



DeafHearie

Services for Deaf & Hard of Hearing People



Communication and Your Child

A Factsheet for Parents of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children



Parents Corner



Communication and Your Child

This Factsheet outlines the importance of communication for a Deaf or Hard of Hearing child's development and provides ideas and guidance for supporting the development of your child's communication skills through everyday activities such as play, mealtimes and daily routines. The Factsheet also provides tips for ensuring the home environment is designed to help your child develop good communication skills.

Communication and Your Child's Development

Acquiring and developing good communication skills is crucial for all children and their families. Children will learn their skills from you and other friends and family. The acquisition of good communication skills will help your child in all areas of their development including intellectual, emotional, personal and social skills. If your child uses a hearing aid or cochlear implant, it is extremely important that you are persistent with your child regarding wearing their hearing aid or cochlear implant. Equally, if your child uses sign language, it is important that as many people as possible in your child's social circle are encouraged to learn to communicate in sign language.



Communication with your child with a hearing loss will start as it would with any other child, they will respond to your facial expressions, voice, eye contact, body movement etc. It is essential that you continue to play games, sing and talk to your child, but be aware that the child will need to see your face; they will struggle if you are talking while looking the other way or have your back to them. You will become aware of your child trying to communicate with you, you should respond promptly and be encouraging. As well as verbal praise, it may be beneficial to use simple gestures or signs that are age-appropriate, such as 'thumbs up' or clapping.

Children with a hearing loss can learn to communicate through spoken language or sign language, or a combination of both, also known as 'total communication'. The decision as to how your child learns to communicate is primarily down to the parents with guidance from professionals actively involved with your child's hearing loss. It is important to be aware that there is a history of debates regarding the best

communication approach to use with a child with a hearing loss and some professionals may favour one method of communication over the other and may strongly recommend that you follow their guidance.

In order for you to make an informed decision, it is imperative that you ask all the questions you need to, of all the professionals involved, and if possible other parents of children with a hearing loss. The method of communication may change throughout your child's life, so don't feel that you can't change your mind once you have made a decision, as you will be guided by what works for your child and for you as a family. See our booklet on Communication Options and Opportunities for more information on this topic.

Communication and the Environment

If your child uses a hearing aid/cochlear implant, they will benefit most from it when they are in a good listening environment. An example of a good listening environment may be a room with soft furnishings, carpet and curtains, all of which absorb sound. It is important to keep background noise to a minimum when having a conversation with your child. For example, reduce the volume of the television or radio when communicating with your child. Avoid trying to have a conversation beside the washing machine in full flight: move to a quieter place first!

Good lighting is essential for a good communication environment. Lighting is important for sign communication and lipreading, and almost all children with hearing loss use lipreading at some level to assist them in communicating.

The design and layout of the environment can have a significant impact on communication with your child. Have a good look around your home and pinpoint the busiest parts and the quietest parts. It can be very difficult for a child with a hearing loss to concentrate on listening to different sounds if the environment is very noisy. For a child wearing their hearing aid or cochlear implant, sounds can echo or be distorted and it can be quite distressing or frightening if there are sudden loud noises. Sounds also 'bounce' on hard surfaces causing reverberation, and this can make it harder for your child to listen to individual voices, for example in a room with wooden floors or in an open plan area.

Remember listening and lip-reading is very tiring so don't overload your child with too many oral instructions. Also, your voice may not be the only sound being heard, as there may be additional sounds being amplified through the hearing aid/cochlear implant. Your child may find it hard to understand speech when they are wearing their hearing aid/cochlear implant in group situations, for example a children's birthday party or a noisy restaurant. This is because most hearing aids amplify all sounds, not just speech sounds.

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A good lip-reading environment would be:

- ✓ facing your child, one to two metres between you and your child
- ✓ good lighting so that your child can see your lips clearly and to ensure that your face is not in a shadow
- ✓ letting your child know you are starting to speak by tapping them gently on the shoulder
- ✓ moving down to your child's eye level
- ✓ providing plenty of extra clues - both visual and auditory
- ✓ turning down the TV/radio or moving away from a noisy washing machine

Lip-reading would be difficult if you:

- ✗ look away whilst talking
- ✗ mumble
- ✗ have an overgrown moustache or beard
- ✗ stand in front of distracting wallpaper
- ✗ have too many people moving behind the speaker
- ✗ talk with chewing gum or other food in your mouth
- ✗ put your hands over your mouth whilst talking
- ✗ use exaggerated mouth patterns as these can distort the speaking rhythm



Managing conversations with your child

When you change the subject in your conversation, always make sure that you let your child know this, otherwise they may still be thinking about the first topic that you were talking about. As a guide it is useful to introduce the topic first before expanding on it. "Swimming, shall we go swimming today, what will we need to take with us for swimming?" It helps if your child has an idea of what you will be talking about before trying to lip-read the extra information. If necessary use a picture card so that they can make a connection with the words.

Listening conditions can be improved by:

- fitting blinds or curtains.
- carpeting floors.
- closing the window or door when there is a noise outside.
- adding soft furnishings - rugs, cushions, tablecloths.

Positioning in a room is important:

- Remember a child cannot see your face well if you are standing in front of the light or a window.
- When in a group it may be better to place your child with their back to the window so that they can see you and the other people and be more aware of what is happening in the room.
- Pictures, photographs and posters can be distracting for a child with a hearing loss. Hang them a bit higher above a child's eye level so that they can concentrate on looking at your face rather than being distracted by them.
- It may not be possible to alter everything, however being aware of the environment can help to make it more 'deaf' friendly.



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Communication and Play

Play is an important activity for all children: it is a time for fun, learning and developing language and communication skills. Developmental psychologists have found that children use play in very constructive and clever ways to develop a multitude of skills important for their future life. A baby holding a toy is learning new motor skills while manipulating the toy, and when gurgling, babbling or pointing, is engaging in important pre-lingual activities that are vital for language development a year or two later in life. Young children continue to use play as a vital tool in many aspects of their development: motor, cognitive, social and emotional development.

Although children use play to learn and explore their environment, parents have a very important role in supporting their children's development during play, especially in the earlier years. Imagine the following situation, where a young hearing child is playing with a toy car. As he is playing, his mother is saying "Oh you are driving the car... It is a beautiful RED car. OOOOH!" Then the child holds the car up and looks to his mother. She smiles and says "Aren't you a CLEVER boy!"

In these short few seconds, the mother is supporting her child's development in a multitude of ways, including:

- Concentration: naming the boy's activity helps him to concentrate for longer, an important skill for learning.
- Language development: using age appropriate words, e.g. 'red' and 'clever', helps the child's vocabulary to grow.
- Self esteem: using a positive tone and phrases like 'clever boy' boosts confidence and encourages the child to play and learn more about the world.
- Emotional development: when the child holds up the car and looks to his mother, by smiling and saying he is a clever boy she is encouraging him to share his experiences with her at an emotional level, and is effectively building their relationship.

Children with hearing loss have the same need to play and learn, but parents will need to adapt their behaviour to provide their child with the same support. If we imagine the same situation, where a young child with a hearing loss is playing with a toy car, he is less likely to hear or understand what his mother is saying while he is playing. If the child uses sign language, there is little point in signing to him while he is not looking at his mother. So, what should a parent do to provide the same support to their child with a hearing loss? Here are some guidelines to follow:

- o Get lower and closer! Move closer to your child, and get lower so it is easier for them to make eye contact and communicate with you.
- o But not too close! Don't cramp their play or interrupt...as this disturbs the child's concentration. so you cramp their play.
- o Wait and be ready! Let your child play, and be ready to respond. When your child looks to you, use speech or signs to name and affirm their play activities. Remember to use facial expression and gestures, such as pointing and 'thumbs up', to convey your interest and emotional connection with their play.
- o Keep it short! When your child is playing, they may not be too interested in what you say! So the key point is to follow your child and allow them to return to their play activity. Don't feel you must force your child to listen to you, this is their playtime! Continue to watch the play activity...and wait and be ready for the next time your child looks to you!

Communication and Mealtimes

Mealtimes can provide some of the best opportunities for your child to develop communication skills. However, as will be evident from the section on providing a good communication environment, TV dinners are not the answer. The traditional family meal where everyone sits around the table together provides one of the best situations for any child to develop their communication skills. Unfortunately, modern life has resulted in many families failing to sit down together at mealtimes for a multitude of reasons.

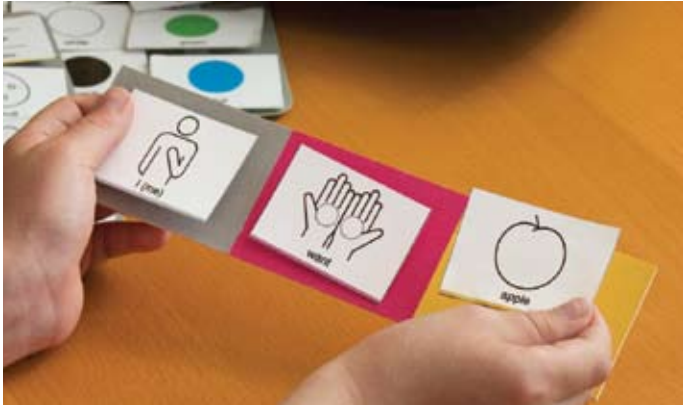
For your Deaf or Hard of Hearing child, family mealtimes can be extremely beneficial in helping your child to develop good communication skills. Assuming you have created a good communication environment for your meal by turning off the TV and washing machine, and the room has soft furnishings and good lighting, you will have made a good start!

Sitting around a table to eat a meal is an ideal situation for any young child to develop their communication skills:

- eating is a social experience for humans: it encourages us to communicate and share experiences.
- sitting around a table is a highly structured situation in which we are all facing each other, again encouraging all kinds of verbal and non-verbal communication.



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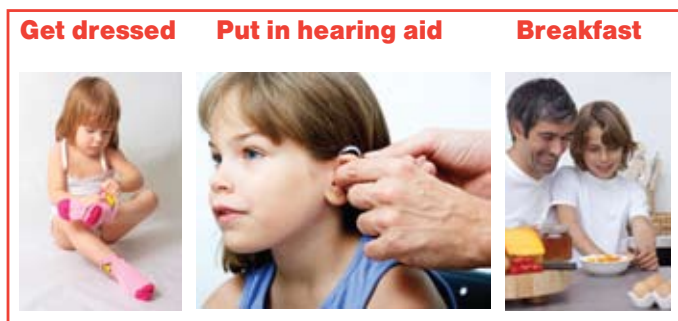


Picture Cards: helping to develop communication

Young children or older children who have limited communication skills can be frustrated and you may find that your child may have tantrums or show other signs of frustration. To keep these incidents to a minimum, it may be useful to use 'Picture Cards'. They will also motivate your child to communicate in your chosen communication method.

The 'picture card' will show a picture of an item, person, venue or task that the child can recognise as something they want, i.e. a drink of milk, juice, or other food items, toys they play with etc. You and your child should verbalise and/or sign the word together with the picture cards. The cards can also be used for when you want to tell your child that it is time for a bath, for school, to get in the car or go swimming.

You can photograph the items, people, venue or your child doing the task, or you can use pictures from magazines or catalogues and glue them onto cards or put them in a book format. This system must be used in conjunction with your method of communication and not as a substitute for speech/sign. You should encourage your child to verbalise and/or sign the word in conjunction with showing you the picture. These cards can also be used to explain a sequence of events and this can sometimes alleviate frustrations. For example - the morning routine:



And finally...

Communication is fundamental to how we develop as individuals and live our lives as part of a wider community. Communication is often the issue that gives rise to the most confusion and distress for parents. This is because there are choices and options in relation to the communication method(s) that your child may use. The reality is that there is no one communication method which works best for all children and their families. Here are a few guidelines that may be useful to you when deciding the best way for you and your child to communicate.

- Find out as much information as you can. There are a number of different ways in which Deaf and Hard of Hearing children may communicate, and there are a number of different devices available to support listening and communication. Reading our booklet on Communication Choices and Options may be helpful.
- Talk to the professionals available to you and get more information and advice. Be aware that different professionals may have different opinions about what is best for your child, and sometimes these opinions may be held passionately.
- Talk to other people who may be able to give you important insights, such as other parents of Deaf or Hard of Hearing children, or adults who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.
- Remember that communication is not just about language: it is about meaningful contact between two or more people. It includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, and is not just defined by the method of communication.
- As the parent, you are the person who has the right and responsibility to decide what is best for your child. Listen to what the professionals and others have to say, but don't feel compelled to follow any one person's advice, however persuasive or passionate they may be. If you have all the right information available to you, you will be able to make an informed decision in the best interest of your child and family.
- Finally, how we communicate is both flexible and adaptable. If you find that a particular approach is not working for you or your child, you may change and adapt at any time.

A useful thought for parents and the professionals working with them:

'The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said'.

(Peter Drucker)

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