

Anchor Center for Blind Children's
Gerber Foundation Research Grant

Anchor Center for Blind Children, based in Denver, Colorado, serves children with vision loss from birth to age 6 years. The mission of Anchor Center is to teach visually impaired infants, young children and their families, providing hope and a nurturing environment where children reach their highest potential.

Many of the children served at Anchor Center for Blind Children have significant feeding and eating challenges. Practical application through our work shows us that infants with visual impairments do not have the opportunity to use visual cues to establish feeding time as a pleasant, fulfilling social experience. Visually impaired infants need to be taught to access their other senses before and after the eating experience.

In January of 2008, the Gerber Foundation awarded Anchor Center's Feeding Team a three year grant to study the differences in feeding skills between children ages birth to three who have low vision and those who are legally blind and using tactile skills as their primary mode for learning. Every six months the researchers videotape feeding strategies and progress and interview the family about feeding concerns and questions. An important part of the interview is a question regarding 'three words' that describe the parent's perception of mealtimes with their child. These 'three words' have provided great insight into the emotional aspects of the feeding experience between parent and child and the psychological impact of a challenging feeding situation. The researchers' sense of the overall 'feel' of the session consistently matches the descriptions provided by the parents as well as the child's skills and progress.

Results of the first year's study are beginning to confirm our hypothesis that young children with little or no vision experience more feeding challenges than do children with low vision. Further, observations indicate that there may be a connection between feeding challenges and other primary needs such as sleep, bonding, and routines.

The researchers' impressions at this early stage in their study suggest the following thoughts on intervention:

- There is a critical window for intervention to ensure success in feeding situations. This is especially true for children who will be tactile learners.
- The critical period for initial feeding intervention with children who will be tactile learners is much earlier than anticipated.
- All children with vision loss benefit from additional sensory experimentation including with the feet.
- There is an emotional/behavioral 'dance' related to attachment behaviors between the caregiver and child. If the attachment status is not healthy, the feeding relationship is significantly impacted.

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