

Keys to Incidental Learning

People with typical hearing have a seemingly magical ability to be able to not look at anyone and still perceive information, even if the source is across a room. Individuals with hearing loss or deafness are set apart from hearing peers by not being able to effortlessly overhear the communication around them. This article will review what incidental learning is, its broad effects, and key ways in which students with hearing loss can be more successful in accessing information incidentally.



What is incidental learning?¹

It is some form of indirect, additional, unplanned learning within an informal or formal situation.

Incidental learning happens every day, all day, everywhere, and anywhere. It is the most 'natural' way of learning. It is situated, contextual, and social (Rogers, 1997).

In our environment...

Walking through the store, driving to work, watching TV.

Social interactions...

Talking with friends, family, neighbors, classmates, teachers.

In the Workplace and/or Classroom...

Listening to workshops, the radio, listening to announcements.

When is the skill of incidental learning typically learned?²

Infant word learning begins as a slow, laborious task that involves frequent repetitions of words in meaningful contexts. During the second year of life, however, the nature of word learning changes to where **most typically developing 18- to 24-month-olds learn new words incidentally**, without direct adult instruction and with only limited exposures to the words' labels and referents. This is shown by the fact that between the ages of 18 months and 18 years, children learn an average of 9–10 new words a day ([P. Bloom, 2000](#); [Templin, 1957](#)).

Researchers suggest that a child acquires language based on how engaged they are in the social situation, the effort they put in to trying to understand the information, and their level of desire to understand. In order for a potential learning situation to be useful, the child must find it worthy of their attention and energy. The child's desire to rectify what they know, with what words they just heard and, how important they feel it is to make sense of what was heard, is the motivation for word learning.

"It is the child's content of mind that determines which words are learned and whether what an adult does is useful for word learning" [P. Bloom's \(2000\)](#)

At the age of two, many children with hearing loss are (1) still struggling to use amplification all waking hours, or (2) their hearing families continue to be challenged to learn sign language vocabulary at a rate typical of a two-year-old, and/or (3) there has been a lack of services by an early intervention provider who is experienced and knowledgeable about how to minimize the far-reaching impact of hearing loss on child development. While children with hearing loss are still struggling to consistently ACCESS communication, their hearing peers are developing expertise in using overhearing to drive language development. Indeed³, even when hearing technology is used effectively, a language gap will almost always be present between DHH learners and hearing peers.

How we understand ourselves, our culture, rules for how people and families communicate and where we fit into the world... ALL of this is strongly influenced by incidental learning

(Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center).¹

Nevermind...

Too often when a student misses information and asks a peer or adult to repeat, they are told 'nevermind', 'shhhh', or 'it's not important.' Yet, being included in communication occurring around them is vitally important.¹ Those who have hearing privileges take informal and incidental learning for granted and may not realize the marginalization phenomenon that have been placed on students who are deaf and hard of hearing because ongoing, dynamic, fluid surrounding conversations are spoken-laden. As such, many of these students are marginalized to the periphery of their school community, becoming relegated to the role of bystander⁵, not realizing how accessing incidental information impacts learning or development of knowledge.⁴

Most places have addressed the issues of accessibility during formal instruction, but the access issue continues beyond the formal instruction. Accessing incidental learning opportunities can boost literacy and vocabulary development. Access to incidental learning fosters an individual's fund of knowledge, starting at home and continues within the community. Ultimately, incidental learning is a lifelong, social, and academic phenomenon. Historically, we have placed the problems associated with incidental learning on the children when the issue is actually a societal attitude. Instead of focusing on what DHH individuals cannot do or have limited access to, a better solution may be to conceptualize how we all can make the environment accessible for them.⁴

Most students know they are missing information at school with their hearing peers but did not know the *extent* of what was missed and how much of it would have been of great value to them.⁵

Unfortunately, no magic answer...

What can we do?

- 1) ENSURE ACCESS – appropriate hearing technology used consistently and/or sign/captions available to include peer interactions as much as possible.
- 2) Control the environment. Even the best personal hearing devices are not as effective in noise. Quieter environments, even if it means a room next door, could make the difference between inclusion and frustrated bystander. Linking with students who are [willing supporters and friends](#) may help a student cope.
- 3) Age-appropriate self-advocacy instruction. Requesting clarification can be done in a way to encourage 'nevermind' or to motivate the speaker to repeat.⁶ Students bear some responsibility in participating.
- 4) TRULY DISCUSS AND PLAN how to decrease the 'bystander phenomena'

TALK ABOUT INCIDENTAL LEARNING AND IT'S CRITICAL IMPORTANCE

Parents, teachers, SSPs, and administrators should engage in discussions, during Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, and request that accessible incidental learning opportunities should be created beyond classroom instruction. Such decisions cannot be based on staff availability, funding, or convenience. Considerations should include hiring qualified Deaf and hard-of-hearing personnel and promoting environments that would encourage a critical mass of students with hearing loss, where there are more opportunities for members to share a common, intelligible, and accessible language. A strategy might be an implementation of a center program where DHH students from neighboring districts converge.⁴

References

1. [All Roads Lead to Understanding: Incidental Learning Right from the Start](#) - PPT
2. [Incidental Word Learning in a Hearing Child of Deaf Adults](#)
3. [Word and World Knowledge Among Deaf Learners with and without Cochlear Implants](#)
4. [Incidental Learning with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students](#)
5. [Positioned as Bystanders: Deaf Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Informal Learning Phenomena](#)
6. [SCRIPT – Student Communication Repair Inventory & Practical Training](#)