

Basic Human Guide with Deafblind Travelers

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June 2019

Introduction

When working with a deafblind person, you may be called upon to act as a “human guide.” Many deafblind people travel independently using a mobility cane, a dog guide, or their residual vision and hearing. They remain safe and efficient travelers by becoming familiar with their environment and making appropriate decisions. While you are working, there will be times when the deafblind person is in a new and unknown place, and the most efficient way to travel and access the surroundings will be a human guide.

Standard human guide techniques were developed more than 50 years ago in the professional field of Orientation and Mobility (O&M). Many deafblind individuals have received training from an O&M specialist and have learned the strategies to effectively travel with another person. By following the standard practices that are taught to deafblind people, as modified below, and through discussion with the deafblind traveler regarding his or her personal travel preferences, including the use of touch cues such as PT or Haptics, the two of you can become a successful, effective team, traveling through various environments and in any situation, allowing full accessibility and decision making on the part of all participants.

The Basics of Human Guide Techniques

The basic concept of human guide is simple. An individual (called the guide), who can effectively preview and navigate the environment safely, positions herself in front of and beside the deafblind person (known as the follower). The guide offers her arm to the follower. The deafblind person remains about one-half step behind the guide, and grasps the guide’s arm just above the elbow. The follower affects the proper grasp by putting the thumb on one side of the guide’s arm and the four fingers on the other. The guide’s arm remains extended down and relaxed; this allows the follower to interpret information from the movement of the guide’s arm. In this way, the team begins to walk.

By holding the guide’s arm in the proper position, the follower can detect the forward movement of the guide as he walks, turns left or right, or steps up or down. And with this information, both partners will cooperate to ensure safe and efficient mobility.

Some basic and common-sense rules should be followed when acting as a human guide. These rules are important to remember:

- The primary goal of the team is to move together, safely and efficiently, through space. The role of the guide is not to manipulate the follower during travel, but rather to respectfully empower their choices. Pulling, grabbing, or pushing is inappropriate. Interfering with the use of a mobility cane is wrong. Acting outside the role of guide should happen only in a serious matter of safety.

- When traveling human guide, always respect the position and pace of the deafblind traveler. The guide should adjust his pace to the speed preferred by the deafblind person by attending to the tension on his arm. When the pace is correct, the guide will not feel pulling and pushing on his arm. The deafblind follower should maintain a firm grasp that is not so tight as to be uncomfortable to the guide. The guide should also respect the preference of the traveler to choose the left or right arm. Obviously, contact between the guide and the follower should be constantly maintained while moving.
- The guide should *never* abandon the deafblind traveler in an open, neutral space. When the guide and follower decide to separate, the deafblind individual should have a wall, pole, seat, or another anchor which allows him to know where he is and to remain safe.
- Safety is a primary concern, and the guide should not enter travel situations where she is uncertain or unable to ensure security. The guide should always move forward first into a space that has been previewed; walking backwards – or a body movement that causes the follower to walk backwards – can be dangerous. Remember that you span twice your normal width when walking in standard human guide position, and be aware of upper body and head hazards along your route.
- If the travel team can communicate by spoken language, then communication between the guide and follower can be helpful during human guide. While it is possible to communicate visually or tactually when guiding an individual through an open, unobstructed space, the guide and follower should usually focus on their safe and efficient movement. Tactual communication should be kept to a minimum when moving in any environment that presents a challenge or is potentially unsafe. If there is an important reason to communicate, the guide and follower might decide to stop moving until communication is complete.
- Some deafblind travelers choose to use a cane when walking with a human guide. The cane is a personal travel tool that allows the follower a preview of the space in front of the travel team. At no time should the guide pull, grab, or take the follower's cane. You may want to discuss the use of the follower's cane preferences for narrow spaces, as well as for stairs and doors, before providing human guide.
- Some deafblind travelers may travel with a dog guide and a human guide at the same time. In this instance, it is best practice that the dog be on a leash and not the harness. The reason for this is that there cannot be two guides; this confuses the dog and de-reinforces the dog from its role. One or the other – the human or the dog – should guide, but not both at the same time. Therefore, before the team sets out, a discussion should take place to determine clear expectations and responsibilities for all members of this kind of travel team.
- The guide should be sensitive to the needs and desires of the deafblind traveler. Some individuals are very experienced at using a human guide, and for others this may be a new endeavor. The guide should adjust his techniques and pace with this in mind.

Traveling in Open Space

Walking in a place that is wide enough for two people and does not change elevation is the simplest human guide scenario. As described before, the follower grasps the guide's arm above the elbow, and maintains their connection as the guide moves forward. It is the guide who must continually preview the environment, anticipate changes along the route, and successfully relate information to the deafblind person through the movement of his or her body and arm. The guide affects turns by continuing to move forward and allowing the follower to feel the turn at the guide's arm.

Narrow Spaces

The first challenge the guide and follower may encounter is a narrow space. This may be an open door, a crowded sidewalk, a busy store, or any place that does not allow enough space for two people to walk through when traveling side by side.

When faced with such a situation, the guide will initiate human guide narrow space technique. While still moving, the guide will bring his guiding arm behind him, resting it in the small of his back. At the same time, the follower will slide their hand down the guide's arm and secure a grasp on the guide's wrist. This will cause the team to align behind each other, making the space necessary to travel only as wide as a single person. To be sure that the guide and follower's feet do not become entangled, the deafblind traveler will extend her arm to increase the amount of space between her and the guide.

When the team has passed through the narrow space, the guide moves his arm to its natural position at the side of his body, and the follower returns his grasp to the position above the elbow.

Changes in Elevation: Stairs, Curbs, Etc.

Another common situation that deserves special consideration and care is when the travel team needs to step up or down, as in the case of steps, curbs, or any other change in the elevation of the surface. The guide should anticipate the upcoming change in the surface, and plan to stop before stepping up or down. It is best to approach curbs and steps straight-on at a 90-degree angle. When the guide stops, this signals the follower to predict a change in the environment.

After stopping briefly, the guide takes the step up or down, and checks that the follower's foot securely follows. In the case of curb cuts at street crossings, the guide will stop, step, and check that the follower is safe and stable on the slope. The guide then moves cautiously forward, and the follower detects that they are again on a level surface. With an experienced team of travelers, the stop may be simply a pause.

In the case of steps, additional consideration is necessary. After approaching the top or bottom step, the guide stops. If the deafblind traveler is in a known environment, he may know he is about to navigate steps. He should grasp the handrail on the stairway. If the follower does not realize that steps are in front of her, then the guide respectfully prompts the follower to take the handrail. The guide, if requested, may inform the follower of the number or approximate number of steps, or sets of steps and platforms, in front of them. When the guide reaches the level surface, he again stops, signaling to the follower that there are no more steps.

At any change in the surface, including steps, curbs, grass, or rough terrain, the guide should always indicate a change by stopping or pausing before proceeding.

Closed Doorways

A standard closed door can open one of four different ways: away from the travel team to the left or right, and toward the travel team to the left or right.

There are various ways to deal with closed doors and deafblind travelers may have a particular preference for different techniques. It may be best to follow a simple rule. If the guide can control the door (the door swings toward the guide), he or she should open the door and hold it open with an extended arm, and use the narrow space technique described above as both the guide and then the follower completely pass through the portal. If the door swings toward the follower, the guide will hand over control of the door by using his hand to lead the follower's free hand to the door. The follower will then control the door until he is through the portal.

Another way to remember this technique as you approach a single door portal: If the door handle or knob is on the same side as the guide, then the *FOLLOWER* controls the door; if the door handle is on the side of the follower, then the *GUIDE* controls the door.

It is safer and easier to avoid revolving doors. Standard swinging doors are almost always available as an alternative.

Escalators and Elevators

Escalators pose potential dangers for all travelers, with or without vision, and again it is best to avoid using them if you are not an experienced human guide traveler. In most places with escalators, elevators and stairways are also available and offer a safer alternative. If you are in a situation where you must travel on an escalator, caution and common sense must be used. First, consider stopping and explaining to the deafblind individual that you will be using an escalator.

The guide should approach the escalator and stop before proceeding onto the moving steps. You can allow the follower to lightly touch the moving handrail to determine the approximate speed of the escalator. The guide may bend his or her arm, and allow the follower to secure a firm, full-hand grasp around the guide's arm. The guide will proceed onto the moving step first, and at the same time, he or she must detect that the deafblind traveler has successfully and safely followed, with her foot setting down solidly onto a full step. The guide must securely use the handrail, as does the traveler, and be prepared to support the full weight of the follower if balance is lost, or the traveler falls forward. As the travel team approaches the end of the escalator, the guide steps off the moving step first and indicates by his body and arm movement that they have reached a level surface. The guide should proceed away from the escalator to avoid pedestrians behind them exiting the escalator.

Elevators usually do not present problems. The guide uses the call buttons and floor buttons, and leads the follower in and out of the elevator. Narrow space position may be necessary, and the guide should be aware that the elevator doors may close prematurely.

Seating

When guiding a deafblind person to a chair, the guide should stop so that the follower is within arm's reach of the seating, then respectfully guide their free hand to the top of the chair. The follower will then clear the seat with his hand, insuring that there are no obstructions, and take the seat.

Entering Vehicles

To enter a vehicle, the follower needs to know: 1) the location of the door and 2) the height of the vehicle. As the travel team approaches the vehicle, the guide stops within arms' reach of the door handle, and may employ either of the strategies suggested:

1. Using hand-under-hand technique, the guide may lead the follower's hand to the closed door handle and the deafblind person can enter the vehicle without further cooperation.
2. The guide may position herself between the follower and the vehicle, and open the door wider than the both of them. Using hand-under-hand technique, the guide then leads the follower's hand along the side of the open door and to its top. Using hand-under-hand technique again, the guide leads the follower's other hand to the roof of the vehicle, thereby providing information as to the height of the opening, so that the deafblind individual can protect their head upon entering the vehicle. The deafblind person can then enter the vehicle without further intervention.

These strategies may be modified to what works best for the team, but keep in mind that it is never okay for the guide to assist a deafblind person by pushing him into the vehicle, or by grasping or pushing down his head and/or neck.

Special Considerations

Each traveler presents a unique combination of experience and skill. Standard human guide techniques may need to be modified to remain safe. Some of these modifications are:

- The deafblind traveler may choose to use his or her cane – or not – when walking with a human guide. Some individuals prefer to use their cane so they can preview the surface in front of them. This typically presents no difficulty except when using narrow space technique or at stairs and doors when the follower must use both hands to remain safe. You may wish to discuss this with the deafblind traveler before providing human guide.
- If the follower has orthopedic or balance problems, the guide may need to maintain an arm position bent at the elbow and allow the follower to wrap their hand around the arm. This provides extra support, but may prevent the facile passage through narrow spaces and at other times. This technique may also require more strength, endurance, and stability on the part of the guide.
- If the guide and follower have very different heights, then the follower may choose to place his hand on the shoulder of the guide. Again, this modification may be necessary, but will cause difficulty at closed doors and narrow spaces.
- Some travelers prefer to visually follow a guide. In this case, it is incumbent on the guide to walk in a way that allows the follower to remain in visual contact. Consider slowing down, regularly checking that the follower is safely behind the guide, and being very cautious when approaching crowds, steps, and other dangerous situations. Poor lighting, bright glare, and other environmental factors will have a significant impact on many travelers with vision loss.
- Some travelers with low vision may use human guide on some routes or for short periods of time, and then decide to use their residual vision at other times. It is always their decision when and if to accept a human guide.

Conclusion

The guide and the follower form a team that moves safely and efficiently through space while still empowering the choices of the deafblind person. Like any new set of skills, a little practice and time will allow you to become a proficient human guide. Confidence and comfort will come soon. Remain relaxed because a stiff or tense body and arm do not provide good information to the follower. Remember that you are in a team travel situation that requires cooperation and mutual respect. Take the time to discuss travel preferences with the deafblind individual before embarking on an excursion, and be open to suggestions and modifications. For more in-depth questions and concerns, consult an O&M specialist.

Good luck and safe travels!