

# A Helen Keller Unit Study

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## Objectives

The purpose of this unit study is to explore the biography of Helen Keller in an interdisciplinary manner which will also provide insight into the life of the blind and deaf.

1. Explore the historical context of Helen Keller's life and her influence on the way we understand the world today.
2. Learn about deafness and blindness in a caring, empathic manner.
3. Apply ethical standards, like kindness and empathy, to our understanding of fellow humans, including the disabled.
4. Use chronology and timelines to outline Helen's life and the time in which she lived.
5. Journey with Helen Keller across maps.
6. Cultivate awareness of our social environment and how it appears to others.

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## Materials

We used the following materials in this unit study.

- *A Picture Book of Helen Keller* by David A. Adler
- *The Story of Helen Keller* by Rachel A. Koestler-Grack
- A pad of sticky-notes
- Journal, notebook, or paper
- Writing utensils (optional: crayons, markers, and collage material)
- A working internet connection and a computer
- Blindfold
- Play-dough or clay (enough to fill 3 ziploc bags)
- A map of the US
- A pack of colored sticky-star stickers

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## Course of Study

### 1. Book & Discussion: *A Picture Book of Helen Keller* by David A. Adler

Ask child to read this colorful book aloud to you as an introduction. Discuss and explore proper names, places, unknown words, terms, and concepts. Keep a running list of these and note them in your journal so you can describe and detail them as they come up. I've noted the words that Max mentioned as intriguing when he thumbed back through the book, followed by the definitions and descriptions which he offered in quotation marks.

- The 1880's as a time period

- Anne Sullivan - Helen's teacher; Helen called the day she first met Anne her "soul's birthday"
- Braille - "a pattern of raised dots that the blind use to read messages"
- Sign language - "talking with your hands"
- Tuscomb, Alabama - Helen's birthplace, home of Ivy Green
- Blindness - "loss of sight"
- Deafness - "loss of hearing"
- Radcliffe College - where Helen went to college
- *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller's autobiography
- How she learned - by touching and feeling things
- American Foundation for the Blind
- Presidential Medal of Freedom - Awarded to Helen by President Lyndon Johnson

## 2. Field Trip: Braille Hunt

Explore few local buildings (i.e. courthouse, grocery stores, museums, gyms, wherever you might travel on your daily errands) and have your child keep a list in his journal of all the places where he or she finds Braille writing. For example, Max found Braille on elevator buttons, near sinks, near stairs, etc.

- Discuss why Braille is used in public places.
- Learn the meaning of a few basic Braille words and have your child draw them in his or her journal. You can find wonderful teaching tools and games for teaching Braille at the Braille Bug website online at [www.afb.org/braillebug](http://www.afb.org/braillebug).

## 3. Activity: Empathy Exercise

Ask child to imagine being blind (consider having them wear a blindfold for half an hour) and then discuss how the world around them feels when they can't see. Is it scary? How do you know if people are happy or sad when they talk to you? How did they find their room? Or the restroom? What words would they use to describe the experience?

- Encourage them to make a word collage in their journals exploring their feelings as a "blind person".
- Give your child a sticky-note pad and allow them to walk around the house placing sticky-notes where they might be needed if a blind friend or relative came to stay.

## 4. Activity: Virtual Field Trip to Helen Keller's Kids Museum

You can find this online at <http://www.afb.org/braillebug/hkmuseum.asp>. Explore the slideshows and descriptions of Helen's life.

- Try to discuss some of the terms which interested you in #1.
- Consider sending a question about Helen or her life to Helen's great-grandniece in the Ask Keller section.

**5. Book: *The Story of Helen Keller* by Rachel A. Koestler-Grack**

Allow your child to read this book either silently or aloud and then have him or her write down 5 things they really liked learning from the book and 5 questions they had after reading the book. Consider going online to try to answer these questions.

**5. Journaling: A Timeline About Helen Keller**

Using books and online resources, show your child how to create a timeline of Helen Keller's life and times. Frame the timeline as a tool to visualize Helen's life and what was happening in the world around her during her life. Draw a straight line across the page and write June 27, 1880 at the beginning of the timeline; mark this date as Helen Keller's birth. Then write the date June 1, 1968 at the end of the timeline; mark this date as Helen Keller's death. Mark the median date in the center of the timeline.

Then encourage your child to look through his books and notes to find other significant dates in Helen Keller's life. Use Google timeline to search for important events from 1880 through 1968. Select a few of these dates to add to the timeline.

For a challenge, when you have finished, ask your child to turn over the page and create another timeline, this one beginning in 1968, the year of Helen's death, and continuing to the present. Try to place events that might have been important to Helen Keller or that were somehow inspired by or influenced by Helen Keller on this timeline. Discuss her "historical legacy", how what we do in our lives continues to affect the world even after our deaths. You can even mark the last date as the day your child began his or her unit study on Helen Keller.

**6. Adventure in Ideas: What Is a Nonprofit Organization?**

Learn more about Helen Keller's legacy to do good in the world online at [www.hki.org](http://www.hki.org), the website for Helen Keller International. Use this as a wedge to talk about the meaning of a nonprofit organization and how nonprofits try to make the world a kinder place.

- A nonprofit is an organization created for purposes other than making a profit. Often, a nonprofit works to assist people, places, and environments for free.
- Discuss the meaning of a profit, and compare a for-profit group, like a business, to a non-profit group, like the Salvation Army.
- Brainstorm a list of all the nonprofits your child can name. Talk about why each one may or may not be a nonprofit.

**7. Journaling: Your Very Own Nonprofit**

Ask your child to write, draw, sketch, collage, or somehow represent a journal entry imagining the nonprofit he or she would create if they had the means to do so. Encourage them to include answers or ideas about the following questions in their journal entries:

- Who would the nonprofit help?
- How would it help those people, animals, plants, or entities?

- What would you name the nonprofit?
- Where would it be located? Why?
- What kind of people would work there?
- Are there any Bible verses or stories that might be connected to the kind of work your nonprofit would do?

### 8. Activity: Sign the Alphabet

Play a game that helps you learn how to sign the alphabet online at [www.funbrain.com/signs/index.html](http://www.funbrain.com/signs/index.html). Then try a few words out on family members or friends.

### 9. Art: Sculpture

Helen Keller's favorite type of art was sculpture because she could touch it and feel it and imagine it. Using clay or play-dough, create a sculpture for Helen Keller. Then blind-fold a family member or friend and let them try to guess what you sculpted by only touching the sculpture.

### 10. Geography: Helen's Journey

Using an old map or atlas, have your child put one color of sticky-stars (i.e. blue) on all the places Helen Keller travelled and lived during her life. Keep the map on the wall in their room and use a different color sticky star to chart the journeys of other historical characters in future unit studies. The map can thus be used as an ongoing learning resource.

### More to Explore:

- Take a field trip to Helen Keller's birthplace at Ivy Green in Alabama. Or visit it online at [www.helenkellerbirthplace.org](http://www.helenkellerbirthplace.org).
- Watch **an** animated cartoon video of Helen Keller's life online via [Google Video](#).
- Visit your local animal shelter or pet store to learn more about seeing-eye dogs.
- Older children might enjoy reading Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*.
- Explore "handspeak" at [www.handspeak.com](http://www.handspeak.com).
- Learn about your vision and how the eyes work by watching the video at <http://library.thinkquest.org/C005949/>.
- Invent a song or a poem about Helen Keller using sign language alphabet in addition to your voice.
- Volunteer with a local organization that assists the blind or deaf.
- Ask your child to try to create a game that could be played by (and enjoyed) by a friend who could not hear or see.
- Find Bible verses or stories about deaf or blind people and discuss how Jesus showed his love for those who suffered from physical disabilities. How can we love and comfort those around us in a way pleasing to Jesus?

## What We Learned

- Helen Keller was a wonderful lady who was born in Alabama (at Ivy Green) and became blind and deaf at an early age, probably as a result of meningitis.
- With the help of special teachers, including Annie Sullivan, and special schools, Helen learned to read Braille and use sign language to communicate.
- Teachers work with us to facilitate our understanding, appreciation, and perspective on the world. Annie's early blindness, later resolved by surgery, helped Annie become a wonderful teacher for Helen because she understood how Helen felt-- how she saw the world. Annie used her experience to help Helen.
- Helen's first word was "water".
- Helen became close to writer Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain.
- When she wrote her autobiography, The Story of My Life, Helen dedicated it Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. Bell's wife was also deaf, and he contributed money and resources to the struggle of deaf and blind people in America. Bell and Helen became close friends; he contributed a great deal financially to her education.
- Helen Keller was the first deaf-blind woman to receive a college degree. She graduated from Radcliffe College in Cambridge.
- In 1909, Helen joined the suffragist movement.
- In 1918, Helen and Annie played themselves in the film "Deliverance", based on Helen's life.
- Helen joined the American Foundation for the Blind, the leading advocacy nonprofit which assisted blind Americans, in 1924. For the next 44 years, Helen served as an Ambassador for AFB.
- Helen wrote many books and pamphlets; she was a skilled typist. The typewriter proved a wonderful resource for blind Americans who wished to write.
- During World War II, Helen and her companion Polly traveled all around the country visiting veterans who had been blinded by their service in the war. She was a source of great comfort to them.
- With the help of the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind, another nonprofit, Helen visited 39 different countries as an advocate for blind and deaf individuals. This nonprofit turned into the current Helen Keller International.
- Helen and Polly also visited Japan to care for the victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- Helen was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.