



# COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

## *Siblings*

### **1. What are the communication considerations for siblings of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing (d/hh)?**

It'd be hard to understate the importance of the relationship between siblings, especially in the context of communication. Human beings learn a lot of what they know about social behavior (what's acceptable and what's not) from interactions with a brother or sister. "Siblings are the people we practice on, the people who teach us about fairness and cooperation and kindness and caring – quite often the hard way," says Pamela Dugdale in TIME magazine. If you grew up with a sibling, think about the things you did together and the things you talked about together that you might not have told mom and dad about! Hearing and d/hh sibs are no different.

For normal sibling relationships to develop, however, there has to be good shared communication. For parents, good communication may require deliberate effort and lot of hard work; siblings are rarely taught how to communicate with each other. Being children, they just find a way to do it. They have other advantages too. Being children they pick up languages quickly – it's not unusual for a hearing sibling's sign language to be better than a hearing parent's. Also being children they approach the challenge of communication in a playful way. They find out for themselves the adaptations they need (like making sure they look at their sister when talking to her) without having to be 'taught' them. Siblings in families can also operate as a unit to help make communication work for everyone. Deaf adults recount stories of relying on hearing siblings to pass on communication if, for example, grandpa might have been hard to lip-read, or a neighbor's accent was hard to follow.

Hearing siblings' level of adaptation appears to depend on their parents' attitude and response to the disability, the extent of parental availability, and their own level of maturity and understanding. (Cicirelli, 1995; Dyson et al., 1989; Kramer & Bank, 2005; Stoneman & Berman, 1993) In essence, if the parents are modeling a healthy attitude and high expectations, siblings follow suit. In families with more than one d/hh child, sibling bonds may be particularly strong as they share many experiences and challenges together.

Also of note, hearing siblings of children who are deaf or hard of hearing may exhibit many positive traits, such as greater levels of maturity, tolerance of differences in other people, empathy, patience, flexibility, and pride in helping their parents with their brother or sister with a hearing loss (Atkins, 1987).

## 2. What questions should every parent and professional be asking about siblings?

- Start with a basic question of whether or not your children (hearing and d/hh) are effective in their communication with each other. Their social and emotional ties combined with their long-term proximity to each other make this relationship very fruitful for communication and language development. If communication is incomplete or unfulfilled, there will be a negative impact to both hearing and non-hearing children in a family.
- Sometimes parents worry about the impact of one child's hearing loss on his/her siblings with typical hearing. The research on this topic is not vast, but it does point to these themes that every family should explore for themselves:
  - Is parent attention being diverted to the d/hh child's needs?
  - Are hearing sibs struggling to be "heard" when communication is geared towards a d/hh sib?
  - Is responsibility for "helping" being too placed early or often on hearing sib shoulders?
  - Are hearing sibs taking a defensive, protective role among peers and "mean kids" at school & around the neighborhood?
  - Are there enough opportunities for hearing siblings to be themselves rather than the d/hh child's brother or sister?

## 3. What issues are at the forefront for siblings of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing?

Fillery (2000) highlighted the role of the 'elucidator' that may be assumed by the hearing sibling; this role leads to more responsibility being placed upon the sibling and may result in irritation and resentment if it interferes with social interactions. Siblings taking on such a role may feel they have 'lost their childhood' and identity, seeing themselves merely as a go-between (Luterman, 1987; Ogden, 1996). Gregory et al. (1995) and Slessor (1994) support this notion with the finding that 62 per cent and 50 per cent (respectively) of hearing siblings were described as having some sense of responsibility for their deaf brother/sister.

However Tattersall and Young's 2003 study of grown up hearing siblings also showed the value that might be appreciated in having taken on some added responsibility in childhood for a d/hh sibling and

the positive influence it can have on later life. As with many aspects of family life, the issue is one of balance. Is too much being expected of hearing sibling? How much do they have a choice? It is also important to set the issue of sibling responsibility in context. In all families, there will be many kinds of relationships of responsibility and shared responsibility between siblings – for example between older and younger brothers and sisters. Bonds of sibling responsibility are not necessarily primarily nor exclusively influenced by hearing or d/hh status.

It has also been suggested that siblings of deaf children may feel jealous and neglected in response to parental or professional attention aimed at their deaf brother/sister (*e.g. Harris, 1996; Marschark, 1997; Gregory, 1976; Slessor, 1994*). Sometimes it's just about the amount of time that seems to be given to the d/hh sibling (whether by parents or professionals). Sometimes it's about the perception that the d/hh sibling gets extra things like special toys, visits, or different opportunities to play. Depending on the age of the hearing sibling, it can be very hard from their child's eye view to understand how this can be fair. As children get older they may rationalize and understand why a d/hh sibling might have to be treated differently, but that does not necessarily mean that it will 'feel' ok.

#### 4. Where can I get more information about siblings of deaf/hard of hearing kids?

- SIB SHOPS acknowledge that being the brother or sister of a person with special needs is for some a good thing, others a not-so-good thing, and for many, somewhere in-between. They reflect a belief that brothers and sisters have much to offer one another — if they are given a chance. Sibshops are a spirited mix of new games (designed to be unique, off-beat, and appealing to a wide ability range), new friends, and discussion activities. The Sibshop curriculum and more info is available at: <http://www.siblingsupport.org/sibshops>
- Tattersall, H. Young, A. (2003), Exploring the Impact on Hearing Children of Having a Deaf Sibling. *Deafness & Education International* 5 (2), 108-122.

This is an interview study with 6 siblings, now adults, looking back on their experiences of growing up with a d/hh sibling. It is interesting because it shows how the experience for them was a complicated one – neither totally positive nor totally difficult but in fact often both at the same time. They explore how it has influenced their values and the choices they have made as adults about, for example, their careers. The participants include one whose sibling had learning difficulties as well as being deaf.

- “In Praise of Siblings”, by Leeanne Seaver for *The Hands & Voices Communicator*; available online at: [http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/fam\\_perspectives/V9-3\\_siblings.htm](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/fam_perspectives/V9-3_siblings.htm)

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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!*