



LANGUAGE UNLOCKS LEARNING:



The key to language development is communicating early!

Family Involvement is the Key to Language Learning. In the first three years of life children with normal hearing learn language at an amazing rate! Through appropriate early intervention and parent involvement it is possible for children who are identified with hearing loss in the first 3 months of life to learn language at a rate that is very similar to children without hearing loss. For children who receive early intervention services more than 3 – 6 months after their hearing loss has been identified, it is expected that a rate of one month of language development will occur for every one month of caregivers. When the family and caregivers are very committed to helping the child learn language, it is possible for the gap in language development caused from not hearing from the time of birth to be reduced during the first 2-3 years of life. For a child with hearing loss to begin to catch up, the family needs to be very consistent and conscientious in how well they communicate with their child.

Remove the barrier to language learning that is caused by hearing loss. The disability associated with persons with hearing loss is not due to their lack of hearing - it is due to limitations in how much they are involved in the communication going on in the world around them. Babies learn most of their language from hearing adults or older children talking about things in their lives that they are interested in. Whether you want your child to learn to talk or to learn to sign, children with hearing loss need to be able to be around and involved in 'language in action'.

Putting together the pieces needed for language development. If the following pieces are in place, it is possible for a child to learn new words and concepts at a rate that is similar to children with normal hearing. If any of these pieces are missing a child may not develop language as quickly and can fall behind on learning. The time to prevent language gaps is when the child is still a baby. The earlier you start to help your child learn language, the faster he or she will learn new words and concepts.



The child is kept in the middle of ‘language in action’

All family members and caregivers know the size of the child’s “listening bubble”? Do they all realize that the child cannot learn verbal language unless the people talking are within this hearing range? Even a little hearing loss will make a child’s listening bubble much smaller than a child without hearing loss. In order to learn verbal language, the more hearing loss, the closer communication needs to take place to the child. So when you see your young child toddling off toward a fragile item or something dangerous remember that he or she may not be able to hear any of your warnings until you get close or look at you. Children who are learning sign or cues also must be able to see language going on all around them, meaning that caregivers and siblings need to be consistently signing what is being said if the child is going to have the opportunity to pick up language at every opportunity.



Many people communicate with the child every day.

Practice makes perfect! Just like any other skill, a child must be exposed to words every day in different ways. Practicing listening, or attention to visual communication, comes long before talking. If only a few people in the child’s environment are able or willing to communicate with the child, then the child will develop language more slowly. If a child listens to two languages the rate of language development can sometimes be 6 months delayed, but this wonderful opportunity to learn from other family members is a loving advantage. Through communicating effectively, the child will learn the languages.



Quality communication happens, not just quantity.

Being around lots of communication every day is critical. Like everyone else, young children will pay the most attention when someone is communicating about something that interests them. Interaction between two people about something interesting is what really drives learning. Having a baby in a front pack or a baby bouncer nearby as you talk about the daily chores is a great idea. Notice what your baby is looking at or seems interested and talk or sign/cue about it. When your child wants something, supply the words or signs that describe what is wanted or felt at that moment.



Hearing enough to learn to listen and talk; or signing enough to learn to express ideas and new thoughts in sign

A child with a mild or moderate hearing loss is not deaf, but consistent daily using hearing aids is necessary if the child is to learn verbal language at a normal rate. If hearing aids are not worn daily during the child's waking hours, the child will get behind on language development. A child with a profound hearing loss will typically not have enough hearing to be able to learn language and talking through use of hearing aids alone. This has been very limiting in the past, before the technology of digital hearing aids and cochlear implants. Developing a listening attitude and calling a child's attention to meaningful sounds that occur in the environment are very important activities. It is important to be aware of the auditory limitations of the child's hearing loss and if the child has enough hearing to develop verbal language. If hearing is very limited and learning to listen and talk is desired, then the benefit of a cochlear implant should be explored by the parents. If a parent desires the child to learn to sign or cue, then signing or cueing must occur around the child during all natural communication opportunities. The parent must be committed to learning new signs every weekly so that they can provide the child with the signs to express the increasing complexity of their wants and thoughts. A commitment to daily consistent hearing aid or cochlear implant wear and/or consistent signing/cueing with a commitment to learning new signs every week by all of the child's caregivers is necessary for the child to develop language at the desired rate.



Family to family connections or role models are a key to the future.

Children with hearing loss are born into more than 500 families in Florida every year. It is important for your child to see other young children, school-age children, or adults who also have hearing loss. A Deaf role model can greatly assist a family in learning new and more complex use of signs. Seeing other children with hearing aids or a cochlear implant may help your child feel less alone, especially if he or she will enter a school where there are no other children with hearing aids. Support, ideas, encouragement, and information can be gained from other people who have experience with hearing loss. Hearing loss need not be a disability - it can be a difference worth celebrating and a future with high expectations worth working toward.