

The following information is adapted from the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. It provides an introduction to various aspects of hearing loss as related to your child. Some information may be relevant to you and your child, while other topics may not apply to your specific situation.

Your child with a hearing loss can succeed-in school, in work, and in life!

It is important to keep this as your focus, whatever your child's age or degree of hearing loss. While you will have the support of many professionals, ultimately you as parents will make many decisions about what is in the best interest of your child. As with all children, there is no magic formula for raising a child with a hearing loss. It helps to maintain a positive attitude, educate yourself about hearing loss, seek out the best resources, and take an active role in your child's education. Most of all, keep in mind that your child is a child first, and a child with a hearing loss second.

This information is written for parents of children of all ages and all degrees of hearing loss.

With so much to cover, the information presented here is only a brief overview, supplemented with a variety of reference and resource materials so you can follow up on subjects more thoroughly. There are a number of organizations you are encouraged to join for access to a huge variety of resources, including educational programs for you and your child, a large inventory of books and other publications, videotapes, conferences, and a national support network.

Will your child have a "normal" life?

While some mild or moderate losses can be surgically or medically corrected, most hearing loss is a permanent condition. Thus, your child's life will have its challenges. However, these challenges sometimes turn into advantages. For example, the ability to work hard and concentrate more, coupled with the routines of audiologic and language therapy, frequently produces children who are self-disciplined and focused. Moreover, the outcomes for children with hearing loss have greatly improved in the last two decades due to major advances in technology and emphasis on programs of early detection and early intervention.

Emotional Impact of the Diagnosis

Parents can benefit from counseling and support after the diagnosis of hearing loss. Grief, anger, fear and denial are natural responses for hearing parents to feel when they find out their child has a hearing loss. Their expected "normal" child has a problem and this problem is going to present many challenges. We convey love through our words and tone of voice as well as through hugs and kisses. We soothe a child through the sound of our voice, or by singing a lullaby. We teach children that the objects in their room, their toys, their food, and the people around them all have names. We show children how to pronounce words by our example. We discipline and warn children of danger through words as well as actions. How are we going to do this now?

Deaf parents of deaf children are not necessarily prone to grief because they are already familiar with living in a world without sound. Deaf parents may feel more comfortable

with a child who is deaf, because this seems natural. But this isn't the case for most hearing parents, who probably know little or nothing about hearing loss and who may never have known a child with a hearing loss. Many deaf parents will teach their child sign language as naturally as hearing parents unconsciously teach their child to speak. But hearing parents must commit themselves to the goal of helping their child listen and speak in order to participate fully in a hearing world, or the equally arduous task of becoming fluent in sign language and learning about Deaf culture.

Grief is a common emotion and an honest expression of disappointment and fear of the unknown. Grief that is not acknowledged or dealt with can lead to denial of a child's problem, which in turn can lead to procrastination in taking constructive action.

Unacknowledged grief can lead to unfocused and displaced anger on the part of parents which can last a lifetime. Acknowledging grief, painful as it may be, will clear away anger and denial, allowing parents to most effectively nurture their child.

What is Early Intervention?

Early intervention means starting a specialized program to help your child right away! We introduce the term since you will hear it used frequently by professionals. Time is of the essence because a child's brain is programmed to learn language during the first six years of life—the first three years being the most critical. After this period, it is very difficult to acquire language and speech skills. Therefore, the earlier the intervention starts, the less of the precious six-year "window of opportunity" is lost.

Early intervention can take many forms, such as getting children fitted for hearing aids, providing counseling and support for parents, and teaching parents how to stimulate speech and language in their child.

One of the first steps will be to get hearing aids for your child. Depending on the degree of your child's loss, hearing aids will ideally enable your baby to hear many sounds. This includes both environmental sounds (for example, the sound of a rattle or a dog barking) and the sounds of speech. Speak to your audiologist about the options available to your child and what type of hearing aid may best suit his or her needs.

Regardless, hearing aids do not correct hearing as perfectly as glasses correct vision. Individual sounds may be somewhat distorted. Because hearing aids amplify all sounds, including background noise, it may still be difficult for your baby to hear and understand speech in noisy situations unless you are standing close by.

Will My Child Need Early Intervention?

All children with hearing loss require some degree of educational and habilitative intervention. Any level of loss can create challenges for a child, especially in an academic environment. Even a child with a mild to moderate loss—provided it goes undetected or untreated—has a higher likelihood of repeating a grade than does a child with normal hearing.

Where Can I Find an Early Intervention Program in my Community?

Most states offer early intervention parent/infant programs through the local school system for parents and children with disabilities up to age three. These programs are free of charge as required by federal law. The school system evaluates your child and then develops a plan with your family for your child based on the evaluation. A good parent/infant program provides consultation on acquiring hearing aids and assistive listening devices, parent counseling, explanation of the various communication options for children with hearing loss, and training in the communication option selected on the advice of professionals and the preference of the family. It is important to note that under these federally mandated parent/infant programs, parents are entitled to help select the communication option for their child. The emphasis in these programs is on working with the family unit, not just the child with the hearing loss.

In addition to the public school, there may be a private parent/infant program for children with hearing loss in your community.

If you feel confused at this point, you are having a normal parental reaction! Ninety percent of parents who have a child with a hearing loss possess normal hearing. Your knowledge of hearing loss probably extends to having seen it profiled occasionally on television or in the movies. The variety of educational options may make little sense to you right now. Which education methodology should you choose for your child? Should you enroll your child in the public program or with a private therapist or in a private school?

These decisions will be clearer after you've done some homework. As you gain knowledge, the right decision for you and your family will be clearer. We suggest that you take the following steps to help in gathering information in order to make an informed decision.

- Read about the different educational options. There are books available that discuss various educational options. You can also request publication catalogs and free brochures from national organizations listed on the resource page.
- Visit the available programs in your community. Start by calling your local school district and asking for the person in charge of parent/infant programs for children with hearing loss. Make an appointment to talk with the person in charge and visit the program. Call resources for a list of private programs in your area. Even if you are unsure about a private option, visiting such a program gives you a frame of reference for evaluating your public school's program and for requesting specific accommodations.