

HANDS & VOICES
**MAXIMIZING YOUR
CHILD'S VISUAL ACCESS**

Tips to Create a Visually Rich World
for Your Child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing



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Babies with typical hearing can hear their parents/caregivers and daily life at home or in the community, even without trying or not directly looking at the speaker. Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing (D/HH) may not have the same access to language and information through sound and benefit from an abundance of visual information. Parents/caregivers can learn and apply simple changes in their routines and the child's environment to maximize access. Regardless of a child's level of hearing, a child can use their vision to better communicate, develop stronger language skills, and to create lifelong strategies. Here are helpful tips and resources from the perspectives of D/HH adults.

1. SHINE A LIGHT:

- “In the middle of the night Miss Clavel turned on her light and said, ‘Something is not right!’” In the beloved children’s book *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans, Miss Clavel is responsible for 12 little girls in two straight lines in which the smallest one is Madeline. This book emphasizes a necessary tool to give D/HH children full access to their home environment: light.
- When it is night or dark, turn on the light as you comfort your little one so that they can see your face, gestures, signs and/or cues.
- Turn off the light *after* you have finished saying/signing/cueing I love you and good night. Visual communication and gestures will increase feelings of belonging for the child.
- Some children feel most secure with a nightlight or flashlight in their room.

2. TAKE A SIDE:

- Walk side by side with your child who is D/HH when going up and down the stairs or out and about. Conversations that occur while leaving/arriving home tend to be important, like where a family is going or what to do after arriving home. The D/HH child walking ahead or behind the parent can miss out on critical information that connects family members to one another.
- For children who have unilateral hearing (no or reduced hearing on one side), remember to walk on the side with better hearing.
- Whenever possible, bring your baby with you when someone comes to the door. If you hear a family member coming into the house, show your little one who is home and that people don’t magically appear and disappear.
- If you and your baby are playing on the floor, you can often feel the movement of someone coming down the hall or from the stairs. Help your child become aware of those clues.

3. HIT THE ROAD:

- Babies in today’s world spend a lot of time in the car but how do D/HH children follow conversation? For children with unilateral hearing, consider placing their car seat so their better ear is away from the window to reduce road noise.
- For children using technology, parents may opt to take the child’s technology off in the car, which may be a short-term solution as children will learn to wear their technology in the car. During the time technology is removed, increased visual communication is critical. The driver can sign, cue or gesture with one hand and use facial expressions which can be seen from the side.
- If the car seat is facing forward, the driver can also use the rear-view mirror to help the child in the back seat see the driver’s face. Consider buying an additional rearview mirror. Upon getting in the car, alert your child (no matter how big or small) as to where they are going.
- Hearing children overhear their parents talk about where they are going and changes in the plans. Do not assume D/HH children know about the plans/changes, so enlist family members to help your child know what is shared in the car. A D/HH colleague shared her experience as a girl riding in the car. Her parents would ask the kids where they wanted to eat. Her sister would tell her, “Say KFC!”, (Kentucky Fried Chicken) knowing because she was Deaf, she missed what her parents had asked, and unknowingly gave her restaurant vote away to her sister!

4. SHARE THE FAMILY TREE:

- Take photos of everyone and share the photos with your child so that they know who is in their extended family. Bring the photos out before family gatherings to help your child prepare. If extended family members are occasional visitors, use photos in the days following their visit to remind your baby who the family member is, their names and memories from the event. Babies love to look at pictures of faces and are never too young for this activity. Follow up with videoconference visits to continue connections.
- Big gatherings and birthday parties can be overwhelming and challenging. Your child may need to see you to feel connected to what is taking place during family celebrations, holidays and dinners. Enlist other family members to not just hold your baby but to show your baby what is happening.
- This is a good time for a baby to be held or wrapped facing outward so that they can see everything that is taking place.

5. FEED YOUR BABY'S BRAIN:

- “Dinner table syndrome” or “verbal table scraps” describes when D/HH people miss out on conversations and are told “it’s nothing,” “not important” or they are given a brief summary of the conversation. Instead, make mealtime a wonderful opportunity to play with communication as well as practicing the art of turn taking and including everyone at the table in the conversation.
- Place your child’s (high) chair against a wall, facing outwards to better see everyone during mealtime or when a family member arrives home.
- Some families enjoy a round table so that everyone is visible.



6. MAKE FAMILY TIME FUN:

- Be aware of increasing visual opportunities when your child is in a back pack or a stroller.
- Bicycle mirrors can be added to your bike and helmet and then later, add them to your child’s as well. Biking is a great time to use assistive listening devices.
- Consider board games or party games that rely on visual clues rather than audible ones. An example for older children and large groups is a scavenger hunt or a photo hunt!
- As it gets dark add additional light, especially if you are a family that camps or your family is socializing in the evening outside. Hearing people enjoy conversations that take place in the dark; however, light from a campfire, flashlights or lanterns make the evening more accessible and more beautiful.
- Visual schedules help your child see what will be happening in the near future as well as a countdown or “how many sleeps” until the day of the event.

7. HELP OVERSEE:

- Typically hearing children rapidly acquire language throughout early childhood and incidental language (language that is overheard) is part of hearing culture. Children who are D/HH may need extra support to keep up. Consider pre-teaching vocabulary/terms your family hears from tv, cartoons, movies, music or the radio by intentionally sharing that information with your child. Think of how much a hearing child may learn from the Muppets or Disney characters before they learn to read. Your D/HH child may need extra help being filled in on what they might miss.

- Watching a children’s program/movie without the sound may help you and your child’s hearing caregivers gain an understanding of how much is missed. Turn on the captioning on all devices for your child even while very young.

8. SHOW THE FUTURE:

- D/HH adults can be windows into your child’s future. Establishing connections with D/HH adults familiar with supporting families can ease your concerns and allows you to see how natural visual communication takes place.
- Some D/HH adults can be consultants to offer advice to you about how to adapt your home or your child’s school environment to capitalize on visual/auditory information.

9. CONSIDER THE PLUS(ES):

- Children who are D/HH and who also have health issues like autism, vision loss, cerebral palsy, ADHD, etc. or who are “D/HH Plus” may need additional tools, resources, adaptations and early intervention to support their needs in the home and community. Professionals who have experience with “Plus” children can offer great strategies.
- A few ideas include: labeling items around your home to connect the printed word to what your child sees, photo albums of family trips to retell experiences/family stories, step-by-step instructions, practical experiences in natural environments (your home and community), consistent routines and over-learning (going over a skill after it is mastered) and much repetition may be necessary.

10. FIND JOY:

- Parents of adult children will tell you the early years go much faster than expected. Parents, you ARE your child’s most important and lifelong teachers. You ARE the most important person to foster your child’s joy for life, connection to family and self-esteem. Slow down your family’s pace and find time to revel in this precious time with your child. Trust your natural instincts as a parent and surround yourself with affirming professionals, other parents and adults who are D/HH who are committed to helping you foster the joy your child brings.

RESOURCES TO GET STARTED

- <http://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/sites/setting-language-in-motion.html> Setting Language in Motion series: Clerc Center and the Boston Children’s Hospital
- <http://babyhearing.org/> This website has many different resources in the categories of, hearing and amplification, language and learning and parent to parent. (English or Spanish website option)
- <https://www.handsandvoices.org/fl3/topics/dhh-involvement/resources.html> Interviews with D/HH adults and youth.
- <http://www.cohandsandvoices.org/newsite/deaf-plus/> More resources for children who have D/HH and have additional health concerns (D/HH Plus)
- <http://vl2.gallaudet.edu/research/research-briefs/english/eye-gaze-and-joint-attention/> Research Brief 5: Eye Gaze and Joint Attention: This research brief, written by Amy Lieberman, PhD, provides an overview of the importance of eye gaze and joint attention in language acquisition. Visual Language and Visual Learning Science of Learning Center. (2012, June). Eye Gaze and Joint Attention (Research Brief No. 5). Washington, DC: Amy M. Lieberman

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