



COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

Hearing Aids

What are the benefits of hearing aids?

The amplification of sounds provided by hearing aids may be the cornerstone to accessing education for a child with hearing loss. The routine use of hearing aids may help in the acquisition of speech and language skills. The old adage, “as we hear, so shall we speak,” is crucial to the hearing-impaired child. Hearing aids definitely make sounds louder, but not necessarily clearer to the listener. However, even if the hearing aids do not provide fine sound discriminations for the user, amplified sounds may well serve as a safety factor to hear voices, oncoming traffic, sirens, smoke alarms, etc. Using hearing aids successfully typically requires counseling, time and patience.

What are the issues at the forefront of hearing aids?

The task of selecting and fitting hearing aids for a child is a difficult and demanding task which requires an experienced audiologist. There are many hearing aid manufacturers who produce a variety of hearing aid types, styles and power outputs all of which must be considered by the audiologist. The selected hearing aids are programmed with highly specialized computer software. The audiologist selects the best hearing aid amplification program based on the individual’s hearing test results and behavioral responses to amplified sounds. There are few absolutes in hearing aid fittings, and the final fit may take a number of trials and revisits until the “best” fit is accomplished.

What should every parent or professional know about hearing aids?

Unlike glasses, which immediately correct faulty vision back to normal, hearing aids do not make “hearing” normal again. Accordingly, the hear-

ing aid process requires consistent therapy and guidance from a support team that includes the audiologist, the speech-language pathologist, special educational teachers, physicians as needed, and of course, motivated and responsible parents. Recent advances in technology have greatly improved the circuitry and signal processing in hearing aids. Unfortunately, the complexity and increased capabilities of modern hearing aids come at expensive prices, although funding support may be available. Hearing aids are usually fit on both ears and can be expected to have a 5-year life span before replacement and updating is needed. In the case of a baby or young child, more regular check-ups will be necessary as s/he gives more reliable responses to hearing tests, and to assure that they are programmed and/or functioning optimally to support age-appropriate language development.

If hearing aids are being used, consider:

- seeing a Pediatric Audiologist if the child is quite young
- not assuming a “hearing aid specialist” at the mall is qualified to provide the same services as an audiologist
- that ear molds are outgrown quickly in a baby or young child and must be replaced regularly for the right fit that enables good use of the hearing aid
- using pliable wig-tape, “huggies” or other products that
- will keep hearing aids from flopping off baby’s ears
- it’s very typical for a baby to pull her hearing aids off and even put them in her mouth; this shouldn’t automatically be interpreted as a rejection of sound

Where else can I find information about hearing aids?

“Amplification for Hearing-Impaired Children.” Chapter 8 in *Hearing in Children* written by J. Northern and M. Downs, Lippencott Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, MD, 2002.

Hearing Loss Resources: Hearing Aids. A.G. Bell Association. http://www.agbell.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?p=Hearing_Aids

Opening Doors: Technology and Communication Options for Children with Hearing Loss. US Dept. of Education. http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/products/opening_doors/opening_doors.pdf

Author

Jerry Northern, PhD, is a Professor Emeritus from the University of Colorado School of Medicine where he spent 26 years as a clinical audiologist and Head of the Audiology Department. Dr. Northern holds degrees from Colorado College (B.A.), Gallaudet University (M.S.), the University of Denver (M.A.) and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Colorado. He is a native of Denver, CO where he was raised by his deaf grandparents and grew up using American Sign Language as a second language. He is a Founder and past-president of the American Academy of Audiology and served as editor of “Audiology Today” magazine for more than 15 years. He is the author or editor of 12 textbooks dealing with various aspects of hearing and hearing disorders and management of patients with hearing losses. He currently serves on the Marion Downs Center Foundation Board of Directors.

Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that's designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We've recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!