identify characteristics that may suggest that a child has deaf-blindness. Please remember that the characteristics may be manifested in different ways depending on the developmental level of the child and the demands of the environment. It is important to recognize that the effects of deaf-blindness will vary considerably, depending in large part upon the interaction between the child's characteristics, and the school, family, and community supports.

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To identify the educational impact for a child with deaf-blindness, the EDT must examine the demands of various settings and environments and the child's abilities to meet those demands by addressing the question of "How do the characteristics of the disability manifest in the child's natural environments (including home, classroom, recess, and others)?" This determination needs to be made at a very individual level for each child and must be based on comprehensive information about the child and his environments, including information gained from observing a child's functional and academic performance across a variety of settings.

[Slide 13] The characteristics under the category of deaf-blindness are organized around three domains: communication, social/emotional, and academics. These domains each include a range of skills that may be impacted by deaf-blindness.

[Slide 14] When we are looking at the domain of communication, children with deaf-blindness may have difficulty receiving and responding to both verbal and non-verbal cues. Children with deaf-blindness will have difficulty with these aspects of communication. Many children with deaf-blindness will use non-conventional forms of communication, such as individualized gestures and/or challenging behaviors. They may have difficulty developing conventional communication modes, such as readily understood gestures or verbal language. This may lead to problems communicating with parents, teachers, and peers.

[Slide 15] In the area of social/emotional development, children with deaf-blindness may also experience difficulties that are related to their underlying communication difficulties. A large part of communication and interpersonal relationship development is related to receiving and responding to verbal information. Many young children with deaf-blindness will have difficulty participating in these verbal interactions, which may lead to difficulty developing age-appropriate social skills such as turn-taking, preventing or repairing breakdowns in communication, playing with others, and engaging in conversations with peers and adults. Because of their communication difficulties, some children with deaf-blindness may also demonstrate challenging behaviors. Specifically, they may show frustration when in situations when they can't understand or be understood.

[Slide 16] Finally, children with deaf-blindness may have deficits in pre-academic or academic activities. Even though the NM TEAM doesn't specifically mention pre-academics, EDTs should remember that deaf-blindness will have a significant impact on children as they develop their pre-academic skills. Because of their difficulty accessing verbal information, they may demonstrate delays in skills such as reading, and they may develop academic achievement deficits. In addition, older children with deaf-blindness may have limited options for vocational settings due to limited communication skills.

Please refer to the "Characteristics and Educational Impact" section of the NM TEAM and remember that the characteristics presented in NM TEAM are not meant to be exhaustive nor is the NM TEAM suggesting that all children with deaf-blindness will demonstrate all of the presented characteristics. It is important for teams to recognize that these characteristics may lead to limited opportunities for

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engaging in age-appropriate activities, opportunities to be educated with peers, and the learning that accompanies these activities.

### **[Slides 17-19] Special Considerations for Assessment**

[Slide 17] It is important for EDTs to be aware of issues related to evaluating young children and children with known or suspected disabilities, regardless of the eligibility categories being considered. For example, when evaluating young children, it is imperative that the impact of the family, home environment, home language, and developmental history be considered. Specifically, EDTs must determine that a possible lack of exposure to developmentally appropriate activities is not the *primary* reason for the child's difficulties. In addition, for a child with a known or suspected disability, evaluators must ensure that the assessment results accurately reflect the areas being assessed. For example, be careful that you are not measuring the child's sensory, motor, or speaking skills, unless those are the skills you wish to assess. Please review NM TEAM Section Six: Essential Components of Eligibility Determination for more information on these issues.

Like all of the eligibility categories, deaf-blindness has unique characteristics that can influence the evaluation process. Assessment results must accurately reflect the child's abilities being measured, rather than other skills. This is particularly relevant for children with suspected deaf-blindness.

[Slide 18] It is important that the evaluators take steps to ensure that the child's hearing and visual skills don't negatively impact the assessment results unless those are the areas being specifically measured. Examiners may want to consult with a person who is trained in educating children with deaf-blindness to ensure that the test instruments and any modifications used are appropriate.

[Slide 19] During the initial stages of an evaluation of a child with deaf-blindness, evaluators must determine the methods that the child uses for both expressive and receptive communication and his level of competence with each method. This will help determine what assessment methods will provide the most accurate representation of the child's skills.

Finally, EDTs should consider the relationship between the child's hearing, his vision, and his performance at home and at school.

### **[Slides 20-22] Initial Evaluation: Deaf-blindness**

[Slide 20] To answer the questions on the eligibility determination worksheets and make eligibility decisions, it is important to discuss the evaluation components that are outlined in the NM TEAM. A number of the components are the same across most, if not all, of the eligibility categories. These components are outlined and discussed in the Conducting Initial Evaluations Module.

Highly recommended evaluation components for deaf-blindness are listed on the screen in front of you and in the NM TEAM under the deaf-blindness section. All of the highly recommended components are important and should be addressed in an evaluation, but some of the elements may need to be

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discussed in a bit more depth to help evaluators more clearly understand the component within the context of deaf-blindness.

Please remember that the assessments chosen must be tailored to assess specific areas of suspected disability and educational need. Assessment of children for whom deaf-blindness is suspected should be multidisciplinary and comprehensive and conducted by individuals experienced in evaluating individuals with deaf-blindness. There is no single definitive assessment for suspected deaf-blindness. Thus, the use of multiple tools, as well as the professional judgment and skill of the professionals who conducted the evaluation, will ensure accurate findings. Please remember that the NM TEAM provides information about common characteristics of children with deaf-blindness—this information can help EDTs identify if deaf-blindness may be an appropriate eligibility category for consideration.

Let's start by talking about the information gathered during a review of existing data, the child's history, and direct observations of the child's behavior. When evaluating a child for suspected deaf-blindness, EDTs should look for information regarding the interaction between the child's hearing skills, his vision skills, and his performance and participation in activities at home and at school.

EDTs must also obtain current information about the child's hearing and vision skills, including a current and comprehensive audiological evaluation from a licensed audiologist. This written report should include information regarding the degree and type of hearing loss, both with and without amplification. This evaluation should also include information about the child's functional use of hearing. In addition, EDTs must obtain an eye examination from a licensed eye specialist. A complete evaluation for a child with a suspected VI must include a written report from this specialist that includes a diagnosis of an eye condition, the child's level of visual acuity, and recommendations regarding glasses or other forms of correction.

[Slide 21] In addition to the medical examinations, a functional visual examination and learning media assessment must be conducted. These assessments must be conducted by a licensed Teacher of Students with Blindness/Visual Impairment. The functional visual examination could be conducted by a certified orientation and mobility specialist, if deemed appropriate by the EDT. These assessments will help the EDT in documenting and evaluating the child's functional use of his vision and in determining the most appropriate learning materials to use to support the child in accessing learning materials, including literacy materials.

Additionally, there are other areas that may not specifically be used to make a final eligibility determination decision, but that can be very useful in describing a child's strengths and needs in order to promote the development of an appropriate educational program. These assessment areas include academic achievement and speech, language, and communication. EDTs must remember that children with deaf-blindness have strengths and weaknesses. It is not essential that a child demonstrate significant deficits in all of these areas in order to be found eligible under the category of deaf-blindness.

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Young children, in particular, may demonstrate skills that aren't significantly different from their peers in some areas, such as communication or early academic skills.

[Slide 22] Finally, it is important to recognize that decisions regarding transition assessments need to be highly individualized for each child and situation. In New Mexico, transition planning must be documented on the first IEP in effect when the child turns 14 or during their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, whichever comes sooner. This type of transition planning specifically relates to the child's progression from the public schools to post-secondary settings. However, EDTs should recognize first that this planning may need to start earlier for some children and second, that transitions occur throughout a child's school tenure. For example, children transition from preschool to elementary school, from elementary school to middle school, between schools, and so on. EDTs should ensure that they have the information necessary to support children through all of these critical transitions, as appropriate for each individual child.

### **[Slide 23] Potential Additional Components**

It is the responsibility of the team to answer any questions that may arise throughout the evaluation process, including what eligibility category best describes the child's primary disability and what supports and services the child needs. The highly recommended evaluation components that we've discussed should help teams answer many of the questions that they might have, but in some situations, teams may require additional information. NM TEAM presents a list of potential additional components that can be found in the Initial Evaluation section of the NM TEAM category of deaf-blindness. This list may be helpful as teams make eligibility determination decisions, but should not be considered as the only additional areas that the EDT may wish to explore.

One of the potential additional components for an evaluation under the category of deaf-blindness is an assessment of cognitive abilities. This assessment must be conducted in such a way that it is truly measuring the child's cognitive abilities, not his auditory or visual skills. The evaluator should consult with other professionals who have experience working with children with deaf-blindness. This assessment may provide the team with information that will assist with educational programming.

Another additional component that EDTs should strongly consider is an assessment in orientation and mobility. This assessment will provide teams with valuable information that will help identify the child's needs in order to ensure that the child is able to navigate his environment safely and as independently as possible.

An assistive technology assessment is another potential additional component of an evaluation under the eligibility category of deaf-blindness. Because children with deaf-blindness have impairments in both hearing and vision, they may demonstrate a need for more specialized technological support for communication, access to materials, and participation in educational activities. For example, although a child with a hearing impairment alone may be able to use sign language for communication, a child with deaf-blindness may need to use alternative methods of communication because he may not have the

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vision necessary to use sign language. Additionally, a child with a visual impairment alone may be able to use books on tape to access written material, but this accommodation may not be appropriate for a child with deaf-blindness due to his hearing impairment. A comprehensive assistive technology evaluation to assess the child's needs in the areas of expressive, receptive, and social communication and academics will likely be a critical component of an evaluation for a child with deaf-blindness.

Please remember that the EDT will determine the necessary assessments based on the child's specific needs. Refer to the NM TEAM for a complete list of potential additional components.

### **[Slides 24-37] Eligibility Determination Process for Deaf-blindness**

[Slide 24] Before we examine criteria that are specific to the eligibility determination decision for deaf-blindness, we would like to remind you that general information regarding the eligibility process and use of the eligibility determination worksheets is presented in the module, "Eligibility Determination and Use of Eligibility Determination Worksheets." We encourage you to listen to that module and to review the information presented in the NM TEAM in "Section Six. Essential Components of Eligibility Determination."

For this discussion, you will find it helpful to refer specifically to the "Eligibility Determination" and "Eligibility Determination Worksheets" sections within the deaf-blindness chapter of the NM TEAM.

[Slide 25] To determine that a child is eligible for special education and related services as a child with deaf-blindness, an EDT must first determine that the child is a child with a disability, and second that the child demonstrates a need for specialized instruction as a result of his disability.

[Slide 26] The Eligibility Determination Worksheets are structured to guide the EDT in making these decisions. They provide a detailed road map to guide teams not only in working through the process, but also in documenting their decisions. We will use the deaf-blindness worksheet as a guide for the rest of this discussion.

[Slide 27] First, the EDT must document relevant identifying information and the assessment and evaluation data they have collected and will be using in the eligibility determination process. This information should reflect data collected from multiple data sources.

[Slide 28] Second, under the "Determine the presence of a disability" section, the EDT will address four questions that specifically relate to determining if a child has deaf-blindness.

[Slide 29] The first two questions, questions 1 and 2, which are consistent across almost all of the eligibility categories, require that the EDT discuss determinant factors related to the child's performance, specifically the lack of appropriate instruction in reading and math, as well as limited English proficiency. Essentially EDTs must consider all of the factors contributing to the child's difficulties and decide which factors are the primary cause or causes of the child's difficulties. Like all decisions, these decisions must be made based on comprehensive evaluation data and with the input of all of the

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members of the EDT. It is important that EDTs recognize that a child may have experienced a lack of appropriate instruction and/or have limited English proficiency, but if these factors are not the primary reasons for the child's difficulties, they would not be considered determinant factors. Once the EDT has ruled out either of these factors, they check "Yes" on the Worksheet. This communicates that "Yes, they have eliminated the possibility that one of these factors is a determinant factor." If the EDT is considering more than one potential eligibility category, these first two questions would be answered the same and use the same documentation across all of the categories. EDTs may find it useful to complete multiple worksheets simultaneously if they are considering more than one eligibility category. Additionally, EDTs should remember that lack of appropriate instruction for preschool-aged children is considered to be a lack of opportunities to participate in developmentally appropriate activities. It is important to remember that the lack of opportunities must be due to a reason other than the nature of the child's disability in order for it to be considered a determinant factor. For example, it may be that a young child has significant behavioral challenges that make it difficult for the family to involve the child in family and community activities. In this situation, even though the child has had a lack of opportunity to participate in these activities, EDTs should not consider this as the determinant factor for the child's learning difficulties. Rather, this information might be helpful and used as further documentation to support a decision that indicates that the child is eligible for special education and related services.

[Slide 30] The third question, question 3, is unique to deaf-blindness. To respond to this question, the team must determine that the child is a child with deaf-blindness, as defined by IDEA based on assessment and evaluation data collected by the EDT. EDTs should remember that medical information provided by parents and outside agencies, including the eye examination, may help answer this question, but it would only answer the question, "Does this child have deaf-blindness?" The medical information would not necessarily support that the child also requires specially designed instruction as a result of the deaf-blindness. That question will be answered by the EDT later.

[Slide 31] The fourth and final question to be addressed is also consistent across all eligibility categories, like the questions related to the determinant factors. In this case, the EDT is determining if any other eligibility category better describes the child's disability. It is possible that a child demonstrates more than one disability, but if the EDT determines that deaf-blindness **best** describes the child's disability, they would respond, "Yes, we've determined that no other category better describes the child's disability." On the other hand, if the child has deaf-blindness but also has another disability and the other disability better describes the child, the EDT would answer "No, we've determined that another category better describes this child's disability." In either case, it is likely that the EDT will need to complete the "Determine the presence of a disability" section on one or more worksheets for the other eligibility categories being considered.

In addition to answering each of the questions "yes" or "no" in this section, it is critical that the EDT briefly describe the documentation that supported each of their decisions.

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[Slide 32] Each of the four questions serves as a stopping point in the process if the EDT answers “no.” Once the EDT has answered “no” to any of the four questions, they have determined that the child is not a child with deaf-blindness. If this occurs, the EDT should stop moving through those four questions. If the EDT either is not considering another potential eligibility category or has already completed the “Determine the presence of a disability” section for other potential categories, the EDT should move to the “Determination of eligibility for special education and related services” section of the worksheet. At this point, the EDT will document the determination that “The child is not eligible under the eligibility category of deaf-blindness.” They also need to indicate why that decision was reached by indicating either that the child doesn’t have deaf-blindness or that a different category best describes the child’s disability. The process then stops for this eligibility category.

The response to all of the four questions in this section of the worksheet must be “yes” in order to proceed to the section of the worksheet, “Determination of the need for specially designed instruction.” Remember, if you have even one “no” response, you skip over the “Determination of the need for specially designed instruction” section.

[Slide 33] To determine the need for specially designed instruction, using the assessment and evaluation data collected, the EDT must determine if, as a result of deaf-blindness, the child requires special education and related services in one or more areas outlined in IDEA.

[Slide 34] These areas include: being involved in and making progress in the general education curriculum or developmentally appropriate activities; participating in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and/or being educated and participating with other children with and without disabilities. The EDT must answer “yes” to at least one of the questions in this section of the worksheet to say that the child requires specially designed instruction because of needs resulting from deaf-blindness.

[Slide 35] After answering these three questions, the EDT moves into the final phase of the eligibility determination process—documenting the final eligibility determination decision. This section of the worksheet, “Determination of eligibility for special education and related services,” allows EDTs to document that either the child is eligible for special education and related services under the category of deaf-blindness, is not eligible under the category of deaf-blindness, or that more information needs to be collected to make a determination.

[Slide 36] If the EDT determines that the results of the evaluation indicate that the child requires specially designed instruction as a result of deaf-blindness, the child would be eligible under the category of deaf-blindness.

[Slide 37] If the EDT determines that the child is not eligible under the category of deaf-blindness, they must indicate the rationale for that decision by checking one of the four options within that decision. These options allow EDTs to document either that the child doesn’t have deaf-blindness or any other disability, that the child does not have deaf-blindness, but is eligible under another eligibility category,

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that the child has deaf-blindness but another eligibility category better describes the child's primary disability, or that the child has deaf-blindness, but doesn't demonstrate a need for specially designed instruction. This section allows for the documentation that a different eligibility category better describes the primary disability.

EDTs should clearly read the questions presented on the worksheet and determine which situation most accurately describes the child being evaluated. Any child who is found to be "not eligible" for special education and related services must be referred to the SAT.

Finally, if the EDT is unable to make an eligibility determination, they may identify additional information that need to be gathered. They would then reconvene later to make the final eligibility determination decision.

### **[Slide 38] Reevaluation and Discontinuation of Services**

The Reevaluation worksheets in the NM TEAM will support the EDT through the documentation and decision-making process during reevaluations.

A child with deaf-blindness should be considered for discontinuation of special education and related services only when they demonstrate the ability to function independently, access and perform adequately in the general curriculum, and no longer demonstrate a need for special education services. The LEA must evaluate the child before determining that the child is no longer a child with a disability. Any child whose special education supports and services are discontinued should be referred back to the SAT at his school to ensure that the child is supported during the transition and a Section 504 Accommodation Plan should be considered, as appropriate.

### **[Slide 39] Closing**

Thank you for participating in this NM TEAM training module. We hope this information has been helpful in clarifying and expanding on the information presented in the manual.