



COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

PreSchool Programs

1. What are the communication considerations for preschool programming?

All children need full access to all communication in their homes, community, and special settings. For young children who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH), this need is magnified by the “Swiss cheese” effect that emanates from their hearing loss. That is, without careful planning, children at best hear/see bits and pieces of words and phrases; at worst, they hear/see very little that is meaningful to them. As a result of these inconsistencies, their receptive and expressive language may be full of holes, like Swiss cheese. Since young children’s language skills are not fully developed, they are unable to fill in words and other information that are not heard/seen, missed or are left out. Thus, targeted and purposeful intervention is required to provide experiences that build language and a knowledge foundation.

Language access includes two critical elements; first, developing the language skills to understand and process everything going on around the child, and second, having full access to all communication in these various environments, again so that there can be full participation in learning and conversation in the same way as their hearing peers.

2. What issues are at the forefront of preschool education for students who are DHH?

Every effort must be made to avoid any gap between a child’s age and their language and other developmental levels. The expectation for children

who have had early identification and appropriate early intervention services is for normal or near-normal language and cognitive development. This developmental trajectory must continue at the same rate as typical hearing children to avoid gaps that leave children behind. These gaps start an adverse cycle that impacts comprehension, attention, general knowledge, behavior and ultimately academic performance. When transitioning from early intervention programs that are parent/family focused to preschool settings that are child focused, there are several considerations for parents and the preschool professionals to discuss when developing the IEP. Some of these are:

- Child Readiness – what type of an environment is the child ready to benefit from?
 - First, make sure that a thorough assessment has been completed so that current skills, strengths and weaknesses, are clear. This should minimally include:
 - an in-depth language assessment looking at all aspects of language and speech development
 - a cognitive assessment
 - for children who utilize their hearing, an auditory assessment (hearing and listening skills in quiet and in noise)
 - a social-behavioral assessment to address attention, confidence, and social skills
 - If language skills and cognitive development are normal or near normal they should be ready for a typical preschool setting so long as the supports are in place that will assure their skills are supported so that their growth trajectory continues.
 - If language skills are delayed, they still need access to the language of their typical peers. However, they will need more direct instruction from a deaf educator with early childhood expertise who can assure targeted experiences to build skills that are behind.
 - If at all possible, placement in a preschool program that serves children with a variety of disabilities (often referred to as non-categorical) should be avoided. Children who are deaf and hard of hearing have the same learning potential as their typical hearing peers and therefore need to be in stimulating environments that will foster their development and readily promote communication with typical peers (who may be hearing or DHH using oral and/or sign).
- Environment Readiness – is the preschool environment being considered for placement ready and able to support a preschooler who is deaf or hard of hearing? What should you look for?
 - The physical environment –communication access can be compromised by poor classroom acoustics, inadequate lighting, teachers who have difficulty projecting their voices, children with little voices, and other classroom noise sources such as fish tanks, pencil sharpeners, overhead projectors, and ventilations systems.
 - Communication accommodations – Whether children listen, talk or sign, they need full access to everything going on around them. What provisions are in place to assure full access?
 - For preschool children using sign language, a sign language interpreter in the traditional role of sign-interpreting what the teacher or speaker is saying is generally not appropriate. Children at this age learn and communicate best directly. Look for a deaf education teacher who is proficient in sign language or a sign language interpreter who understands how to deliver and mediate language under the direction of the classroom teacher. These professionals may

also be called language facilitators.

- For children who communicate primarily through listening and speaking, make sure the teacher understands the importance of communication proximity, facing the child, and repetition when necessary. Generally preschool teachers are pros at language experience and enrichment. Just be sure the DHH child is able to fully participate. A language facilitator may be necessary for children with significant language delays who need extra modeling and practice to develop those skills.
- Hearing assistance technology (HAT) can be critical for DHH children to hear the teacher, other speakers, and especially the little voices of their peers. Appropriate HAT options should be explored with the educational audiologist who must also fit the recommended device. Training for the classroom staff and support to monitor that it is functioning appropriate is critical.
- o General learning and instructional style
 - The teacher should be a good language model, communicate expressively, and use multiple strategies, especially visual ones, to deliver ideas as well as for children to demonstrate what they learned
 - The teacher and school should be flexible and willing to work with children and their families to provide and advocate for what is needed to assure kids receive what they need to meet their individual goals
- Frequent and consistent monitoring of performance to assure that the learning trajectory illustrates one for one growth (e.g., one month's growth in one month, one year's growth in one year)
- High performance expectations from everyone- parents, teachers, and service providers, that these children can achieve the same as their peers without hearing loss.

3. What questions should every parent and professional ask about preschool education for DHH?

- Is my child eligible for specialized services at school?
 - o Children with a “hearing disability” may be eligible for special education support, but hearing loss alone is not a qualifying condition—the child must also need specialized instruction.
 - o If a DHH child is identified early and has benefitted from effective early intervention, there may be no “adverse effect” of hearing loss that would qualify for special education support at school. Parents should become knowledgeable about their child's unique needs and what it takes to meet them, and whether or not special education services are appropriate. Understanding special education as well as parental rights, applicable laws and regulations related to a DHH child's education is essential.
- What is the accountability system in the school? Who is the special education director? What is the chain of command? What is the role of the school administrator? Who has day to day responsibility for the services? What is their level of knowledge and experience with DHH students?
 - o Administrators should demonstrate that they are committed to supporting families and their

children and be willing to advocate for their access needs and specialized services.

- How is the performance of DHH children assessed, monitored and adjusted?
 - In addition to pre-academic and academic areas, schools should consider non-academic areas such as speech, listening, social, and self-advocacy skills. Progress should be monitored frequently (that may mean weekly for many skills) and service adjustments made when progress expectations are not met. Parents should be kept informed of all progress monitoring results and any service adjustments that are made. Practices used in school should be based on research evidenced-based practices or consensus best practices for DHH children and youth.
 - In addition to individual student data, group performance data for DHH students should be analyzed, and monitored within the school, school district, or cooperative/regional program including performance on state and district-wide assessments.
- How are parents included in the preschool program?
 - There should be opportunities for training, specifically designed to help address the child's goals under parent counseling and training as well as trainings that teachers and other staff attend. Many preschools also offer a home component with the teacher making periodic home visits.
 - Parent groups, specifically for parents of DHH children, are another important avenue for families to share their experiences, learn from one another, and plan special activities for their children and families.
- What are the options for services and programming? How are educational placement decisions made? How are communication considerations under special education law/the IDEA discussed and incorporated into the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP)? What related services are available (e.g., audiology, counseling, interpreting/captioning, parent, training and counseling, speech-language)? What specialized instruction is available (e.g., self-advocacy training, listening skill training, deaf culture, transition preparation)?
 - There should be a continuum of services and placement options that are discussed for each child. Placement decisions should never be made on what is available. The IEP team may need to be creative to design the right program for your child.
 - Pre-academic performance should be one of the primary factors to determine placement and services. However, non-academic factors are also important. Other considerations include access to other DHH peers, opportunities for participation in extra-curricular activities, and the need for specialized instruction and support services.

4. Where can I go for more information on education?

U.S. Department of Education and No Child Left Behind: www.ed.gov/nclb

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs: www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osep/index.html

Section 504: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/edlite-FAPE504.html>

Hands & Voices Special Education Eligibility Survival Guide: http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/advocacy/V11-2_eligibSurvKit.html

www.wrightslaw.com

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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!