

Good Communication Starts at Home

It is important to remember the primary and most valuable thing you can do for your deaf or hard of hearing baby at home is to communicate at every available opportunity, with the baby and with each other when the baby is there.

BABYHOOD:

Communication Support:

1. Meet some deaf and hard of hearing people

If you can't access any deaf families to show you how they encourage the development of communication in their babies, it is important for you to enrol with a reputable early intervention centre for deaf and hard of hearing children as soon as you know that the baby has a hearing loss. Skills and strategies will be modelled for you by the experienced deaf parents or by the professionals.

These will show you:

- how to catch your baby's eye gaze
- how to indicate visually (in the absence of language) what's going to happen
- how to provide all the "data" which begins your baby's process of learning the rules about the language being used. This is important in every language, including sign language.

2. "Home work"

It is important to carry out any exercises that the early intervention team suggest. These may be to do with:

- listening, if your baby has some hearing, a hearing aid or cochlear implant
- watching
- both listening and watching.
- speech activities to encourage babbling and voice use
- games to help your baby follow hand movements, and to make them.

It is not enough for such activities to be carried out at the centre, or once a week. Intense early input will make all the difference in your baby's language acquisition, and through that, his or her cognitive development.

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3. Understanding baby's communication

The centre will help you learn to see your baby's intentions, whether in sign or voice.

They will help you to:

- recognise your baby's attempts to imitate words, even though these attempts will be only approximate, and not in any way accurate.
- begin to understand what your baby is trying to say, so they will be encouraged by this success to try even harder to pronounce spoken or signed words and to communicate through language.

Being Responsive:

If your baby makes happy vocal sounds of any sort, make sure that you interact with them immediately. It has been shown that babies initiate "conversations" with the people around them by making experimental noises. People immediately respond to this by giving them attention and by making the same sort of noises back. In this way, the baby explores their voice, and learns to use it to attract attention. It is a positive feedback loop! If, however, the adults don't respond and give their baby their attention, and copy the noises and facial expressions, then the baby may gradually give up making the effort.

This means that:

- your baby's voice is not getting practice
- the turn taking skill of conversation isn't being established.

The same must be done when the baby tries out hand shapes and hand movements in early sign development. Quickly give your attention, and try to do the signs or movements back, happily.

Talk to your baby at every waking moment you are together. This includes sign language, if that is a language you use. Never think "Because they can't hear me, it's not worth while", or "Because they don't know any signs yet, it seem pointless".

The baby will learn so much from the experience:

- that people interact in this way all the time
- that it is pleasurable
- that information is transferred in this way.

It also helps your baby to learn to watch the face of the person they are with, and to seek the information being made available.

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Models of Communication:

Make sure that your baby has opportunity to observe other family members and other people talking together, in speech or sign. Over-hearing in this way is vital to the development of an understanding about the act of communicating, and to learning about the family and the world.

In summary, put simply, take every available opportunity to interact with your baby: hands, eyes, face and voice.

TODDLER AGE:

Building on the Foundation You Started in the Babyhood Stage:

It is important for everyone who interacts with your child to be aware of his or her communication development.

- Tell people who will look after the child how to communicate effectively with your child
- Show them how you do it.
- Provide lists of the new words that your child is beginning to understand or beginning to use.
- Make sure that your child spends time with other deaf or hard of hearing children, as well as hearing children.
- Join a playgroup so you as parents will have opportunity to swap stories and share ideas with other parents, while your child can explore relationships with others like him- or herself.

It can help if you put labels with the names of household objects on the objects themselves – a word and / or a symbol for a child learning spoken language, or a picture of the sign if the child is starting to sign.

Story Time:

It is really important to have a regular story time with your deaf or hard of hearing child.

- Let your child see that the members of their family enjoy and value reading.
- Develop the habit of taking pleasure in books together, starting with simple picture books.
- Keep the books within your child's current language and interest range, so they feel successful in their interaction with books.
- Use drama – act the story together - and draw pictures to make the stories come to life.

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- The time taken will be very brief at first, especially if you begin during infancy, but if it has always been pleasurable, it can gradually be extended to allow for more complex stories and can even involve an exploration of language.

Communicating to Manage Behaviour:

As with any child, a deaf or hard of hearing child needs to learn the rules of the household and be expected to follow them.

- Don't vary the rules for the "poor little deaf child" unless there are physical reasons for doing so – if, for example, he or she has other disabilities. This avoidance of making exception benefits both the deaf child and the other children in the family or other group.
- It is vital to show your pleasure when they start to show signs of understanding a particular rule and of wanting to please you by trying to follow it. As with language development, behaviour development is strongly influenced by knowing that parents are pleased with us.
- It is also important to continue to show your pleasure when your child becomes able to follow a rule completely.
- Be consistent. Always use the same language to convey that some actions are unacceptable. A simple but firm "No!" coupled with moving the child to a new location is one way to convey this. Give your child something different to do to distract them from returning.
- Don't vary the boundaries. If you don't want that behaviour, then always say "No!". If you let it happen just once, you have lost the battle. The child will know that your "No!" doesn't always mean "No!" and they may start trying to modify rules to suit themselves..
- As language competence develops, your child may be able to explore with you why a particular behaviour is unacceptable. At first, it is enough that they receive the constant message that it is unacceptable.
- Make sure that grandparents and all other carers do their best to follow the same patterns.
- A child feels much more secure if they know the boundaries, even if they do not particularly like them.

Conversations:

- Depending on your child's stage of language development, make it possible for them to be involved in family discussions and decision making. It is quite empowering to a child when the rest of the family follows their suggestion, so sometimes allow your child to choose a family activity or the menu for a meal.
- Always be ready to draw or act out what you are trying to say.
- Be ready to take your child to the thing you are talking about, even if it's in another part of the house.

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- Try not to let them develop the feeling that they don't need to understand everything, or you will risk them losing that sense of wanting to know, of natural curiosity.
- Try not to give your child the idea that it's too much trouble to help them understand, or that it doesn't matter. Natural curiosity is important to any child, but particularly to a deaf child as it helps them to find out how things work. It helps their concept development.

EARLY SCHOOL YEARS:

Discussion and Conversation:

- It will always be important to discuss things with your deaf child, no matter whether they use speech or sign.
- Children gain the best General Knowledge when parents and other relatives and friends take the time to answer their questions and discuss their ideas and everyone else's ideas, and take the time to discuss current affairs at appropriate levels with their children.
- Through discussion, children gain both the language skills and the knowledge and information to generate fresh ideas, and to express their ideas with their peers
- Through such discussion, they gain verbal knowledge and develop interests which are age appropriate.
- It is important for all of the teachers involved with your child to do likewise.

Keeping Text Records:

- Make scrap-book story books, if you can, about family adventures and events of interest.
- Take lots of photos to illustrate these scrapbook stories, to help stir up memories for your child. These can provide a topic of conversation when you can't think what to talk about. Each time you revisit such a resource, you will discover new expressions and new vocabulary.
- You might like to keep a diary or journal of the things that your family does. Use this with a calendar. This will not only record the memories, but will also help your child to gain an understanding of time past and time to come. Ask "What did they do next?", and "What did they do before that?" and so forth, to stimulate imaginative thinking and to strengthen your child's understanding of time.
- A journal or communication book can help your child's carer's and teachers to understand what they are talking about, before they have the skills to make it clear verbally or in sign
- Ask your child what they would like you to write in the books.

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- When they become more able, allow and encourage them to add their own notes to the stories.
- For signing children, a comparison of the Auslan way of saying it and the English way of writing it is always helpful.

Literacy:

- Continue to show your child that you value reading.
- Support them in their efforts to decode text.
- Help them to strengthen their imagination, because this will help them to draw meaning out of text by visualising the story being told. “What do you think happened next?” “Why?” “What should have happened?” “What’s a different thing that could have happened? Suppose that the boy didn’t know?”

TEENAGE:

Conversation and Debate:

- It is during secondary school that the good family conversation habits which fully included all family members begin to show their effectiveness.
- Students who have been included in discussions about anything and everything at home and throughout primary school, will have gained a strong General Knowledge base which will enable them to participate with understanding in the secondary school education process. The need for such conversations and discussions will not lessen.
- These students will always need to be included in accessible discussions, debates, arguments and conversations, as often as time and access to the appropriate people at home and at school will allow.
- Remember that deaf and hard of hearing children do not **over-hear** well, if at all, and without some actively planned opportunities for discussion, they gradually slip behind in their world knowledge and in their ability to form an opinion and conversation about it.

Essays and Vocabulary:

- Youth need lots of experience in putting their side of an argument together if they are going to be able to write about their point of view.
- Youth will need wide vocabularies if they are to be able to carry out their own research in books or on the Internet successfully.
- Youth will need to broaden their vocabulary which comes with wide-ranging discussions,

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- With limited vocabularies, students are inclined to copy the text they discover without considering its implications. Good reading skills are essential to research.
- If they would like you to, ask to see your child's efforts in essay writing.
- Offer constructive suggestions, but don't change the piece. After all, your child needs to have ownership.
- Be prepared to talk about ways the essay might continue, alternative outcomes and so forth.
- Respect your child's feelings if they would like the essay to be a communication between themselves and their teacher.

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