

Touch Signals

Touch signals is a generic term referring to the practice of using various methods of touch on the body. They are used to convey visual, social, and environmental information discreetly and in real-time to a person who is deaf-blind.

The use of touch signals emerged over time out of a natural instinct to share information with individuals who are deaf-blind about their surroundings in a quick and unobtrusive manner. For example, a husband may use a signal to let his wife know he was leaving the room when she was busy cooking. A friend may give a certain tap to his deaf-blind friend in a restaurant to let her know the food has arrived and that they should take a pause in their conversation while the waiter serves their meals.

There are several internationally recognized bodies of knowledge and practice associated with touch signals. In the U.S., the two main systems being used are Haptic Communication and Back-Back Channeling (BBC). Both systems were developed by deaf-blind individuals and continue to evolve within the deaf-blind community.

Haptics was developed in Norway during the early 90's in an effort to standardize a method of communication that was already evolving organically within the deaf-blind community. Haptic communication is a fixed set of signals performed in a specific way and in a defined order to provide visual and environmental information as well as social feedback to an individual who is deaf-blind. For more

information go to www.hapti-co.com.

Back-Back Channeling (BBC), a method found under the Pro-Tactile (PT) philosophy, originated in Seattle, Washington, in 2007. BBC is a similar method to Haptics in that it provides visual and environmental information via touch on the body. The Pro-Tactile philosophy also supports the idea of providing social feedback through back channeling via touch. The signals in BBC and back channeling (BC) methods are not meant to be standardized or documented. Rather, these methods encourage communication partners to develop their own signals given the particular preferences of the deaf-blind individual as well as the situation they may be in. It is important to note that the PT philosophy entails much more than just a method of touch signals. PT is a philosophy and a movement. There are three major components to PT. 1) a philosophy: which focuses on the primary value of touch in deaf-blind culture, 2) attitude, which is based on the value of equality between deaf-blind individuals and the rest of society and 3) a number of methods including back channeling, back-back channeling, tactile American Sign Language and mapping. To learn more about PT go to www.protactile.org

There is an emerging trend and growing body of research about the use of touch signals with other populations including individuals who are hearing-blind and individuals who have minimal language skills. Additionally, there is research in the use of touch signals in mobility instruction and competitive sporting activities with people who are deaf-blind. The possibilities of the uses for touch signals are endless. Therefore, the systems will continue to evolve to meet these growing needs.

The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults (HKNC) follows an “all inclusive” approach with regard to teaching

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and use of touch signals. HKNC is incorporating all systems/philosophies into its training program and encouraging individuals to select what works best for them in a given situation. Often a combination of systems has been found to be effective. Research on this topic and the existing systems is ongoing as well as HKNC's internal research to determine the specific needs of consumers including students, staff, and professionals in the field. HKNC is working closely with an advisory committee made up of individuals who are deaf-blind, interpreters, and staff from various departments at HKNC to make modifications and additions to existing resources to meet those specific needs.