SUGGESTIONS FOR:

Including Those who are DeafBlind or Have Complex Medical Needs at the Dinner Table

ENVIRONMENT & PHYSICAL COMFORT

- Ensure the child's wheelchair, specialized seating, or support equipment allows them to be at the table and at eye level with others; not off to the side.
- Avoid bright or fluorescent backlighting that makes it harder to see faces or items; soft or natural lighting may be better. Position the child with their back to bright light sources or windows.
- Narrate what's happening- describe who's talking, laughing, or what's going on ("Daddy just told a silly joke—everyone's laughing!" or "Grandma just sat down in the chair next to you" or "I hear Billy in the living room watching the football game.").
- Group/family gatherings can be loud- turn off or minimize excess background music/noise and communicate close to your child.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

- Involve the child in what is happening; do with, not for. Assist them in participating in the preparations and traditions (ex: stirring the batter, helping to set the table, turning on the timer, touching ingredients with guidance, etc.). Be respectful of their hands by using hand-under-hand.
- When engaging your child, provide processing and wait time for them to respond or engage.
- Sensory experiences- if oral eating isn't possible, let them experience food through smell, touch, or safely tasting (if approved by medical staff and/or caregivers).

DELAWARE STATEWIDE DEAFBLIND PROGRAM
WWW.DELAWAREOUTREACH.ORG

DEAFBLIND PROGRAM COORDINATOR: ERIN KLINE
302-454-2305 / ERIN.KLINE@CHRISTINA.K12.DE.US

COMMUNICATION ACCESS & SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

- Familiar people who understand your child's cues, behaviors or communication attempts can help bridge conversation and make sure they are included in conversations and stories. Have a communication partner (adult or sibling), positioned in close proximity (within arm's reach) so that the child can have both access to and be encouraged to communicate.
- Use familiar objects or pictures (e.g., a spoon for "eating," or a plate for "mealtime") to represent parts of the experience and allow for anticipation of what will be happening.
- Encourage siblings or cousins to learn a few signs or help with communication devices or object/picture symbols.
- Encourage family members and friends to address the child directly, not just through adults/caregivers.
- Allow for turn-taking in conversation. Make space for your child to express themselves. Even a small response (ex: a smile, a gesture, a body movement) deserves attention and respect.
- Offer choices through whatever communication mode works- reaching, eye gaze, vocalization, facial expressions, objects, switches, signs, or gestures- to let them pick a food, a plate, or a seat.

MEDICAL & SENSORY NEEDS

- Plan for breaks- large gatherings can be tiring. Create a quiet or dim space nearby for rest or decompression (include some of your child's familiar and preferred toys/items).
- Check equipment- ensure medical devices, feeding tubes, hearing aids, or communication devices are fully charged and accessible.
- Respect pacing- meals may take longer or look different for a medically complex child- build in time so no one feels rushed.