HANDS& VOICES

"What Parents Need to Know"

Spotlight on:

SOCIALIZATION and the Child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Most deaf and hard-of-hearing children are born into hearing families and hearing communities. Since deafness and hearing loss affect a child's ability to communicate, and communication is necessary for socialization, you may worry that your child will have difficulties developing relationships with family members, making friends, and participating in social activities. These are legitimate concerns, since your child is likely to be the only one in the neighborhood and their school who is deaf/hard-of-hearing. (d/hh) However, parents do not have to be weighed down by these concerns. Educating yourself will be the first step to ease the fear, and will ultimately help you support the development of your child's self-esteem and social confidence.

What impact will this have on my child's social development?

- *Will my child have friends?*
- *Will he/she be teased?*
- *Will he/she play sports?*
- *How will I ever leave my child in daycare?*
- *Will my child…..?*

These are some of the many questions that may run through parents' minds when their child is first identified with a hearing loss. For many parents, hearing loss until now was associated with "older" people, not babies. If parents have no knowledge of deafness/hearing loss, the news may be distressing and will undoubtedly be life-changing.

Getting started: Where can I find the information I need?

Fortunately, parents can obtain helpful information from a wide variety of sources such as:

- Internet
- Health professionals (audiologist, pediatrician, etc.)
- Early intervention specialists (speech therapists, ASL instructors, early childhood educators, etc.)
- Primary and secondary educators of deaf and hard-of-hearing students
- Organizations that focus on deafness and/or hearing loss (Hands & Voices, State Association of the Deaf, AG Bell, State School for the Deaf, Self Help for Hard of Hearing (SHHH), Commission for the Deaf/HH etc.)
- List-serves that provide periodic information via e-mail
- Books and journals

Taking the next step: Finding people who have "walked the walk."

Sources of information you refer to initially for more technical purposes may also point you in the direction of resources such as other families who have children with hearing loss, deaf/hard-of-hearing role models, and programs and services specific to the needs of their family. When your family is ready, meeting other families with children who are deaf/hard of hearing and meeting deaf/hard of hearing adults can relieve some of your anxieties and can help you feel less alone in the experience. Paul Ogden writes,

"When you do feel ready, here are some people to seek out:

- Other parents of deaf or hard of hearing children-parents who will have experiences to recount and resources to tell you about, as well as warnings of what or whom to avoid.
- Deaf adults-people who can help you understand the realities of deafness and the way it shapes the perspectives of deaf people. "Meeting deaf adults will acquaint you with the world and culture of deaf people, and it will bring role models into your child's world-a factor whose importance, right from the start, cannot be overstated". (Ogden, P. 1996, The Silent Garden: Raising Your Deaf Child)

Facilitating positive social experiences: The early years.

Early on, parents will play a crucial role in helping their child feel comfortable in social situations. Keep in mind though; a child may have a natural tendency to be outgoing or a natural tendency to be shy. In other words, being shy may not be a "deaf/hard of hearing" characteristic; the child may just be shy.

A first step in encouraging independence in social situations is leaving your child with a trusted care-giver. If a neighbor, friend, grandparent volunteer to watch your child, accept the offer. Children are very good at letting people know their wants and needs. if you have chosen to sign with your child, and you are concerned that the caregiver doesn't know any sign language, leave a simple sign language book. A parent can even make their own book with signs their child uses. If there are certain techniques your family uses to get your child's attention, let the caregiver know. If you are comfortable leaving your child, your child will be comfortable.

Although babies and young children socially interact most frequently with family members, children in daycare settings and playgroups will also have significant social relationships with other adults and children. Parents faced with finding a child care or preschool setting for their deaf or hard-of-hearing child may wonder if communication difficulties will affect the quality of care and the relationships their child will develop with their teachers and peers. Caregivers do not necessarily need to have previous experience with a deaf or hard-of hearing child in order to provide a nurturing and positive environment, but it is important to find a child care setting that is open to and enthusiastic about welcoming your child with hearing loss. When deciding on a child care setting, there are some important questions to consider that will have a direct impact on your child's social interactions. These are:

- If my child uses amplification (hearing aids, cochlear implant, fm-system), is the caregiver comfortable with and willing to learn about the technology? Will they be committed to helping ensure that my child is using the amplification consistently according to my directions?
- If my child uses sign language (either exclusively or in combination with other communication methods), is the caregiver willing to learn sign language and, if applicable, teach it to other children in the child care setting?
- What are the acoustics like in the setting? Are the floors carpeted? How many children are in one space at a time?
- Does the caregiver recognize the need to both accommodate my child's special needs as well as foster an environment where my child is included and accepted by the other children?

According to Solit and Bednarczyk (1999), there are three important objectives of an inclusive program (one that includes hearing peers):

1) to create a social environment that facilitates acceptance of children who are deaf and hard of hearing by children who can hear; 2) to support and encourage friendships between children with and without hearing losses; and 3) to provide opportunities for children using different languages and communication modes and from different cultures to learn from each other.

Other social situations that offer good exposure could be story-time at the library, music class at the local recreation center, the nursery at church or the gym.

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"What are those things in your ears?"

It's an inevitable question and it is one your young child will be asked frequently by curious peers. Children should feel comfortable discussing hearing loss with friends and peers. In the early years the parent will be the model. When other children or adults ask about your child's hearing aids, their hearing loss, why they use sign language etc, answer the questions. If a parent feels uncomfortable discussing hearing loss, the child will feel like it is a bad thing. If your child learns to answer the questions, it will help develop their own sense of self.

2-year-old Sally and her mother Liz were in the grocery store putting apples in a bag, when a little boy passing by with his father asked Liz, "What are those things in her ears?" The boy's father looked embarrassed and whispered "sorry" to Liz. Liz smiled at the boy and replied, "Those are Sally's hearing aids." "Oh, said the boy, what do they do?" Liz replied, "Well, it is a little bit like the glasses I'm wearing glasses to help me see more clearly. Sally's hearing aids help her to hear better."

Running interference: Knowing when to step in, and when to step back.

As your child grows older, initiate play dates with hearing and deaf/hard of hearing children. Your deaf/hard of hearing child will enjoy play dates just as your hearing children will. Allow the children to interact on their own; the temptation may be to make the interaction better, but often parents ruin the fun. Use this time to observe. If you see room for improvement in social skills, role play with your child later during playtime. Anticipate new situations and play it out beforehand.

Sometimes it is necessary to involve yourself in a situation, but think before you do. Will this help right now or can it wait?

Sammy, a seven year old boy with a severe-profound hearing loss was playing in the sprinkler with his good friend seven year old Jessie who is hearing. Jessie is learning sign language and always makes sure Sammy is watching her before she talks/signs. Because they were playing in the water, Sammy was not wearing his hearing aids. He wasn't looking at Jessie, and she kept calling/signing his name waiting for him to turn around.

Sammy's mom was watching. Realizing Jessie was becoming frustrated, Sammy's mom explained that without his hearing aids Sammy can not hear anything so Jessie would need to tap him –calling his name would not work. She also explained to Sammy that he would need to be aware that he didn't have his hearing aids on. They played in the water the rest of the summer; Jessie knew how to get Sammy's attention and Sammy knew to be aware of what was happening around him..

Mom chose to intervene because Jessie always made such an effort to communicate effectively with Sammy. Had she waited until later Jessie would have been frustrated and the learning opportunity would have been gone.

5-year-old Daniel arrived with his mother excited to start kindergarten. He didn't know anyone attending the school, but he told his mother he wasn't afraid. Mom was worrying about Daniel making friends in his mainstream classroom because of his first language was sign language and his speech was a bit difficult to understand. As Daniel entered the classroom, a boy came up to him and said "Hi, I'm Alex. What's your name?" There was a pause, and Alex and Daniel just looked at each other. Daniel's mom wanted to jump in and facilitate the interaction, but just as she was about to, Daniel said and signed, "Hi! I'm Daniel. Do you want to go over and play with the dinosaurs?" Alex nodded and they headed over to play.

Sometimes it's hard to wait and see what will happen. As loving parents, we don't want to see our child get left out or miss an opportunity to make a friend. It's very tempting to jump in and "smooth out" any communication challenges that pop up in front of us. Perhaps it's not so surprising, but left to their own devices, children will usually find a way to communicate with each other. It is better in the long run if a child's interactions with peers are his or her own rather than via a parent.

Maintaining and strengthening social ties

Don't let summer be a down time for your child. Initiate a summer-play group with your child's friends/peers from school. If possible set up group swim lessons, soccer lessons, gymnastics classes, music classes, etc. for your child and deaf/hard of hearing peers. If children continue to see each other during the three month summer break, when school starts in the fall, they will not have to restart the bonding process again. This time also gives parents a chance to visit and network. If you have set up group lessons with an interpreter, spread the word to other families with deaf/hard of hearing children. This will be a way to broaden your families' network of deaf/hard of hearing individuals.

A group of parents from a deaf/hard of hearing preschool set-up a summer playgroup schedule before school let out. The families rotated houses. Whoever hosted was responsible for snack and an activity. The other parents stayed, but they were able to visit. The host was in charge of the kids, and unless he/she needed help the other parents were off duty. The children looked forward to playgroup as did the parents. The children strengthened their friendships, were exposed to different adults, and the parents had a great opportunity to strengthens their friendships. When school started in the fall, the teacher commented there was a noticeable difference in the children. The children didn't need any adjustment period; they were ready to start back again as if there had been no break. The parents continued to meet weekly for coffee.

Getting technical: Writing social objectives into the IEP

Once your child enters school the social piece will need to be addressed. The ability to communicate effectively with other peers whether the peers are hearing, deaf or hard of hearing will need to be addressed in your child's IEP, as will effective communication with adults your child will meet at school. The school placement you have chosen will influence the direction of the IEP. Children in a center based program or a school for the deaf will have more opportunity to interact with peers and adults using the same mode of communication. This is not to say this issue does not need to be addressed. Regardless of their

preferred communication mode, deaf or hard-of-hearing children attending a mainstream program may not have the opportunities to interact with other deaf/hard-of-hearing peers or adults. Some deaf/hard-of-hearing adults, who in general felt positive about their experience in mainstreamed education, have said that they would have benefited from more opportunities to interact with other deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals. Within the IEP different goals can be addressed as to how to facilitate interactions. Some examples are:

- Becoming an on-line(e-pen) pal with another student who's deaf or hard of hearing.
- Networking mainstreamed students to center-based or state deaf residence schools for opportunities to gather socially.
- Connecting to a state role model program, if available.
- Many teachers believe that discussing information with friends and other peers enhance learning. Brenda Schick, a researcher and professor from the University of Colorado explains, "It seems reasonable that a child's IEP should reflect the goals that schools have for all children regarding social cognition and learning the language of discussion and debate."

Children learn better when they are able to work with friends and interact with friends in the classroom. Group projects will be better completed when children work with real friends rather than with non-friend peers. Schick says, "With peers, children can argue, negotiate, and figure it all out. Some researchers have speculated that these life skills come more from peer interactions than through interactions with adults. And those language skills are absolutely essential."

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Facilitating social competence: Challenges and ideas

Hearing children pick up a lot of information indirectly. This is called passive or inferential learning. Because deaf/hh children do not overhear conversations occurring around them, they will miss information that other children just seem to know. This can cause a feeling of isolation at school. In the cafeteria or on the playground children will discuss what they will do when they're finished with lunch, the most popular new video game, the new rules for kick ball for Tuesday, etc. Kids move fast and change topics quickly. How can a deaf/hh child keep up.? Do they have a good friend or two who keeps them caught up?

Tommy, a hard of hearing child, attending a mainstreamed program at his neighborhood school was very happy entering in to first grade. He had attended kindergarten at the same school, and children he had been friends with were placed in his class. After a couple weeks of school, he told his mom, his friends were still his friends but not after lunch or at recess. She found this puzzling so she observed off and on for a week. She realized her son was missing the other children's plans. When they decided to change an activity, her son missed the change or the new rule. The kids just expected you to follow along if you wanted to play. The mother addressed this with the teacher and set-up a plan. They pulled three of his friends and asked if they would make sure Tommy knew when the activity was changing and when the rules were changing. They also addressed with Tommy how things are on a playground—-fast. The kids tried hard, and there were ups and downs, but as they progressed into higher grades the kids continued to relay information to Tommy and eventually Tommy was helping to change the rules. Mom asked every year that certain kids move on to the next class with her son. He had developed some meaningful friendships and she knew the importance of this.

As your child grows and desires more independence, the best way to help them become comfortable and happy in social situations is to do things that are mostly behind the scenes, but which facilitate communication and

increase your child's ability to obtain information. There are many activities where relatively simple accommodations could make all the difference in terms of allowing your child to participate more fully in the experience. Some examples are:

Find out which movie theaters in your community offer closed captioning or open captioning. If your child would like to see a movie with friends that is not being offered there, help your child request the film.

Encourage family and friends to turn on the closed captioning on their television sets when you go over to visit.

If your child has an fm-system, be sure that it is used on field trips – if someone is leading the class on a tour, ask the tour guide to wear it.

If your child uses sign language, arrange for an interpreter for activities such as theater performances, swim and other types of lessons, and story-telling or poetry readings. This is sometimes easier if a group of parents approaches the event or community center and makes the request. And if you do have an interpreter coming for an activity, be sure and spread the word so other families can participate.

Similarly, if your child uses sign language and would like an interpreter, arrange for one to be at important family gatherings, such as weddings, funerals, and family reunions. Although this may be an additional expense, it could help your child feel more a part of the experience and more connected to the family.

Technology is available that can facilitate communication and which is often very popular among young people who are deaf and hard-of-hearing. Consider the options, and when appropriate, provide your child with some of these helpful tools (e-mail, pagers/text-messaging, TTY).

In conclusion…

Deafness/hearing loss affects communication, and communication is crucial for developing social relationships. However, you can be sure that your deaf or hard-of-hearing child will find ways to express themselves and reach out to others and friendships will form. Perhaps these friendships may be different in some ways from those you had as a child, or from those that your hearing children have, but if your child is happy, confident, and has enriching relationships, that is what is important.

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The "What Parents Need to Know" Series

The "What Parents Need to Know" Series includes full articles and two-page synopsis of the following topics:

- **Socialization and the Child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing**
- **Self-Advocacy for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students**
- **School Placement Considerations for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Student**
- **From High School to Post-Secondary Education: The Transition Process**

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