

Part 3: Better Hearing: Communication Tips and Strategies

Section 1: Communication tips for friends and family

Over a dozen visual, verbal, and environmental strategies to communicate more effectively with the hearing-impaired person.

Section 2: Communication tips for teachers

Dozens of ways teachers can more effectively communicate with the hard-of-hearing student.

1. Communication tips for friends and family

See your hearing health professional. Learn about hearing aids and assistive listening devices (ALDs). Try these products. They work and they make an enormous difference.

Decrease the distance between you and the listener. This is the single most effective way to increase understanding. Moving a little closer can make a big difference.

Don't eat, drink, or chew gum while speaking.

During conversation, turn off the radio, television, and other distractions.

Wait until passing noises subside. While walking down the street, for example, don't even attempt to talk over the noise of the passing cement mixer. Wait until it's out of range.

Save important talk for quiet environments.

Scout out good places. Know which restaurants are quiet and which are noisy. Know which areas of a restaurant are better than others. Avoid the kitchen, cash register, and reception area. Look for restaurants with lots of soft fabrics and upholstery rather than a modern, hard-surface look.

Be sure the listener is ready to hear you. He'll need a moment to focus because understanding speech requires more concentration for him than for you.

To see why this is so, think of listening to someone with a thick accent; it's much more difficult to understand his first few words if you are unprepared to listen.

For best communication, the speaker and listener should be **3 to 6 feet apart**.

Face him so he can see your lips, your entire face, and hands and body gestures. These all provide valuable cues and can help fill in for sounds he's not getting. Try to avoid bushy mustache or other facial hair that obscures the lips. Avoid shadows.

Lighting should be above or in front of you, never coming from behind you. Don't stand in front of the window while talking to him. As discussed earlier, he needs to observe facial and body gestures. This is particularly important if the listener is further away, as in a classroom.

Face him and **talk directly to him** so the volume of your voice doesn't fluctuate. Turning away from someone while talking significantly decreases the volume. Talking into the cupboard while getting the cold cereal is even worse. Try not to talk while moving around so volume level and visual cues don't fluctuate.

Speak louder and enunciate clearly, but don't exaggerate sounds and don't shout. Exaggerating can distort sounds, and shouting can be very disruptive to the HOH person for two reasons: first, the HOH person, depending on the degree of hearing loss, may dwell in silence where ambient sounds we take for granted are severely reduced or absent. A sudden loud sound can be startling. Second, there is a reduced listening comfort range between what can be heard and what becomes uncomfortably loud.

Rephrase, don't repeat. Vary the words. Some words are more difficult to understand than others and/or may be more difficult to lip read.

Introduce topics clearly, as well as transitions. For example, "Dad (pause), I want to talk about your trip to Florida", rather than, "What time is your flight?" If you are discussing a complex topic, good organization and clear transitions will aid understanding. This is critically important. Why? It's related to the way we listen and absorb information.

None of us hear every single sound in a conversation but if we are familiar with the topic, we'll hear enough key sounds to fill in the gaps, even if the other person is talking very rapidly. If we're not familiar with the topic we will interrupt more because the context isn't strong enough to fill in the sounds/syllables we're not hearing. A HOH (hard of hearing) person, who is not able to hear as many

key sounds as we are, needs a stronger context to help compensate.

Be sensitive to signs of confusion or uncertainty.

In group conversations, try to have only one person speak at a time. The person who is about to speak, if at all possible, should provide a subtle visual cue such as a hand gesture. The HOH (hard-of-hearing) person can't understand one voice over another and needs to be facing the speaker for maximum clarity. In more formal settings, such as book clubs, the leader should indicate who is to speak by pointing and saying his or her name.

Arrange people and furniture to create the best listening environment. In the living room, seat the HOH person away from the kitchen and other noisy areas. Be sure he is sitting with the noise *behind* him. In a restaurant, sitting next to the person rather than across from him may be better. Seat the person with his good side towards the others and facing them as much as possible so as to get the most visual cues.

In summary, do *not*:

- talk rapidly
- enunciate poorly and in a low tone of voice
- speak with food in your mouth
- turn away from the listener
- speak with your head in the cupboard or from another room or from more than 6 feet away
- change topics abruptly, without cues or transitions
- use unusual or unfamiliar words
- speak when there is significant background noise present
- speak in poor lighting

2. Communication Tips for teachers

Investigate sound field and personal FM systems. These technologies are wonderful for the classroom.

(NOTE: We have repeated here some of the "Tips for friends and family" because they are relevant, and have added quite a few more.)

Find out what works for the student. Open communication is essential. Speak to him. Under what circumstances does he experience difficulty? You might find if you change a few small things it could make a world of difference.

Keep a clear channel of communication open with the **parents**. You can learn a lot from each other.

Decrease the distance between you and the listener. This is the single most effective way to increase understanding. Moving a little closer can make a big difference.

Don't eat, drink, or chew gum while speaking.

Wait until passing noises subside. Wait for that plane to pass overhead or for the students to settle down.

Don't talk while children are retrieving material. First of all, people make noise when they gather material. And the HOH student cannot rummage through things and hear you at the same time because he's not looking at you.

Be sure the listener is ready to hear you. He'll need a moment to focus because understanding speech requires more concentration for him. To see why this is so, think of listening to someone with a thick accent; it's much more difficult to understand his first few words if you are unprepared to listen.

Face him so he can see your lips, your entire face, and hands and body gestures. These all provide valuable cues and can help fill in for sounds he's not getting. Try to avoid bushy mustache or other facial hair that obscures the lips. Avoid shadows.

When addressing the student, **say his name first.**

Lighting should be above or in front of you, never coming from behind you. Don't stand in front of the window while talking to him. As discussed earlier, he needs

to observe facial and body gestures. This is particularly important if the listener is further away, as in a classroom.

Face him and **talk directly to him** so the volume of your voice doesn't fluctuate. Turning away from someone while talking sharply decreases the volume. Talking into the supply cabinet is even worse. Don't talk while writing on the board (this is tough on all students) and try not to talk while moving around so volume level and visual cues don't fluctuate.

Speak louder and enunciate clearly, but don't exaggerate sounds and don't shout. Exaggerating can distort sounds as well as the shape of the lips while speaking. Shouting can be very disruptive to the HOH person for two reasons: first, the HOH person, depending on the degree of hearing loss, may dwell in silence where ambient sounds we take for granted are severely reduced or absent. A sudden loud sound can be startling. Second, there is a reduced listening comfort range between what can be heard and what becomes uncomfortably loud.

Rephrase, don't repeat. Vary the words. Some words are more difficult to understand than others and/or may be more difficult to lip read.

Introduce topics clearly, as well as transitions. For example, "John, (pause), let's consider Phil's problem. He misses the last train. What are his options?" When presenting new or complex subject matter, good organization and clear transitions will aid all your students' understanding. This is critically important. Why? It's related to the way we listen and absorb information. If we're prepared, it goes more smoothly.

Be sensitive to signs of confusion or uncertainty.

In group conversations, try to have only one person speak at a time. The person who is about to speak, if at all possible, should provide a subtle visual cue such as a hand gesture. The HOH person can't understand one voice over another and needs to be facing the speaker for maximum clarity. In more formal settings, such as book clubs, the leader should indicate who is to speak by pointing and saying his or her name.

In group discussions, arrange the seating so the student can see and hear as clearly as possible.

Be aware that the student's **hearing ability may fluctuate from day to day (or hour to hour)**. Fatigue, background sounds that you are unaware of, or health

conditions such as ear infection can impede clear hearing. He may not be bored or tuning you out.

Be sensitive to **student fatigue**. Try to understand what this child is going through. It's hard work straining to listen and to understand, trying to fill in the gaps

Announcements made over **public address systems** are particularly difficult to understand. Perhaps someone can translate for the HOH student.

Speak clearly with good diction. (There are workshops available on how to speak clearly.)

Give good directions, repeating key elements when necessary or writing them on the board.

Switch to visuals frequently (handouts, overheads, posters, etc.) to provide breaks from listening.

But be aware that **overhead projectors are noisy**. Don't speak while you are turned to the overhead. Turn off all other unnecessary equipment and any other potential distractions.

Seat the student about a a third of the way back in the middle of the room (away from the windows and noisy hallways) so he can hear and see clearly without having to look up to see you.

Print new vocabulary on the board.

Be aware of **situations when the student will not be able to lip read** and prepare beforehand. For example, if you are going to present a slide show with the lights out, some options might be to try for a captioned set of slides, provide him a transcript if one is available, or to seat the student next to you.

Institute a **buddy system** to always let him know what they're doing, what page they're on, and possibly to take notes for him. The teacher should be considerate of the "buddy" and make sure he doesn't miss out on crucial information while helping.

Assignments and homework should be printed on the blackboard or passed out as handouts. Daily and weekly **agendas** are very helpful in maintaining a strong context.

Be aware that it is **impossible to lip read and take notes at the same time**. If you are **reading from the blackboard** or flipchart, **stand next to it** so he can lip read and see the printed material easily. Make it easy for the student to focus his attention in one area of the room at a time. Avoid presenting too many visual stimuli at the same time.

Learn the basics of **hearing aids**, their strengths and their limitations; i.e., under what circumstances he will hear clearly or experience difficulty.

Find out what **assistive listening devices** may be appropriate and how they work. (Personal FM systems and sound field systems are very effective in the classroom.)