Approach Education
Making education approachable, no matter the learner.

FREE Educator Guide

THEY CAN HEAR YOU… BUT ARE THEY UNDERSTANDING?

What Every Educator Should Know About Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students



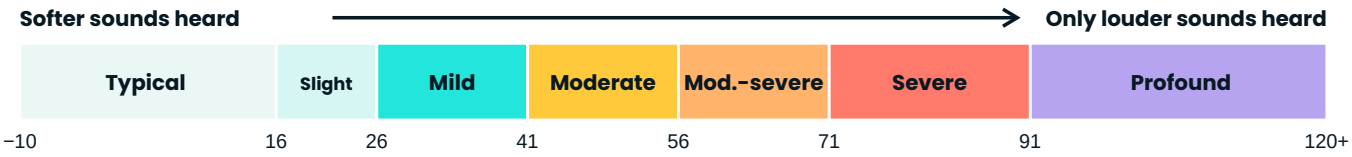
“Hearing a voice doesn’t always mean understanding the message.”

Teachers **Paraprofessionals** **Administrators** **Campus staff**

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Hearing Loss Isn't One-Size-Fits-All

Hearing loss is described by **degree** (how loud a sound must be before it is heard), by **which ear or ears** are affected, and by **type**. Two students with the same label can have very different access to speech, so the label is only a starting point.



Hearing level in decibels (dB HL), based on the ASHA classification (Clark, 1981)

Mild
26–40 dB HL

Soft or distant speech and quiet speech sounds can be missed, especially in noise. A student may seem to hear "most things" while missing key details.

Moderate
41–55 dB HL

Conversational speech may be only partly heard without hearing technology. Word endings and quiet consonants are easy to miss.

Severe
71–90 dB HL

Typical conversational speech is generally not accessible without hearing technology. Many students rely on visual access, sign language, technology, or a combination.

Profound
91+ dB HL

Very loud sounds may be detected or felt. Access to language may come through cochlear implants, sign language such as ASL, or both, depending on the student.

Unilateral
One ear

Hearing loss in one ear only. Telling where sound comes from and understanding speech in noise, or from the affected side, can be hard. Often underestimated.

ASHA also lists **slight** (16–25 dB HL) and **moderately severe** (56–70 dB HL). Ranges vary slightly between sources. A degree describes a hearing test result, not a student's intelligence, abilities, or potential.

Detecting sound: "I can tell someone is talking." A voice is present, or a familiar word like a name.

Understanding speech: "I know exactly what was said," every word and ending, even in noise or at a distance.

Speech mixes louder, lower-pitched vowel sounds with softer, higher-pitched consonants such as *s, f, th, t,* and *k*. A student may hear the voice clearly but miss the consonants that carry meaning: plurals, past tense, and whole words.

CONCEPTUAL EXAMPLE An illustration of the idea only. It is not a simulation of any specific hearing loss, device, or student.



"Take out your science folder and finish the first six steps."

WHAT WAS SAID

"Ta_e ou_ your _ien_e _older and _ini_ _e _ir__ _i_ __e__."

WHAT MIGHT GET THROUGH (CONCEPTUAL EXAMPLE)

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Language Access Can't Wait

Children build language through thousands of everyday interactions. That language becomes the foundation for reading, academic learning, and relationships. For a DHH student, the key question is not only *"Can they hear?"* but **"Do they have full, consistent access to a language?"**

The CDC "1-3-6" Early Hearing Detection and Intervention benchmarks

Source: CDC



Early identification

Newborn screening and timely diagnosis let families learn about their child's hearing and their options early.

Early intervention

Services that begin early help children build communication and language skills during the years when language develops fastest.

Consistent access

Language access needs to happen all day, in every setting: home, classroom, lunch, recess, and activities.

When access to language is reduced, it may affect...

Vocabulary

Fewer chances to overhear and practice new words, including words with multiple meanings.

Comprehension

Following longer sentences, multi-step directions, and fast-moving lessons.

Literacy

Reading builds on a strong language foundation in any language, signed or spoken.

Social communication

Joining group talk, catching jokes and side comments, and repairing misunderstandings.

More than one path to language

Spoken language, often supported by hearing technology. **Signed language** such as American Sign Language (ASL), a complete language with its own grammar. **Both**, used together. Families make these choices with their child's team, and school teams support the plan.

KEEP IN MIND

Not every DHH student has a language delay. Many DHH students have age-appropriate or advanced language. What matters is access, support, and each student's needs.

More than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents (NIDCD), so many families are learning about hearing loss and language options at the same time as their child.

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The Information They Didn't Know They Missed

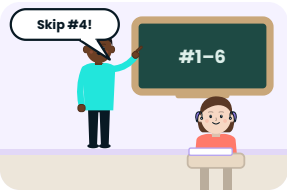
Much of what students learn is never directly taught. It is **overheard**: a classmate's question, a quick reminder, a joke, a change in plans. This is called **incidental learning**. Hearing students pick much of it up without trying. DHH students may miss it *and not know they missed it*, so they can't ask about it.



1. Missing a classmate's question

A question comes from behind the student. The teacher answers "Yes, you can!" The answer makes no sense without the question.

Try this: Repeat or rephrase classmates' questions before you answer them.



2. Missing changed directions

Mid-task, the teacher says "Skip number 4." The student is looking down at the paper and keeps working on the old directions.

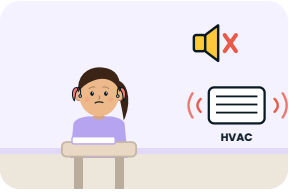
Try this: Get attention first, then post the change where everyone can see it.



3. Group discussions with multiple speakers

Voices overlap, turns change quickly, and the speaker is often out of view. By the time the student finds who is talking, the topic has moved on.

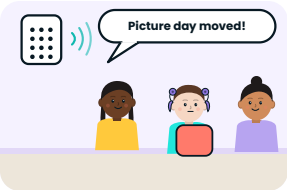
Try this: Use one speaker at a time, and point to or name the speaker.



4. Background noise interfering with speech

Ventilation, hallway noise, chairs, and nearby groups compete with the teacher's voice. Hearing technology picks up noise too.

Try this: Reduce noise sources, close the door, and use the student's hearing technology (such as a remote microphone) if it is part of their plan.



5. Missing announcements during transitions

Intercom messages and reminders often come while students are packing up, moving, or talking: the hardest times to listen.

Try this: Post announcements visually and check that key information reached the student.

Listen for clues: "Wait, what are we doing?" · copying a neighbor's work · laughing a beat late · "Nobody told me." These often signal missed information, not inattention.

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Myth vs. Fact

These common beliefs come from good intentions, but each one can quietly block a student's access to learning.

MYTH **Hearing aids restore normal hearing.**

FACT Hearing aids make sounds louder, but they do not restore normal hearing (NIDCD). Noise, distance, and echo still affect understanding, and hearing aids amplify background noise too.

MYTH **If a student responds to their name, they understand everything.**

FACT A name is familiar, expected, and often comes with visual cues. Understanding new vocabulary, fast talk, or group discussion is much harder than recognizing your own name.

MYTH **Good grades mean accommodations are no longer needed.**

FACT Strong grades may show that supports are working, or that the student is working much harder than peers to keep up. Removing supports can reduce access and add fatigue.

MYTH **Students always ask when they're confused.**

FACT Students can't ask about information they don't know they missed. Many are also tired of asking or don't want to stand out. Build in checks instead of waiting for questions.

MYTH **Front-row seating solves all access problems.**

FACT Seating can help, but the best seat depends on the activity, the speaker, sightlines to an interpreter or captions, and noise sources. A seat can't fix comments from behind or uncaptioned videos.

MYTH **All DHH students communicate the same way.**

FACT DHH students may use spoken language, ASL, both, or other approaches, with or without hearing technology. Preferences can differ by setting. Follow each student's individual plan.

The common thread: access depends on the student, the setting, and the support. When in doubt, ask the student and their DHH team (Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, educational audiologist, speech-language pathologist, or interpreter) what works best.

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What You Can Do Tomorrow







01

Gain attention before speaking

Use the student's name, a wave, a light signal, or a class cue, then begin.

02

Maintain appropriate visual access

Face the class. Don't talk while writing on the board. Keep your face out of window glare, and keep the interpreter in view.

03

Reduce background noise

Close the door, turn off unused equipment, and pause for loud interruptions.

04

Provide accessible directions

Give directions aloud and in writing. Number the steps and post any changes.

05

Check understanding

Ask "What will you do first?" instead of "Do you understand?"

06

Make peer comments accessible

Repeat classmates' questions and answers, and keep to one speaker at a time.

07

Follow the student's individualized support plan

Use the IEP or 504 accommodations and technology routines consistently, in every setting.

08

Encourage self-advocacy

Make "Can you repeat that?" welcome, and thank students for asking.

Know the basics: three federal laws

IDEA

For students with IEPs, the team must consider the student's language and communication needs, including opportunities for direct communication with peers and staff in the student's language and communication mode (34 CFR §300.324).

Section 504

Public schools that receive federal funds must provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to qualified students with disabilities, including needed aids and services (34 CFR §104.33).

ADA Title II

Public schools must make communication with students with disabilities as effective as communication with others, through appropriate aids and services (28 CFR §35.160).

Schools must meet both IDEA and ADA requirements (U.S. Dept. of Education & Dept. of Justice, 2014). This guide is educational, not legal advice; contact your campus IEP or 504 team. Sources: ASHA, CDC, NIDCD, U.S. Dept. of Education. A full reference list is included in the download.

"A student cannot learn from information they cannot access."

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