# Excel Tips for Your Child Count Files

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February 2025

Hi, my name is Carlie Rhoads. I’m NCDB’s Data and Evaluation Manager. Each year, I oversee managing, cleaning, aggregating, and reporting the national child count data. Every state deafblind project submits their child count Excel files to NCDB annually. It's my job to make sure they are as accurate as possible and merge them into one complete file. Then, I use statistical software to summarize the data and create tables for the annual report.

It’s vitally important that the data we collect and share is accurate, and that process really begins with those of you at state deafblind projects who are responsible for submitting the data files. Today I’d like to share 10 tips to help keep your Excel files accurate and consistent, and to eliminate some of the most common errors we see.

We’re going to take a look at a typical Excel file as I talk. I will now share my screen.

Tip number 1 is to make sure the NAMES of your Excel file columns are correct. And tip number 2 is to make sure the ORDER of the columns is correct. Each column needs to be in the order shown on the sample spreadsheet on the Child Count Management page, and also shown here on the screen. These two tips allow the files to be merged correctly.

Tip number 3: Almost every column of data on the spreadsheet is required. A few are optional, but even if your project chooses not to report those categories, you must still have the column named and in the correct order. You can leave the cells of those optional columns blank, but you must include the column. This is so there is consistency among the child count files submitted by all state projects. If they are not consistent, the files cannot be merged. The optional columns are shown highlighted in yellow on the sample page on the screen and are idcode or identification code, cnotes or child data notes. These are data notes that are only required if you have a note for the child, DOB (date of birth). This is not to say that you do not have to include the child’s date of birth. You do have to put in a specific number for month, day, and year. But you do not also have to report a total date in the date of birth column if you do not want to. And the last column that is not required and is optional, is primary language in home or primlang. All other columns are required and should not be blank.

Tip number 4: Be absolutely sure there are no spaces after each number entered in the Excel file cells. When there are spaces, Excel does not recognize entries as numbers.

Which brings us to tip number 5. Be mindful of the number format you are using in each column. For most entries, this will be a date or a number with the exception of data notes columns. If you don’t use the correct format, Excel may interpret the numbers you enter incorrectly. For example, it may interpret a number with decimal points as a percentage, when that’s not what you intended. I am going to show you how to correct this error. On the screen, we have column F, where the numbers are being presented as decimal points, which we don’t want. So to ensure you have the correct format selected for each column, first highlight the desired column, right click on your mouse, select Format Cells, and choose a category that is appropriate for your numbers. As I mentioned, in most cases this will be a number, and to get rid of the decimal points, you would just make the decimal places zero or you may select a date.

Tip number 6 is super important: Make sure all identifying information is removed before submitting your file. This includes things like the names and locations of children and families. When you submit a file in the submission portal, you are certifying that you have done your due diligence and the file contains no identifying information. Confidentiality is extremely critical, so I cannot emphasize this enough.

Tip number 7: Make sure to save your Excel file often so you don’t lose your work. And it’s a good idea to share its location with others at your project. If only one person has access to the file and that person leaves, it can be extremely difficult to recreate the data. Obtaining the most recent data file submitted to NCDB will not be helpful because the files we receive do not identify children.

Tip number 8: Clearly and consistently label your child count file. For example, “Ohio Child Count Data 2025.” This helps with overall efficiency and file tracking.

Tip number 9: Check for duplicate entries before you submit. Technology is great when it works, but sometimes you can miss an error, especially when entering a long list of data. I would suggest checking for duplicate entries using the ID code, which is column C, or child number column, which is column D. I suggest those columns as those should be unique for each child. To check for duplicate entries, first select the cells you want to check for duplicates. We are going to be using Column D for this example, which is child number. After you have selected the cells that you want to check for duplicates, follow this menu path. First make sure Home is selected on your menu tab, then go to Conditional Formatting, highlight Cells Rules, and Duplicate Values. This will bring up how you can mark errors in the column. So for any duplicate values in this column it will show duplicates Light Red Fill with Dark Red text. Hit okay, and then as you can see in column D, IJKL and IJKL are both marked red as a possible duplicate. Keep in mind that sometimes based on your child numbering system, some children may have the same ID or child number code. We like to try to avoid that as much as possible, and every child should have a unique ID code or child number, but make sure it truly is a duplicate before you delete it. I highly recommend that you keep an original copy file of your data before deleting anything, in case errors occur.

Tip number 10: We are going to look at Column P for tip number 10. If you see the pop-up error message “Number Stored as Text” when you click on numbers in a column, it means that the numbers are being read as text, rather than numbers. Here’s an example: As you can see in column P of this Excel file, each of the numbers has a green triangle in the upper left corner of the cell. When you select the cell, a triangle with an exclamation mark pops up, which is an error warning. If you click on the green triangle, it will let you know that the number has been stored as a text. Here is the error message, “numbers stored as text.” You can fix one number at a time, but this is not really efficient if you have an entire column or multiple columns with the error. It’s much easier to fix the errors in one column at a time. First, highlight the entire column. You can do this by clicking on the letter at the top of a column. Next, select Data from the menu at the top of the file. In the submenu that appears, click on “Text to Columns.” This opens a dialog box. Make sure the Delimited option is selected, which is the first option on the first page of the menu, and click Next. On the next screen, make sure Tab is selected and click Next. Then make sure General is selected and hit finish. This will correct all of the Numbers Stored as Text error for that column. As you can see in column P, the green triangle is now gone. It is not possible to fix multiple columns at one time, so you will have to do one column at a time.

Hopefully these tips are helpful as you prepare your project’s child count file. If you have questions or need assistance, I am always very happy to provide support. You can reach me via email at crhoads@helenkeller.org. I also have weekly office hours on Google Meet on Thursdays at 2 p.m. Eastern. The Google Meet link is located on the Child Count Management webpage.

Thank you for your patience and careful attention. Together, we can continue working towards an accurate and consistent national child count.

*The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H326T230030, Project Officer, Rebecca Sheffield. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.*