

KEEPING MOLEHILLS FROM BECOMING MOUNTAINS

Understanding and Supporting Teen Students with Hearing Loss



By Cheryl DeConde Johnson, Ed.D.

Teens and hearing loss are complex topics by themselves. Combined, they represent a challenge that often leaves parents wondering how they will live through this period of their child's life, teens on an emotional roller coaster from "leave me alone" to "pay attention to me," and teachers seeking guidance to help understand and work effectively with this age group.

In order to consider strategies to help these students, it is important to first understand the unique characteristics of teens, then of hearing loss and its resulting communication and social problems, and finally the potential implications that result when they occur together.

A Teen with Hearing Loss is First a Teen...the Molehill

The volumes of information written about teens and teen behavior cannot be duplicated in this brief information item. The key point to recognize is that before we can assist our students with hearing loss through this often challenging period of time, it is important to understand the behaviors that are characteristic of teens and have strategies for dealing with them. The importance of the emotional intelligence (EQ) cannot be over emphasized – all students benefit from character education and conflict resolution strategies. If we have prepared students with hearing loss before they reach their teens by helping them understand and accept their hearing loss and to develop advocacy strategies, it may be easier to sort out and deal with teen versus hard of hearing issues than if these areas have not been addressed. Even with this prevention approach, everything is clouded by the fact that the hormonal changes experienced during the teen years create such chaos in a young person that rationalization is often difficult.

Communication Access...the Primary Goal of Accommodating Hearing Loss

For most persons with hearing loss, including teens, the primary communication challenge is gaining full access to what is being said. This access assumes that the person has the vocabulary and language abilities to understand the message once access is provided. If deficits in those areas exist, the language that is communicated must be modified to a level that can be accessible to the receiver. Without full access, the student with hearing loss is at a distinct disadvantage by needing to rely on partial information to derive correct meaning from the message being delivered.

Strategies to provide full access include listening and visual components. From hearing assistance technology that maximizes audition to sign language that provides a full visual interpretation of the message, accommodations abound for the teenager with hearing loss. Accommodations do not offer an unfair advantage to the student with hearing loss but rather serve to “level the playing field” by providing access to the same information as hearing students. Students cannot be expected to be held accountable for information to which they have not had access.

The real barriers are in assuring that these accommodations are available, are effectively implemented, and that the teen is willing to use them. Teens with hearing loss should identify their accommodations through their IEP process. Teachers can help by adhering to some simple communication considerations. These suggestions often benefit other students in the classroom as well.

- Make sure all information is accessible by faithfully implementing all accommodations that have been recommended. Because teens with hearing loss more than anything want to fit in, they do not want to be noted for their hearing loss. They do not want to draw attention by requesting accommodations such as asking for repetition or clarification. When a student with hearing loss requests a specific accommodation, recognize the courage that it may have taken to make the request and accept the responsibility to comply in return.
- Check in with the student with hearing loss frequently to determine their level of comprehension. Conduct the checking in a way that does not single out the student as being different.

- Implement common sense rules of communication etiquette in your classroom. Encourage all students to take turns when talking, to identify themselves, to speak loudly and clearly so that everyone can hear and understand them, and when necessary, help by repeating what other students are saying. Repeat public address announcements or provide them to the student with hearing loss in writing. Be conscious of minimizing classroom noise levels and maintaining good lighting.
- Be an enthusiastic user of FM and other assistive technology. Troubleshoot the devices and check batteries to insure they are working before class begins. Enlist the help of the student with hearing loss to learn how the device operates as well as tips for maximizing its use.
- When captioning is recommended for a student, make sure all videos and films have captioning when ordering them. Media should never be used if it is not accessible to all students.
- When a sign language interpreter is involved in the classroom, respect their primary role as an interpreter. Work closely with this individual and the deaf education teacher when introducing new vocabulary, reviewing content, and delivering instruction.

Characteristics of a Teen with Hearing Loss...the Molehill Becomes the Mountain

When the indecisiveness, irrationality, and unpredictability of teens meet the misinformation resulting from partial or lack of access associated with the hearing loss, the resulting problem can quickly grow out of control, e.g., into a mountain. Students with hearing loss who rely on their audition usually respond to what they hear, or think they hear, and assume they heard it correctly without taking steps to verify what was said. This problem by itself probably leads to more problems in social interactions and communication than any other - especially at this fragile age. Because sign language is more concrete, this problem does not occur as frequently when sign is used, especially through direct communication. A poorly skilled interpreter, however, may not accurately convey a message.

Teens with hearing loss tend to think in concrete terms making it difficult to see or understand “middle ground”. As a result, they can lack the cognitive and social skills to negotiate and compromise. They benefit from role playing and experience from seeing others in similar situations. It is helpful to involve teens with hearing loss in a process that asks questions to analyze situations and find solutions.

Ten Tips for Helping Teens get the Mountain back to a Molehill

1. Recognize behavior that is “typical teen”

and treat it accordingly. Any discussion or intervention must be fully accessible – the vocabulary and the language - and available to the student. Take advantage of counselors, counseling groups, and other school resources to help students work through their problems. When necessary, seek professional support from a psychologist with expertise in deafness and the ability to communicate directly with the student.

2. Make sure the student understands his/her own hearing loss, implications of the hearing loss, and appropriate accommodations.

Students should learn about themselves and their hearing loss and what they need to do to address it before they reach their teen years. Opportunities to meet with other deaf or hard of hearing peers and adults to help them develop an identity as a person with hearing loss is important for most children with hearing loss. Even though some teens identify themselves as

hearing, rather than deaf or hard of hearing, they should recognize that without their hearing aids, cochlear implants, or other hearing assistive technology, they have some hearing limitations that require accommodations. Counseling should be an on-going part of the developing teen’s school experience so that there are opportunities to discuss acceptance and other issues as they develop and deal with their own identity.

3. Teach self-advocacy skills and empower independence.

Students should also be taught self-advocacy skills so that they are able to take responsibility for their hearing loss and their accommodations to access communication and instruction as early as possible. Students with hearing loss may consider negotiating an accommodations plan with their teachers and providing them with written guidance to implement helpful strategies.

4. Make sure the student has at least one good friend with whom he or she can communicate effectively.

Teens need to be able to discuss feelings and thoughts, and to have a comfortable person with whom they can just “hang-out”. They also need to learn appropriate communication and social skills. Ideally the student is in an environment where he/she is not forced to be with the only other teen with hearing loss but instead has a large enough peer group that friends can be chosen from among that group. And, for some, the friend of choice may be hearing.

5. Make the environment accessible and friendly.

In center-based programs there are often sufficient students to create a desirable space for them to gather – teens with hearing loss and their hearing friends. A corner of a classroom or a small room can be converted into a student lounge area that is inviting as a place to hang out. Include “deaf friendly” technology such as a captioned phone, video phone, and computer

access. School announcements, activities and events can be posted as a means of distributing information to assure that the teens with hearing loss are informed. Instill in the students with hearing loss a sense of family where everyone cares and supports one another. When using interpreters, seek out ones that are “cool”, e.g., look like but do not exactly act like teenagers, are fun, and are helpful without being controlling or motherly. Interpreters need to be able to facilitate communication with signing and non-signing students whenever there is an opportunity. For non-signing students, provide a quiet area where speaking and listening conversation can more easily be understood. An FM system with a table top conference microphone may be helpful to access group discussions.

6. Set up teen activities to bring students together.

An after school sign club, or sport activities that do not emphasize communication like volleyball or bowling, are good ways to start facilitating interaction with hearing students and to encourage fun. Food – pizza, pop, and M&Ms – also are a hit. Once they are together, let the students plan future activities.

7. Offer sign language classes.

One of the best ways to increase the number of communication partners for teens that use sign language is to teach sign language to hearing students. Many states now consider American Sign Language (ASL) an official foreign language and high schools are increasingly including ASL as part of their foreign language course offerings. Deaf and hard of hearing students benefit from the opportunity to receive foreign language credit as well as to take a course with their hearing peers in which the playing field is level!

8. Start a chat room or join a list serve with other teens with hearing loss.

Appoint a student to research available list serves or to organize the chat room. Students can share friends and information they have learned from those interactions.

9. Help students be a familiar face on campus.

Schedule classes and the same lunch period with a core group of hearing students. A shared lunch period provides an extension of the classroom where students can sit together and have an opportunity to make friends with hearing students from that core group. Video/media, art or other classes that do not rely heavily on verbal information are good class opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with hearing students as well as demonstrate what they know.

10. Encourage participation in regional and state activities for students with hearing loss.

Camps, track/field days, theater performances, and outdoor education programs that are dedicated to students who have hearing loss are opportunities for these students to be with a large group of peers in a fully communication accessible environment. Just the access by itself opens up communication in a way that is not typically experienced on a daily basis. For students from inclusive programs these opportunities establish the meaning and benefit of communication accessibility so that they can self-advocate more effectively in their daily educational settings. Students can learn to practice their skills by being role models for younger students with hearing loss as well as working with these younger students. Participation also provides a sense of the greater deaf community, the numbers of others who share hearing loss and use hearing aids and other hearing and visual technologies, and how these individuals conduct themselves in a variety of communication and social situations.

The early teen years are often mired in emotion. Students with hearing loss, just like their hearing peers want to be included and liked but need help to understand their emotions, recognize feelings and deal with problems while they are molehills rather than when they become mountains. Schools should recognize the importance of the EQ – emotional quotient - with their

teens with hearing loss and develop a system of support that is meaningful to those involved. Teachers of the deaf, educational audiologists, and other support staff should recognize their responsibility to assure that full communication access is provided and to support the general education teachers so that accommodations are implemented on a consistent basis.



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