

Resources to Teach Blind and Visually Impaired Children and Teens About Alzheimer's and  
Other Dementias with a Personal Perspective

by Jessica Rodriguez

In teaching a blind or visually impaired child about how Alzheimer's or any other dementia may be affecting a relative or family friend, it is important to understand how that person can access information about the condition of the relative or friend. As a blind person in the field of social work, I try to help the person with dementia connect to their environment through their senses. I ask them if they hear any birds outside, if they can sense any pleasant smells, such a favorite recipe being prepared in their home, or I ask about what kind of music they listen to. A blind child could be encouraged to engage their grandparent or other relative with dementia in conversations that include information about things that they and the grandparent are both able to experience.

Before trying to teach any blind or visually impaired child about a subject as complex as dementia, it is essential to understand and empathize with how children with visual disabilities learn. According to an article in Family Connect, educators believe that more than 80% of what children learn comes to them by watching others. <https://familyconnect.org/browse-by-age/infants-and-toddlers/education-iandt/incidental-learning/> For example, when most children who have normal vision go into a room, they look around to see how many people are in the room, what the people are wearing, what kind of furniture is in the room, if there is food being served, and where could they find a place to sit down and begin a conversation with somebody. However, if the child is blind or visually impaired, they cannot see how many people are in the room. Instead, the blind or visually impaired child might listen for voices to figure out how many people are present in the room. If they are expecting someone they know to be there (for

example, a friend or relative), they may listen for the voice or laughter of that person. So, it is important to recognize that blind children or teens learn from a different perspective using their remaining senses.

I have lived with my grandparents since I was a teenager, and using my remaining senses, I have found ways to relate to them. Even though I am totally blind, I noticed that my grandmother and grandfather enjoyed watching shows or YouTube videos that featured musical artists from the 1950's and 60's, such as Lawrence Welk, Andy Williams, Glenn Miller, or Nat King Cole. I found that I enjoyed listening to some of that music also because I could understand all the words and the songs had greater meaning than some of the modern artists teens were listening to in the 1990's. Therefore, music became something we could all relate to. When my grandfather started to slip into dementia, I was able to bring him moments of happiness by playing the music of these artists that he enjoyed.

I also found that the sense of touch, which is very important to me, was also comforting to my grandfather. I would spend a lot of time sitting with him and holding his hand so he did not feel so alone. This soothing activity is something that can be suggested to any blind or visually impaired child who wants to relate to their family member who is dealing with dementia.

Another activity that blind children or teens can use to engage those in the early stages of dementia is to watch game shows on TV, such as Jeopardy. Because the content of the show is very auditory, the blind person can easily follow along, and the person in the early stages of dementia may know some of the answers to the questions. People with dementia can often recall things from the past even if they are forgetful about recent events. For example, they may recall

who was the president of the U.S. in 1960, but not remember what they had for breakfast that morning.

Another activity that blind or visually impaired individuals can do with those who have dementia is to listen to audio books together. It may be best to choose a classic book that does not contain inappropriate language and or audio magazines, such as Reader's Digest, that has short articles and jokes that are easy to follow using the sense of hearing.

In many cases, people with dementia do not get enough opportunities for movement or exercise. However, a safe way for both blind people and those with dementia to exercise is to do activities to build strength in their muscles while seated. For example, there are wrist bands and ankle bands that a person can wear. These bands have places to insert lightweight metal weights so that a person can lift their arms or legs to strengthen muscles.

Another activity that blind or visually impaired children or teens can enjoy with older relatives who have dementia is to eat foods that everyone enjoys. Some people with dementia have trouble holding utensils. Therefore, finger foods are most convenient. For example, I might order a large sub sandwich and ask for the sandwich to be cut into small sections which are easier to manipulate.

If both people are into sports the person with dementia could watch a football or baseball game on TV while the blind person follows commentary on the radio. In addition, some movies shown in theatres or on TV have audio descriptions of what is happening on screen so the blind person can follow along with the person who has Alzheimer's or other dementia.

## Other Resources

On the Alzheimer's Association website, there are several books recommended for children or teens that help young people understand Alzheimer's or dementia. One of these books is available as an audio book, and would therefore, be most accessible to blind or visually impaired child or teen. The book is called The Graduation of Jake Moon by Barbara Park published by Aladdin Publishers (2002). Not only is this available as an audiobook, but on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), but you can also purchase a summary and study guide, as well as a lesson plan to accompany the book. This book is designed for children and preteens, ages 9 -12 or grades 4 – 7. Here is a brief summary of the main focus of the book: “Jake Moon used to love the time he spent with his grandfather, Skelly, but that was before Skelly got Alzheimer's disease. All of a sudden, it's as if Skelly is the kid, and Jake has to be the grown-up. Much of Skelly's care becomes Jake's responsibility, and that doesn't leave much time for a life of his own.” The book is only 128 pages long; however, it would probably be best to have the blind or visually impaired child read one chapter a day, as the book is divided into 12 chapters. Ideally, it would be best if the blind or visually impaired child could read this along with a caring adult, perhaps a parent. In this way, the child and parent could share their feelings about the older relative with Alzheimer's or dementia. They could talk about behaviors they had observed and how this was different from how the grandparent acted when they were younger.

In my family, as my grandfather's dementia progressed, I noticed that it became harder for him to participate in a meaningful conversation. For example, we used to talk about passages in the Bible that we both used to enjoy. As his dementia progressed, my grandfather no longer understood the meaning of Bible passages and we were no longer able to have conversations about the importance of these scriptures as they applied to everyday life.

The Alzheimer's Association also provides a list of activities that children or teens can do with a person who has Alzheimer's or dementia.

1. Bake cookies.
2. Take a walk around the neighborhood.
3. Put a puzzle together.
4. Weed a garden or plant flowers.
5. Color or draw pictures, or look at photos.
6. Create a scrapbook or fill a memory box with mementos.
7. Read a favorite book or story.
8. Eat a picnic lunch outside.
9. Watch reruns of old TV shows together.
10. Listen to or sing favorite songs.

In reading over this list, as blind person, I would like to comment on the ones which are most feasible for me to do with a family member that has dementia. Baking cookies could be an activity that be done together, as it could easily be adapted for someone who is blind. First of all, the knobs or buttons on an oven should be labeled in Braille or with puff paint to mark the temperature settings and the on and off switch. There is special label maker (similar to a Dymo writer) that produces labels in Braille. There are pre-sliced cookies that come in a tube are easy for a blind person to use. They can even be cut with a butter knife for safety. The person with dementia can place the pieces of dough on a cookie sheet. The person who is blind can use oven mitts for protection and put the cookies into the oven to bake. If I was doing this activity, I could set the alarm on my i-Phone to know when the cookies would be done.

Another activity on this list that seems feasible and safe is for the blind person and the person with dementia is to put together simple puzzles. I recall using puzzles that were made of wood and did not have too many pieces. A simple puzzle would also be best for the person with dementia and this would provide an opportunity for them to use visual fine-motor skills.