

**Teaching Resources**

- Ask the Expert
- Curricular Resources
- Educational Publications
  - About the Authors
  - DB Guidelines
- Resource Packets
- Samuel P. Hayes Research Library
- Scout: Information on Blindness & Visual Impairment
- Training & Conferences
- Webcasts
- Webinars

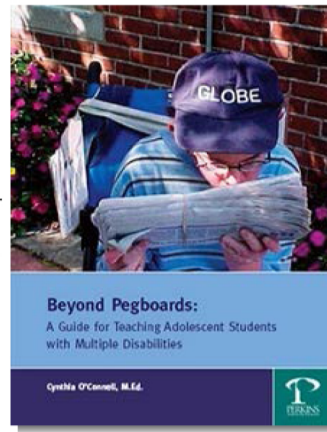
## Beyond Pegboards

### A Guide for Teaching Adolescent Students with Multiple Disabilities

Author, Cynthia O'Connell, M.Ed.

By Mike Del Rosso

In Cynthia O'Connell's classroom hangs a tactile timeline. She and her students filled it with artifacts throughout their 2010-11 school year. It resembles a clothesline, but instead of hanging garments, they hung pictures, writings describing events, tactile objects like a shovel to resemble the groundbreaking of the New Lower School, which happened earlier in the school year. Every Friday afternoon, they'd pick one event that highlighted the week to capture that moment in time. They even hung audio devices that play sound when you push a button. On MLK day, one audio device plays a recording of Martin Luther King Jr. reciting his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.



Buy the book.

-  RSS
-  Email
-  Print
-  Bookmark

In her book, *Beyond Pegboards: A Guide for Teaching Adolescent Students with Multiple Disabilities*, O'Connell writes "adapted calendars provide a concrete means for each student to anticipate events and record special occasions. Time is an abstract concept. Making the concept of time more tangible will help to organize your students and minimize anxiety."

 are you an educator?

Receive monthly updates about publications, author interviews, webcasts, and other resources useful for teaching students with visual impairments with or without additional disabilities.



A shovel on the tactile timeline represents the groundbreaking ceremony for the New Lower School building.

Tools, like tactile timelines, and methods used to develop the 23 activities detailed within *Beyond Pegboards*, are examples of O'Connell's theme-based education strategy, a methodology she's developed over her 36 years of teaching. Once she identifies the developmental needs of a given student—especially nonreaders who can't benefit from learning concepts through the written word—she tries to tailor meaningful and age-appropriate activities to address those needs.

"Developmental gaps give me direction," she said. "Sometimes that's how I come up with an activity."

In this way, *Beyond Pegboards* provides a concrete means for teachers to meet Massachusetts educational standards. Chapter II relates specific skills needed for the universal school subjects—mathematics, English language arts, history and social science, etc. Chapter IV demonstrates quite literally how pulling these skills into specific activities can meet a student's conceptual and skill-based deficits on multiple levels.

and social science, etc. Chapter IV demonstrates quite literally how pulling these skills into specific activities can meet a student's conceptual and skill-based deficits on multiple levels.

"If you think of the book as a language-based, classroom approach to teaching, it just all makes sense. This book is really written for a first-year teacher so that they can simplify what they're asked to do by isolating priorities. And make teaching joyful. They'll still be teaching after 36 years, if they learn to teach this way."

The cover of *Beyond Pegboards* shows a child holding a rolled up newspaper. The activity she designed for newspaper delivery offers a shining example of her theme-based approach.

Some of her students that delivered newspapers didn't know how to carry out a social interaction, understand the concept of *just one* or hold on to anything purposefully, lacking an "aim, grasp and release" skill. "We have had newspapers go flying everywhere and flying everywhere for weeks and months," she said. "And then one day, because enough people had said 'Thank you for my newspaper. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow,' one day it clicked. The students held on to that newspaper because the routine became meaningful.

Structured and repetitive routines can teach students how to respond appropriately in social situations based on modeling, cueing and prompting. "Gradually, you withdraw your prompts until they can do it more independently," she said.

Delivering newspapers worked on skills across the board:

- **One-to-one correspondence:** the student only picked up one newspaper and gave it to one teacher.
- **Grasping and releasing:** he held on to the newspaper until he gave it to the teacher.
- **Learning a rote social script:** "Thank you for the paper." "You're welcome."
- **Maintaining attention to task:** The student followed the modeled directions.



A Mayer-Johnson picture calendar creates a predictable environment. "I start with yesterday, today and tomorrow," O'Connell said. A totally blind student would have a tactile calendar. "We'd represent swimming with be a piece of a towel, for instance."



A closeup of the tactile timeline, which incorporates tactual, pictorial and auditory symbols over the course of one full school year.

"What I tried to do was put down what I wished they had taught me when I was in school and when I was a first-year teacher," said O'Connell, who will be retiring after this school year.

She says start by establishing a structured routine around an area of need. Always have challenges. Go the next step. And you can't make a mistake, which is the fun part. "You think about what went wrong and it keeps you thinking of new solutions." In hindsight, you can even have a sense of humor about some of your colossal failures.

O'Connell's last section of the book offers 101 additional themes, projects and activities for adolescent students. Yet these are more emblematic of a thought process she's trying to instill in future teachers for the visually impaired. She only stopped at 101 because "it sounded nice."

"That's the freedom you get with theme-based teaching: you can develop your own program," she said. "You have the freedom to create activities that will work, when you know that an approach isn't working."

#### Careers

We are always in search of energetic and talented individuals committed to helping children and adults who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired with or without other disabilities. Sound like you? [Take a look at our career opportunities.](#)