A Special Library

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DB-LINK - The National Information Clearinghouse On Children Who Are Deaf-Blind

Susan is a special education teacher. In two weeks, a 5-year old deaf-blind boy will be enrolled in her class. She has never worked with a deaf-blind child before. She is anxious to learn as much as she can about deaf-blindness and teaching strategies for this student.

David is 17 and has Usher syndrome. He is planning to go to college and needs information about how to make sure the school he attends is able to meet his needs.

Annette and Robert are the parents of a 3-month old son, Danny. Danny was born prematurely and has severe vision and hearing loss. They want to make sure that Danny gets the best possible education and know how important it is to start early. They need information about early learning and communication.

Jennifer is a graduate student. She is writing a research paper about the impact of deaf-blindness on learning. She needs help locating what has been written on this subject.

These examples show the range of information requests that DB-LINK staff receive on a typical day. When the federal government launched plans for a clearinghouse specific to deaf-blindness in 1992, its intent was to make information about this disability widely available. Today, DB-LINK responds to requests from people throughout the United States and is nationally recognized as the central source for the collection and distribution of information about deaf-blindness.

Two aspects of information management have been essential to our success. First, DB-LINK was designed to combine features of both clearinghouses and libraries to create a service that makes us unique among information providers. Second, we were fortunate that our development occurred at the same time that information technology was expanding. This made it possible for us to take full advantage of computers and the Internet.

Clearinghouse/Library Design

A clearinghouse is an information center that traditionally functions by making general information about a specific topic available to anyone. Clearinghouses usually maintain a small selection of publications and resource lists, and are often expert at providing their customers with referrals to meet more specific needs. As a clearinghouse DB-LINK has developed topical publications that meet the general needs of our customers and we maintain information about a network of service providers for referral. These include agencies, support groups, schools, and consultants. We have also developed a level of service and a focused, deep collection of materials that is not typical of most clearinghouses. In this way, DB-LINK functions more as a special library.

A special library is a library that has a unique focus and develops a comprehensive, in-depth collection of materials about a specific topic. Special libraries are found in government agencies, private companies, museums, hospitals, and other similar organizations. The mission of a special library is to organize and manage a body of information not readily available anywhere else or to meet the needs of a particular group of people.

Prior to the establishment of DB-LINK, it was hard to find in-depth information about deaf-blindness. State deaf-blind projects had small resource libraries, but they were not comprehensive or widely available to parents and teachers. Because deaf-blindness occurs in a small number of people, it is a topic rarely included with the education or disability information found in most libraries. Before DB-LINK, much of what was written about educational methods and research in the field had no visible network for distribution. For these reasons, it was important that DB-LINK comprehensively collect all available useful information about deaf-blindness and make it easily accessible.
Currently, our library includes books, articles, videos, newsletters, conference proceedings, research findings, and catalogs. By using such standard library practices as collection development, database creation, centralization of resources, and reference service, DB-LINK has created greater visibility and accessibility for information about deaf-blindness. We also collect information from other subject areas that deepen our ability to support the specific informational needs of our customers. Topics in these areas include special education, disability law, medicine, assistive technology, and funding opportunities.

Most important to our customers, is the responsive nature of our service. DB-LINK information specialists research and deliver specific responses to questions. We provide articles, resource and curricula lists, and locate information online. Our customers include parents, deaf-blind individuals, teachers, researchers, IEP teams, and technical assistance providers. We support families and teachers with information that can make a difference for their child or student. Our ability to respond uniquely to each request makes it possible for anyone, regardless of geographic location, to access our library.

The Influence of Technology

Emerging technologies have allowed us to format information and provide a range of services that were not even a twinkle in the federal government’s eye when they initially planned this project. We were fortunate to begin in 1992, when few people were anticipating the information explosion that would follow in the next few years. As we developed, the fact that we were unburdened by a history of established practices made it very easy to take advantage of computers and advancing technologies.

Timing, knowledgeable staff, and supportive institutions have been key to integrating our use of technology, affording us the opportunity to move information into the hands of a much wider community of users. Our web site offers full access to our databases and publications, and current information about research projects, training opportunities, and conferences. It also provides a starting point for locating additional information on the web. Familiarity with computers and the Internet is not necessary to access DB-LINK, however. The majority of our customers still contact us by phone.

DB-LINK also uses technology to manage a variety of e-mail discussion groups. These give families, professionals, and consumers an opportunity to exchange personal experience and knowledge via e-mail.

Additionally, technology has made it possible for DB-LINK to operate as a consortium. Three primary agencies work together on DB-LINK: Teaching Research at Western Oregon University, Perkins School for the Blind, and the Helen Keller National Center. Electronic databases, a rotating 800 telephone number, and the ability to move large amounts of information via the Internet has made it possible for us to remain geographically separate, yet provide unified service delivery.

Technology has helped to create a network that extends the impact of information and is transforming the field of deaf-blindness. DB-LINK is now part of a community that is developing information resources and increasing awareness about deaf-blindness throughout the world.

What You Can Do

At DB-LINK, we collect information in a variety of ways. We subscribe to journals and newsletters. We attend conferences and collect proceedings. We search online databases and the Internet. We collect information produced by research projects and state deaf-blind projects. At every step of the way, your partnership is critical to our mission to provide service and access to quality information. You can help.

Send us notices or copies of new products such as books, articles, manuals, and videos, so that we can add these to our collection and publicize their availability. Send us materials you develop for training programs or conferences. If you run support groups or work for schools, agencies or organizations that provide services to deaf-blind individuals, help us keep our resource database up-to-date. Call us or check the resource database on our web site to see if your organization is currently listed and the information is accurate. Contact us if you have expertise in deaf-blindness and are interested in being listed as a consultant in our database.

Think of us as your special library and spread the word about DB-LINK. Let families, teachers and other people who work with deaf-blind children and youth know that we are available by phone, TTY, e-mail, fax, and on the web, to assist in meeting their information needs. Tel: 800-438-9376, TTY: 800-854-7013, dblink@tr.wou.edu, http://www.dblink.org

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