

Glue Ear 3: The impact of Glue Ear and how we can help

What is the impact of having Glue ear?

Having a hearing loss, even if it is slight or in one ear only, can have a major impact on some children. When children are very young they are developing a very keen understanding of the different speech sounds in their language. Many of these sounds have only very small differences between them; e.g. 's' and 'sh'. If a child is not hearing the difference, he may not be able to make these sounds.

Some children's pronunciation may be immature, or in severe cases children may be very difficult to understand. Children's language may also seem very immature, as they are not hearing what is being said to them. They may understand lots of vocabulary, but not hear and use the small words of grammar, making their language seem very 'babyish'.

Not being able to hear, and especially if hearing does not remain constant, can be very frustrating. Children's responses vary, but can include being very 'clingy' and tearful, lacking in confidence, or sometimes being openly aggressive.

When children start school, they may have difficulty with reading and spelling, even though their hearing has improved and there are no remaining hearing difficulties. Some children may be diagnosed as having dyslexia or 'dyslexic signs'. It is possible that what has happened is that the children have missed out on important stages of learning about speech sounds (*phonological awareness*) when they were very young. This phonological awareness develops naturally, as children become aware of how to make different speech sounds, and to recognise the difference between them. We also learn this through learning rhyming songs, nursery rhymes and sharing rhyming storybooks.

If a child has glue ear early in life, he may miss out on this important phonological awareness. Without phonological awareness it is very difficult to learn to read or spell, and especially in English, which is the hardest language to read and spell. When we learn to read we use our knowledge of speech sounds, and how they relate to written letters, to help us 'sound out' words that we don't recognise, or need to spell. Gradually we come to learn these words off by heart, and become fast readers and spellers. If we meet a word we don't recognise, like a place name, we stop and 'sound it out', and put the sounds together to make a recognisable word.

Children who have had Glue Ear often get stuck at the stage where they learn words by sight only, and memorise words as whole units. They become 'visual readers', only using their eyes. Some children are able to build up a vast memory bank of whole words. However they can't 'sound out' letters using speech sounds. They can often go through the whole of primary school being judged to be 'a good reader with some poor spelling'. Late in primary school or in early secondary school, everything breaks down, as the children's memories can no longer cope with learning so many words.

How can we help children with Glue Ear?

The most important thing is to know that a child has Glue Ear. Give the parents as much support as you can, including helping them to find out what services are available. Keep parents regularly updated on how you think their child is hearing/not hearing. Referral to Speech and Language Therapy may be necessary, and SLTs can give valuable support and information to the family as well.

It will be important to involve the child in lots of fun activities that focus his listening skills, especially if we are to make sure that he builds up good phonological awareness. Listening activities from the early stages of 'Letters and Sounds' are ideal, as well as lots of involvement in rhyming activities, including learning rhymes and songs.

Games that develop language and understanding will also be vital. Surprisingly enough, speaking louder can make children complain of earache. Speaking clearly, avoiding covering your mouth with your hands (it's surprising how many of us do this!) and making sure that the child is looking at you and giving his full attention, are all helpful things that adults can do. Be sympathetic and aware that changes in behaviour may be due to fluctuating hearing loss, and that he may be emotionally fragile.

For more information contact the National Deaf Children's Society at www.ndcs.org.uk or phone NDCS freephone helpline on 0808 800 8880