

Listening skills and the hearing-impaired child



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The classroom – the 'listening environment'

One of the most distressing features of deafness is the fact that when you use aids to boost the sound you want to hear, you also boost the sounds you don't want to hear. Another feature of deafness is the inability to discriminate: i.e. to pick out and concentrate on one source of sound while mentally 'switching off' what is unimportant. If there are two or more sources of sound the child's difficulties will be increased. Nothing you can do will compensate for the child's hearing loss, but there are some steps you can take to reduce the difficulties he will face every day.

If there is more than one class in which he could be taught, consider the following points:

Minimising the noise

- Which classroom is quietest? Try to avoid the one overlooking (overhearing?) the main road or the canteen loading bay.
- Listen to the heating systems. Some are very noisy. Does the teacher have the option, say, of switching off the fan when the class is practising listening skills, or is it a ducting system over which the teacher has no control?
- Can you put him in a room that is carpeted? Less noise from feet and furniture.
- What about the corporate personalities of the classes? Some classes are incapable of keeping still and quiet, even during listening exercises. Try to avoid putting him into a class which is known to be noisy.

Improving the view

- Deafened children cope by combining what hearing they have with lip-reading. A bearded teacher may be of less help to a deaf child than a clean-shaven (or female!) one.
- Is the room well lit? When speaking to the class, can the teacher comfortably stand in a position where the light falls on his face? If he has to stand with his back to a window his face will not only be in shadow but the contrast between bright outside light and inside shade will make his features invisible. It may be possible to change round the furniture to correct this.

Trust the child's judgement. Let him spend a period in each of the possible classes and let him suggest the one in which he feels most comfortable. Ask him which teacher's voice he registers best. He may be able to hear a deep male voice much better than a light female one, or vice versa.

Talking to the class

Your instinct may lead you to seat the child right in front of you, at the front of the class, but this may not be the best position for him; it may not give him the best or most comfortable view of your lips and you may, quite literally, be talking 'over his head', in which case the sound of your voice will not reach him until it has bounced off the walls and a few other things first.

Do you tend to move around the class as you speak? This will affect the deaf child's ability to 'follow' you. If you want freedom of movement, the best place for him may be at the back of the class, so that he can keep you in view and within the effective range of his aid. If he sits with his back to the wall the wall itself may serve to gather the sound for him, much as cupping your hand behind your ear can help you to hear what someone is saying to you in a crowded and noisy room. Be guided by the child; let him choose the most suitable position.

A few other points to watch

- Do you continue talking as you turn round to illustrate your point on the blackboard? He'll miss that bit. It will be as if your voice has been switched off.
- When you are reading from a book or a sheet, or when you are holding up flashcards, be sure you don't told them in such a position as to obscure the child's view of your lips.
- Do you sometimes dictate answers instead of writing them on the board? The deaf child can't write and listen (i.e. watch your lips) at the same time.

Using taped material in a whole-class setting

The extent to which a child's perception of sound is impaired will be different at different frequencies; one may hear low sounds perfectly well, while another may cope better with high frequencies. Some deafened children are acutely sensitive to loud sounds at certain frequencies. This means that simply turning up the volume may not help and, indeed, may make the situation worse. Better to adjust the tuning controls, boosting high or low frequencies to compensate for the child's particular pattern of deafness.

Perhaps you can allow the child himself to experiment with the controls to find the best setting, then you can make a note of it. The rest of the class who can hear normally will cope with the adjustment even if it is not the setting you might have selected for them.

When choosing new equipment, go for machines which have separate controls for high and low frequencies rather than ones which have a combined knob. These permit finer tuning and increase the chance of the child finding a good match. Remember that the child's personal aid will have tuning controls too, and considerable experimentation may be required before the best possible settings are found. Remember this when you start a listening exercise. The child will need time to 'tune in' and may miss the first part of the text. Give him time to read each question before you play the next bit of the tape. The usual thing is to wait until you see that the children have stopped writing; the deaf child will need time to read the next question as well.

Using the listening post

This is unlikely to be of much use to the child since it is probably under the control of another member of the class who of course will use the settings which best match the distribution of his own, normal, hearing pattern.

Use of individual tape recorder with headphones

This is often seen as the best solution to the problem because it allows the child to proceed at his own pace at the setting which suits him best. It can be useful, but there are some points to watch out for:

- Be sure you can offer him good quality tapes and a machine which can produce a wide range of frequencies and adequate volume without distortion. Consult expert opinion and the child's own experience. It may be that he uses equipment at home which would give a guide to what suits him.
- Human ears have evolved for coping with human speech. All electronic equipment available in class will distort sound

to some degree. The child's hearing is already impaired; the deficiencies of the sound system you are offering may only serve to magnify the distortion.

- If the child wears a hearing aid in or behind the ear, he may have to remove it when he puts on headphones, to prevent whistling. This may cancel out any hearing gain provided by the headphones which in any case will not be adapted to cope with his particular hearing loss. He may manage better with headphones or without. Either way, explore the possibility of finding somewhere quiet for him to work, away from noisy group activities. If he wears a body pack further experimentation will be needed. It may be useful to consult the support services to see if they can recommend devices which could help.

Using video

It is often assumed that video tapes are more suitable than audio tapes for a hearing-impaired child, because of the additional visual element. This may or may not be the case. The more sophisticated the video tape is, the less use it may be to the deaf child. Some production techniques actually make the child's task more difficult. You will have to consider each tape through the deaf child's eyes and ears. It may be worth noting the following points:

- Few TV sets have fine-tuning controls for sound.
- When videos are copied, it is often difficult to maintain the quality of the original sound-track.
- The deaf child will gain from use of video only if the speaker constantly faces the camera and speaks clearly. Bob McKinstry's video for the experimental 1986 Standard Grade French exam was, excellent from this point of view (apart from his beard!) It is more usual, however, for camera shots to be varied. e.g.:
- In interviews, the questioner often has his back to the camera, so the deaf child will see/hear only the answers.
- The camera often pans away from the speaker or zooms in to focus on some significant detail such as a town plan, an item about to be purchased, the price shown on the till etc. Result: loss of continuity for the deaf listener.
- Scenes of life in France will be interesting in themselves, but if the completion of a listening task depends on information given by an off-screen commentator, the deaf child has little or no hope of succeeding.

- If vocabulary or grammar is dealt with, ask yourself: is the point made entirely through the writing on the screen, or does understanding depend also on the explanation given by the TV tutor off-screen?

Providing a written response

Remember that the deaf child needs to use his eyes as well as his ears to hear. It would be unreasonable to expect him to be able to write at the same time. If possible, offer frequent pauses during which answers can be written, but remember to give the child a clear signal before you restart the tape or start speaking again. If frequent pauses are unsuitable for the material, or for the task you wish the rest of the class to do, and if the deaf child can use a tape recorder, it may be possible to record your first reading and to give the tape to the deaf child to work on by himself, perhaps at home or at a later date.

Providing a spoken response

The assessment of speaking by its nature involves the child in listening as well. If you are making use of group activity time to assess the rest of the class try, unobtrusively, to make alternative arrangements for the deaf child. It is not fair to expect him to succeed with all the noise going on around. If he cannot hear what is said he cannot hope to respond. Improve the conditions for him and you will improve his chance of success. The final test should present fewer problems, since the conditions required for the rest are ideal for him too.

The child himself

Many of the suggestions made here involve consulting the child. He is the only person who can judge what helps and what does not. If you do not ask him he is unlikely to tell you, for he will in the past have met with impatience and ridicule. If by discussing your joint problems with him and asking for his advice you can convince him that you care, you may succeed in making his time in your class more enjoyable and more productive. He will feel more secure in the knowledge that you understand his problems and that you care enough to try to help. That security will enable him to relax - and that in turn will make success more likely.



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