Introduction

Imagine not being able to see or hear. How would you learn about the world around you? How would you learn to communicate? You would face many serious challenges, wouldn’t you?
These are the challenges Helen Keller faced more than 100 years ago. When she was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama, Helen could see and hear. When she was 19 months old, she became ill and had a very high fever. She *survived* her illness, but the fever left her blind and deaf.

With time and teaching, Helen Keller would *overcome* her *disabilities* and become an *inspiration* to many people.

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**Helen’s Early Years**

At the time when Helen was a small girl, people didn’t know much about disabilities. Not many teachers had tried to educate people who were both deaf and blind. Only a few children like Helen around the world had learned to communicate.

Helen and her parents tried to work with her disabilities. Helen did not have rules to follow. At times she seemed out of control. Her parents had little hope that Helen would lead the kind of life they had imagined she would.
Helen Gets a Teacher

Helen’s parents grew more and more frustrated. A friend of Helen’s parents, Alexander Graham Bell, the man who invented the telephone, had an idea. When Helen was about 7 years old, he suggested they hire a young woman to teach Helen. The young woman’s name was Anne Sullivan. Helen’s parents agreed to give it a try. From that day on, Helen’s life changed.

At first, Helen did not like Anne. Anne made Helen do things she didn’t want to do. Anne made Helen eat from a plate, pick up after herself, and dress herself. Helen fought her, but Anne kept trying.
Anne knew that Helen could not see and hear. But she knew that Helen had other senses. She could touch, smell, and taste.

Anne began to teach Helen to use these senses to communicate and to learn about the world around her. Anne knew that Helen was very smart. She thought it would only take some time before Helen learned how to communicate.

Helen’s sense of touch became her most important sense.

Teaching Years Pay Off

Anne thought about how she could teach Helen to communicate. She used Helen’s sense of touch to teach her.

Anne taught Helen sign language. In sign language, people use their fingers to make words and letters. Anne began teaching Helen to spell words with her fingers. Anne would spell words into the palm of Helen’s hand so that she could feel the words being spelled, since she couldn’t see them.
For a long time, Helen didn’t understand the finger game Anne played with her. But Anne did not give up.

One day at the water pump, which is sort of like a water fountain, Anne pumped water over one of Helen’s hands. She used her fingers to spell W-A-T-E-R on Helen’s other hand. Suddenly Helen became very still.

Helen got it! She understood! She finally realized what Anne was doing. She realized that Anne was communicating with her. Helen then used her fingers to spell W-A-T-E-R into the palm of Anne’s hand.

Next, Helen pointed to Anne and then to her own hand. Anne spelled out T-E-A-C-H-E-R. From that day forward, Helen called Anne teacher. Then Helen had Anne spell out the names of other things around her.
Helen learned to spell words as quickly as Anne could teach them to her! Next, Anne taught Helen to use her sense of touch to read. She taught Helen to read books printed in Braille. Braille uses raised dots instead of ink to make letters and words. Helen learned to *feel* words.

Helen also learned to understand what people were saying by placing her fingers on their lips. As people said different words, Helen could feel their lips change shape.

Once Helen learned to communicate, a new world opened up to her. She went to college, and Anne went with her. Anne signed into Helen’s hand what teachers said during classes. She also made Braille notes for Helen to read. Helen graduated with Anne’s help.
Helen Keller spent most of her life traveling with Anne Sullivan. She gave many speeches and wrote books about her life. She proved to the world that blind and deaf people deserved respect. Helen overcame her disabilities and became an inspiration to people everywhere.

Glossary

**Braille** *(n.)* a system of printing using raised dots to represent letters (p. 13)

**communicate** *(v.)* to share thoughts or ideas (p. 4)

**disabilities** *(n.)* conditions that limit a person’s ability to do something (p. 5)

**frustrated** *(adj.)* annoyed or distressed about being unable to complete a task (p. 7)

**inspiration** *(n.)* a good influence (p. 5)

**overcome** *(v.)* to win a victory over some challenge or obstacle (p. 5)

**senses** *(n.)* functions of the body, such as sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing (p. 9)

**sign language** *(n.)* a communication system of hand, face, and body movements (p. 10)

**survived** *(v.)* remained alive (p. 5)

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Helen Keller died on June 1, 1968, at age 87.
Quick Check

Name _____________________________ Date ____________

Instructions: Read each question carefully and choose the best answer.

1. If it weren’t for __________, Helen probably wouldn’t have met Anne Sullivan.
   A) Grandfather
   B) Thomas Edison
   C) Anne Sullivan’s mother
   D) Alexander Graham Bell

2. What was the first word Helen understood using sign language?
   A) mother
   B) dinner
   C) water
   D) pencil

3. Which statement is true?
   A) Helen was born blind and deaf.
   B) Helen hit her head and became blind and deaf.
   C) Helen could see and hear when she was a baby.
   D) All of the above

4. How did Helen use sign language differently from most people who sign?
   A) She looked at the signs.
   B) She listened to the signs.
   C) She felt the signs with her hands.
   D) She spoke the words after she saw the signs.

5. Read this sentence: Helen learned to communicate. What does the word communicate mean?
   A) to teach others
   B) to win a long race
   C) to overcome an illness
   D) to make thoughts known

6. From the information in this book, you can tell that Anne Sullivan __________.
   A) didn’t give up easily
   B) wanted to move away
   C) didn’t think Helen could learn
   D) felt she was wasting her time
7. Helen was able to ________ with Anne Sullivan’s help.
   A) go to college
   B) give many speeches
   C) travel to many places
   D) all of the above

8. What does survive mean?
   A) to learn easily
   B) to meet new people
   C) to continue to stay alive
   D) to become famous for something

9. Helen’s sense of ________ was most important to her for understanding others.
   A) touch
   B) sight
   C) smell
   D) taste

10. The Braille system helps people to ________.
    A) read
    B) find teachers
    C) dress
    D) cook

11. **Extended Response**: explain how Helen Keller is an inspiration to others.