



# BEST NEWS

Blind Early Services TN - Newsletter for Caregivers and Providers



## HELEN KELLER DEAF-BLIND AWARENESS WEEK

### Deaf-Blind Awareness Week is June 27 - July 3

Helen Keller Deaf-Blind Awareness Week is June 27 to July 3. This national advocacy campaign has been in place since 1984 when President Reagan issued a proclamation to increase awareness and understanding of deaf-blindness. Each year during the last week of June, and in honor of Helen Keller's birthday on June 27th, people around the globe participate in activities that bring attention to both the difficulties and misperceptions that those in the deaf-blind community face. If you are a parent of a young child experiencing both vision and hearing loss or impairment, the National Center on Deaf-Blindness has recently released a great resource about how to communicate with your child. Please see the link below to access this information. Follow BEST on Instagram and Facebook this week to play myth vs fact regarding deaf-blindness!

### MARK YOUR CALENDAR

JULY RELEASE  
**BEST TOGETHER PODCAST:**  
KATE KELLY, MT-BC

JULY 6-10  
**NFB NATIONAL CONFERENCE**  
(VIRTUAL AND FREE!)

### BEST Co-Founder Guests on Spark Sessions Podcast

Spark Sessions shares stories of advocacy turned into action. Listen to the latest episode featuring BEST co-founder, Alison Clougherty by clicking below.

 **Donate to BEST by shopping at Amazon! Blind Early Services TN is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit and a recognized charity on AmazonSmile. All purchases made through our unique Amazon link will provide BEST with a portion of the proceeds.**

### Meet Kate Kelly



We're thrilled to announce our July podcast guest, Kate Kelly! Kate is a board-certified Music Therapist (MT-BC), singer-songwriter, and registered yoga instructor in Nashville, TN. Kate attended Belmont University, was a founding member of its Music Therapy program, and was among the first graduating class of Music Therapy students in 2016. Alongside her passion for Music Therapy, Kate received 4 years of training in voice, rhythm guitar, performing, and songwriting through Belmont's School of Music. Kate has used her unique skill set to help both children and adults with behavioral challenges, disabilities, autism, mental illness and chronic illness. Kate provides individual and group music therapy sessions to provide tools for achieving developmental goals, mental safety, stabilization, and overall well-being. Her sessions incorporate evidence-based techniques such as mindfulness, songwriting, improvisation, lyric discussion, poetry, drum circles, and movement as a means of healthy coping. Kate is a reader, runner, yogi, songwriter, and student of life. She continues to use music as a source of healing in her own life and finds the most meaning in her work when she is helping others do the same. Tune in for her episode on the BEST Together podcast in July!

### Staff Spotlight: Rachel Pace

Rachel is a licensed special education teacher and joins the BEST staff on July 1 as a Developmental Therapist. She has spent most of her career teaching preschool aged children and advocating for children to receive instruction in their least restrictive, most inclusive environments. Rachel has been working in the field of early intervention since 2019 and firmly believes that caregivers are their children's first, best teachers. Rachel graduated from Tennessee Technological University in 2010 with a degree in Child and Family Studies. She holds endorsements in Early Childhood Education, and Early Childhood Special Education.



### Eliza's Story

by Rebecca Davis,

BEST Board Member and VIPS Indiana Co-Founder

Meet Eliza. Eliza is a happy, mischievous girl with an iron will, a baby, not unlike your baby. In 2006 she was born legally blind due to multiple diagnoses. As her sighted parent, I did not understand her. When I gazed at her perfect face, her eyes stared off in another direction. She startled at every noise. Things I did to comfort and entertain my older daughter did not work with Eliza. I remember sitting next to her on our living room floor and feeling helpless. I could touch her, but I did not know how to reach her.

I was desperate to learn.

Our children learn differently than children who have functional vision. Eliza and I both needed the services of a Teacher of Blind/Low Vision. I needed a professional to teach me how to encourage Eliza to use all of her senses to explore the world around her. I needed someone to show me how to comfort and care for her.

When I searched for these services in Indiana, I learned no ongoing specialized early intervention for young children with visual impairments was available. There was no one to help me. I felt completely hopeless.

When the services our children need are not available, we can feel as though our children don't matter. No parent should ever feel this way. I could not accept that Indiana did not offer the services we needed to give Eliza the best start in life. Determined in my pursuit to get Eliza and our family the help we needed, I found Visually Impaired Preschool Services (VIPS) in Louisville, Kentucky. I remember pulling into the parking lot with my family and seeing the letters V-I-P-S in print and in braille on the outside wall. I caught myself feeling hopeful. As the sliding glass doors parted, we walked into VIPS for the first time. The kind woman at the reception desk said, "Hello, Eliza!" This welcome, a simple act of kindness to an overwhelmed mother, touched me more than I can express. They understood. VIPS understood that Eliza matters. I drove Eliza from Bloomington, Indiana to VIPS in Louisville, Kentucky every week for the next two years. She was taught by teachers who understood her unique needs and how to meet them. She learned alongside classmates who were both sighted and blind. She played inside in the sensory room and outside on the inclusive playground. She practiced making food in an adapted kitchen. She smelled the plants in the sensory garden. She had tap dancing lessons! There was a learning library filled with resources for curious parents and teachers. There was a calendar of events and upcoming holiday parties for the whole family. This wonderful center that VIPS had built for children like ours was more than I could have dreamed of. It was incredible! Our time there was a gift. It was a vision of a future in which Eliza is educated in the unique way she can learn. A future in which she is included the way every child should be and a world in which she is welcome. For this vision, this gift, I am eternally grateful.



Eliza then



Eliza now

### VIPS and BEST

Rebecca went on to co-found VIPS Indiana in order to create the same experience she found in Kentucky for other families like hers in her own state. Much like Rebecca's experience in Indiana, we, BEST co-founders, Alison and Stacy, found the same to be true here in Tennessee when our boys were born with blindness. We extend our greatest thanks and admiration to Rebecca and the leadership team at VIPS, as they have served as the model we seek to replicate here in Tennessee. VIPS' Executive Director, Diane Nelson, and Director of Education, Kathy Mullen have been instrumental in supporting our efforts by sharing with us their insights, strategies and blueprints for success. With Rebecca on the BEST board of directors, we don't have to reinvent the wheel and feel supported and guided by some of the best we know in the realm of early intervention and education for families of children who are blind/low vision. Thank you VIPS and thank you, Rebecca, for sharing your story and your support. We are indebted to you for expanding your passion and care for families like ours across state lines.

Please consider donating to BEST and/or VIPS. Every dollar counts and goes directly to supporting families of children experiencing blindness!

### BEST Activity Corner: DIY SCENTsory Matching

A great way to encourage exploration of a child's sense of smell is with DIY scent bottles. Have the child explore each scent and correctly identify them verbally or by matching to a picture or brailled card.

Supplies Needed:

- Small bottles (plastic spice bottles work great)
- Cotton balls
- Scents such as coffee grounds, cinnamon, peppermint oil, lemon juice, lavender oil, honey, pepper, salt, vanilla, various herbs

Instructions:

- Put a separate scent in each bottle
- Allow child to smell directly from the bottle or by sprinkling on a cotton ball
- Have the child guess each scent



### WHAT WE'RE LOVING THIS MONTH!



**Learning Resources Ruff's House Teaching Tactile Set features ten different textured bones and a plush Ruff, the dog. This toy is a great way to encourage texture perception and sensory exploration.**

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