

# Deaf-Blindness: Eligibility Determination and Identification



## Overview

Deaf-blindness, or combined vision and hearing loss, is a rare condition that limits access to both auditory and visual information, resulting in significant challenges in obtaining and processing information. Although the term “deaf-blind” may suggest total loss of hearing and sight, it includes a wide range of combined sensory losses. A child may have some usable hearing and/or vision and still be identified as a student with deaf-blindness.

## National Context

According to the 2021 National Deafblind Child Count, 10,627 children and youth (birth through age 21) were identified as deaf-blind in the United States, including 658 infants and toddlers. Deaf-blindness is the lowest-incidence disability under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). About 1% of these children have total blindness and profound deafness, while approximately 99% have some usable hearing or vision. Additionally, around 85% have other communication, physical, medical, or cognitive disabilities. These complex needs often contribute to under-identification or classification under other disability categories, which can limit access to appropriate interventions and supports.

To access the most recent National Deafblind Child Count, visit the [National Center on Deafblindness](#).

## Virginia Data

According to the December 1, 2024, Child Count, there were 190,120 students with disabilities in Virginia. Based on the national trend, less than 1% of these students would be expected to have deaf-blindness, which is approximately 190 - 380 students statewide. However, in Virginia, there were 25 students reported under the primary disability category of deaf-blindness in 2024. This discrepancy suggests that students with deaf-blindness may be identified in other disability categories, potentially limiting their access to specialized supports and services.

## Definition and Classification

Under the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia* (8VAC20-81-10):

“Deaf-blindness means simultaneous hearing and visual impairment, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.”

A child with deaf-blindness, regardless of additional disabilities, should not be classified as having multiple disabilities, as that category specifically excludes deaf-blindness.

## Educational Implications

Deaf-blindness is best understood as a disability of access to visual and auditory information (National Center on Deafblindness, 2025). Because most classroom instruction relies on visual and auditory input, students with combined hearing and vision loss must be:

- Accurately identified under the correct disability category.
- Provided with appropriate accommodations, modifications, and assistive technology.
- Supported by professionals with expertise in dual sensory loss.

Identification as deaf-blind does not automatically change placement but ensures access to specialized services and supports from professionals experienced in the effects of combined sensory loss on communication, learning, and social-emotional development.

## Virginia Resources

The Virginia Deafblind Project, jointly funded by the Virginia Department of Education and the United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, provides:

- Professional development for educators and families on deaf-blindness.
- On-site coaching and consultation on deaf-blind-specific strategies.
- Support access to the general curriculum and grade-level standards.
- Collaboration with early intervention and education providers to address intensive learning needs and support successful transitions.
- Family engagement in education, transition planning, and peer connections.

Helpful links and contact information:

- [The Virginia Deafblind Project](#)
  - Contact: [VADeafblind@vcu.edu](mailto:VADeafblind@vcu.edu) or (804) 828-3876
- [Virginia Department of Education](#)
  - Contact: [SPEDInstruction@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:SPEDInstruction@doe.virginia.gov) or (804) 298-3148