

# Socialization & Prevention of Bullying

Here are some of the many questions that may run through parents' minds when their child is first identified with a hearing loss:

- Will my child have friends?
- Will she be teased?
- Will she play sports?
- How will I ever leave my child in daycare?

When you feel ready, here are some people to seek out:

- Other parents who have experiences to recount and resources to tell you about, as well as warnings of what to avoid.
- Adults who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing who can introduce you to their world and culture, as well as act as role models for your child.

## **Facilitating Positive Social Experiences: The Early Years**

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A first step in encouraging independence in social situations is leaving your child with a trusted caregiver. It is natural to wonder if communication difficulties will affect the quality of care and the relationships a child will develop with caregivers, teachers and peers. Caregivers do not necessarily need to have previous experience with a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing in order to provide a nurturing and positive environment, but it is important to find a childcare setting that is open to and enthusiastic about welcoming your child.

When **deciding on a childcare setting**, there are some important questions to consider. These are:

- If my child uses amplification (hearing aids, cochlear implants, FM systems), is the caregiver comfortable with and willing to learn about the technology? Will they be committed to helping ensure that my child is using the amplification consistently according to my directions?

- If my child uses sign language (either exclusively or in combination with other communication methods), is the caregiver willing to learn sign language and, if applicable, teach it to other children in the childcare setting?
- What are the acoustics like in the setting? Are the floors carpeted? How many children are in one space at a time?
- Does the caregiver recognize the need to both accommodate my child's special needs as well as foster an environment where my child is included and accepted by the other children?



For more information, see the **'Getting Ready for Kindergarten'** section in this toolkit.

### **“What are those Things in Your Ears? ”**

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It's an inevitable question and it is one your young child will be asked frequently by curious peers. Children should feel comfortable discussing hearing loss with friends and peers. In the early years the parent will be the model. When other children or adults ask about your child's hearing devices, the hearing loss, why you use sign language, etc., answer the questions fully. If you feel comfortable discussing hearing loss, your child will too. Answering questions like these helps your child to develop her sense of self.

*Two-year-old Sally and her mother Liz were in the grocery store putting apples in a bag, when a little boy passing by with his father asked Liz, "What are those things in her ears?" The boy's father looked embarrassed and whispered "sorry" to Liz. Liz smiled at the boy and replied, "Those are Sally's hearing aids." "Oh," said the boy, "What do they do?" Liz replied, "Well, it is a little bit like glasses. I'm wearing glasses to help me see more clearly. Sally's hearing aids help her to hear better."*

## **Running Interference: Knowing When to Step in, and When to Step back**

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As parents, we don't want to see our child get left out or miss an opportunity to make a friend. It's very tempting to jump in and 'smooth out' any communication challenges that pop up.

It is important to allow children to interact on their own - the temptation may be to make the interaction better, but often parents ruin the fun. Use this time to observe. If you see room for improvement in social skills, role play with your child later. Anticipate new situations and play them out beforehand.

Sometimes it is necessary to involve yourself in a situation, but think before you do. Will this help right now or can it wait?

*Sammy, a seven-year-old boy with a severe-profound hearing loss, was playing in the sprinkler with his good friend Jessie, who has typical hearing. Jessie is learning sign language and always makes sure Sammy is watching her before she talks/signs. Because they were playing in the water, Sammy was not wearing his hearing aids. He wasn't looking at Jessie, and she kept calling/signing his name waiting for him to turn around. Sammy's mom was watching. Realizing Jessie was becoming frustrated, Sammy's mom explained that without his hearing aids Sammy cannot hear anything so Jessie would need to tap him - calling his name would not work. She also explained to Sammy that he would need to be more aware of visual cues when he didn't have his hearing aids on. They played in the water the rest of the summer; Jessie knew how to get Sammy's attention and Sammy knew to be aware of what was happening around him.*

Mom chose to intervene because Jessie always made such an effort to communicate effectively with Sammy. Had she waited until later, Jessie would have been frustrated and the learning opportunity would have been gone.

*Five-year-old Daniel arrived with his mother excited to start kindergarten. He didn't know anyone attending the school, but he told his mother he wasn't afraid. Mom was worrying about Daniel making friends because his first language was*

*sign language and his speech was a bit difficult to understand. As Daniel entered the classroom, a boy came up to him and said "Hi, I'm Alex. What's your name?" There was a pause, and Alex and Daniel just looked at each other. Daniel's mom wanted to jump in and facilitate the interaction, but just as she was about to, Daniel said and signed, "Hi! I'm Daniel. Do you want to go over and play with the dinosaurs?" Alex nodded and they headed over to play.*

Sometimes it's hard to wait and see what will happen. Perhaps it's not so surprising, but left to their own devices, children will usually find a way to communicate with each other. It is better in the long run if a child's interactions with peers are her own rather than via a parent.

## **Maintaining and Strengthening Social Ties**

Don't let summer be a down time for your child. Initiate a summer-play group with your child's friends/peers from school. If possible, set up group swim lessons, soccer lessons, gymnastics classes, music classes, etc. for your child. If children continue to see each other during the summer break, when school starts in the fall, they will not have to restart the bonding process again. This time also gives parents a chance to visit and network.

*A group of parents from a Deaf/Hard of Hearing preschool set up a summer playgroup schedule before school let out. The families rotated houses. Whoever hosted was responsible for snack and an activity. The host was in charge of the kids, and unless he needed help, the other parents were off duty. The children looked forward to playgroup, as did the parents. The children strengthened their friendships, were exposed to different adults, and the parents had a great opportunity to strengthen their friendships. When school started in the fall, the teacher commented that there was a noticeable difference in the children. The children didn't need any adjustment period; they were ready to start back again as if there had been no break. The parents continued to meet weekly for coffee.*

## Facilitating Social Competence: Challenges and Ideas

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Children with typical hearing pick up a lot of information indirectly. This is called incidental learning. Because Deaf or Hard of Hearing children do not overhear conversations occurring around them, they will miss information that other children just seem to know. This can cause a feeling of isolation at school. In the cafeteria or on the playground, children will discuss what they will do when they're finished with lunch, the most popular new video game, the new rules for kick ball for Tuesday, etc. Kids move fast and change topics quickly. How can a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing keep up? Does he have a friend or two who can help him catch up?

For more information on **incidental learning**, see the article by the same name in this toolkit.

*Tommy, a child who is Hard of Hearing, was very happy entering into first grade. He had attended kindergarten at the same school, and children he had been friends with were placed in his class. After a couple weeks of school, he told his mom that his friends were still his friends but not after lunch or at recess. She found this puzzling so she observed off and on for a week. She realized her son was missing the other children's plans.*

*When they decided to change an activity, her son missed the change or the new rule. The kids just expected you to follow along if you wanted to play. The mother addressed this with the teacher and set up a plan. They asked three of his friends to make sure Tommy knew when the activity was changing and when the rules were changing. They also discussed with Tommy how fast things are on a playground so he would understand why his friends were pointing out the changes. The kids tried hard, and there were ups and downs, but as they progressed into higher grades the kids continued to relay information to Tommy and eventually Tommy was helping to change the rules. Mom asked every year that certain kids move on to the next class with her son. He had developed some meaningful friendships and she knew the importance of this.*

As your child grows and desires more independence, one way to help him become comfortable and happy in social situations is to do things that are subtle, and which facilitate communication and increase your child's ability to obtain information.

There are many activities where relatively simple accommodations could make all the difference in terms of allowing your child to participate more fully in the experience. Some examples are:

- Find out which movie theatres in your community offer captioning. If your child would like to see a movie with friends that does not have captioning, help your child to request the film.
- Encourage family and friends to turn on the captioning on their television when you go over to visit.
- If your child has an FM/DM system, be sure that it is used on field trips - for example, if someone is leading the class on a tour, ask the tour guide to wear it.
- If your child uses sign language, arrange for an interpreter for activities such as theatre performances, swim and other types of lessons, and story-telling or poetry readings. This is sometimes easier if a group of parents approaches the event or community centre and makes the request. And if you do have an interpreter coming for an activity, be sure to spread the word so other families can participate.
- Similarly, if your child uses sign language and would like an interpreter, arrange for one to be at important family gatherings, such as weddings, funerals, and family reunions. Although this may be an additional expense, it could help your child feel more a part of the experience and more connected to the family.
- Technology is available that can facilitate communication and which is often very popular among young people who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Consider the options, and when appropriate, provide your child with some of these helpful tools (e.g., e-mail, pagers/text-messaging, text telephone (TTY)).

Deafness/hearing loss affects communication, and communication is crucial for developing social relationships. However, you can be sure that your child will find ways to express herself and reach out to others and friendships will form. Perhaps these friendships may be different in some ways from those you had as a child, or from those that other children have, but if your child is happy, confident, and has enriching relationships, that is what is important.

Adapted from:

[-\*Socialization and the Child Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, Hands & Voices\*](#)

## **More than Just “Stay Away from the Bully”**

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*“You shouldn’t have made the team,”* the bully says to the girl with hearing aids. *“You can’t even get a boyfriend.”* The bully and her posse made fun of her signing and whispered, looking and laughing at the girl in the locker room.

And the wounded girl did the right thing. She texted her mom, who encouraged her to tell her coach, and the coach did the right things. He listened and comforted the girl, and took action with the bully and kept watch over the rest of the season, even looking for ways to get the two girls to see each other as fellow humans, not as bully and victim. The mom congratulated the girl for her courage, and told her that she might have changed the life of this bully, and for sure she kept other kids safe from being harassed.

Bullying, by legal definition, is an intentional aggressive behaviour that involves an imbalance of power or strength and is repeated over time. That behaviour can be physical, emotional, sexual, verbal or non-verbal. Emotional or non-verbal bullying includes rejection, extortion, defamation, humiliation, blackmail, manipulation of friends, isolation, and peer pressure.

## Self-Advocacy: A Skill to Cultivate

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The ability to speak up for what they need to strangers, to adults in positions of power, to their own peers, and to the rest of the world around them starts well before a parent might think it does. A strong sense of self makes it possible for a child gathering courage to take a stand, whether that stand is “I need captions on the film in science,” or “No, I am not stealing from Wal-Mart with you.” A teenager doesn’t wake up one day with that strong sense of self, but instead makes baby steps through childhood - from trusting that parents will comfort and feed us when we are toddlers to learning that one can make a mistake playing with a candle at age six. We can live through the parent’s correction, and still feel loved.

The sense of self, and knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses, also means learning about what helps them and what doesn’t help them access information, and to be comfortable in their own skin. When a child does ask for help or otherwise speaks up on her own behalf, parents and teachers can ensure that a child will risk asking another time through celebrating the act of courage (even if it was a bad choice - that’s how we learn!). Imagine the courage it takes to tell a school counselor that you just can’t understand the math teacher with the accent. Any small step toward the larger goal of a child who knows his strengths and needs, and knows who, how, and when to ask for assistance is a step toward victory.

The unfortunate news about asking for help, in particular, is that it doesn’t guarantee a child will get help. A child may not be believed, may be dismissed, and may even be ridiculed when making the request. Parents might even be the ones dismissing a child’s painful experience. A middle school student in Colorado recently sought help about a school bully, and was greeted with “How do we know YOU are not the bully?” This student and her mom learned that speaking up once is not enough. It took multiple times going to bat for a child’s safety and well-being.



## Bullying at School

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No school can keep a child safe from every incident, but awareness and responses to bullying must be proactive and thorough. Bullying at school (or online by classmates) creates a hostile environment where a child can't fully participate or receive the benefits of an education program.

Parents are a child's first teachers in discriminating what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Some actions cross the line. A big brother tickling might be okay, but when the younger sibling has had enough of it, he should be encouraged to say no, and the older child be compelled to honour that refusal.

No child should be made to feel inferior because of a disability; that is clear. It may be that bullies prey on the easy victims: the child who has less developed social skills, difficulty communicating (especially under stress), has fewer friends, is not involved in extracurricular activities and avoids being noticed or being assertive. Parents can bolster a child's confidence in all these areas with modeling, practice, encouragement, and lots of opportunities to grow skills in the safer environment among friends, neighbours, and places frequently visited. Parents can also teach their kids the meaning of the concepts "bribe" or "sarcasm" or "peer pressure" as a way of preparing kids for the big world out there, which can at times be a challenging world.

## How do we Respond?

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A terrific storyteller and clinician, Rebecca Branstetter, writes in her Blog "[Notes from a School Psychologist](#)" about an [incident](#) that inspired her to rethink how schools respond to a child's courageous act to report bullying. She wonders if we inadvertently re-victimize kids who are bullied by putting the burden of change on the victim with statements like "Kids can be cruel, you have to develop a thick skin," or "Did you try ignoring him or avoiding him?"

Her assertion that some of our actions relate to sort of a "blaming the victim" stance is troublesome. Life is full of conflict, and neither parents nor schools can

keep a child safe from all directions, nor should they keep a child in a safety bubble. A child can learn quite a few strategies to employ before telling an adult, and any of these actions can potentially stop a bullying incident from becoming a pattern. Indeed, the very act of “telling,” if handled incorrectly by schools, can make a problem worse for a child. She looks like a “rat” to the bully and his entourage.

In light of the likelihood of bullying (or even the risk of abuse, which is three times higher for kids with hearing loss than the general population) in a child’s life, parents can also make sure a child learns safety skills and defenses to better protect themselves. See the **Kidpower** ([www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org)) website for excellent resources and classes on this topic, including how to walk with awareness and confidence, possible responses to teasing, how to walk confidently away from a bully without making the situation worse, and more. Schools can create a culture that doesn’t tolerate bullying through the careful observation of behaviour, actively looking and listening for incidents, and fully investigating and acting on each one.

What about the bystanders? Encouraging other children to intervene rather than just passively watch a bully continue is a worthwhile endeavour, and could also stop a bullying incident from repeating. In the response to bullying, school policies should also address the bully or bullies themselves. A school who gets the facts of the bullying right, attempts to pinpoint the many causes, and takes action to prevent future problems - whether that be classroom instruction, more supervision at recess, listening to children and planning for change - is a school that will build a safe environment where learning can actually happen.

Adapted from:

[-More Than Just “Stay Away from the Bully”, Hands & Voices](#)

## What Should You do if Your Child is Bullied?

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### 10 Guideposts to Help Stop Bullying

A child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing faces unique challenges in keeping pace with his classmates. Add bullying to the mix and you have a problem that can be overwhelming for the student, the parent and the school staff. The solutions are as varied as the classmates, schools and communities where the bullying occurs. Here are 10 guideposts to help stop bullying.

#### PREVENTION

##### 1. Recognize that bullying happens to kids who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Many people cannot conceive of the idea that a child with special needs would be the victim of bullying. Unfortunately, children perceived as being different in some way are usually the *first* individuals to be targeted by bullies. This aggression can take the form of:

- Teasing imitation of the use of sign language.
- Mimicking the child's distinctive vocal quality.
- Encouraging classmates not to associate with the "different" kid.

##### 2. Be alert that bullying might be happening.

Since children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing can occupy a lower social standing among their peers, they might lack a support system - which the bully recognizes. Bullying can go unreported because children with special needs sometimes struggle with self-esteem issues. They may fail to report the abuse due to their feelings of intimidation, humiliation, or embarrassment. It's important to speak with your child about bullying. Tell your child in no uncertain terms that bullying should never be tolerated and there is no shame attached to reporting it.

### **3. Help create a communication friendly environment in your child's school.**

Since bullies tend to victimize individuals without a support network, encourage your child to engage with other kids and adult staff. Establish a rapport with your child's teacher and principal. Educate them to the nature of your child's hearing loss and to your child's strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, one student who is Deaf had the reputation of being rude because she didn't return the greetings of classmates who passed her in the hall. When the group was reminded that they needed to be in the child's line of sight in order for their greetings to be recognized, the misunderstanding ceased.

### **4. Teach your child to be a self-advocate.**

Teach your child that she has a lot to offer both her classmates and her school. Encourage your child to speak out when something seems wrong. If she is perceived as having a strong character, that is often enough to discourage a bully from targeting her. If necessary, consider social skills training or getting to know a Deaf or Hard of Hearing adult mentor for assistance.

### **5. Beware of cyberbullying.**

The cyberbully uses the Internet and social media tools to harass his victims. Matthew Kaplowitz, co-author of *How to Talk to Your Kids About Bullying and School Violence* and producer of digital media for students with disabilities, recommends that you oversee your child's computer activities. "Consider installing Internet security filters. They will help you regulate your child's online experience. Teach your child the nuances of communicating online, and that messages, sent privately, can easily be shared with others. Check text messages to make sure that offensive messages aren't being sent to your child. Teach your child **never** to reveal personal information online."

## **INTERVENTION**

### **6. Be supportive.**

If you discover that your child is being bullied, don't wait. Speak to her about it immediately. Listen to your child's feelings. Be understanding and supportive. Explain that she is not responsible for being bullied, nor is there any shame in being bullied - bullying must never be tolerated. Share a story about how you or someone you know was bullied. You are also likely to have strong feelings in the matter, but try to generate an impression of calmness. This is your child's experience - and it's a very personal experience.

### **7. Gather information.**

Find out everything you can about the incident(s). Who was involved? What led up to the altercation? How long has the bullying been going on? Learn about the school's anti-bullying policy. Get all your facts organized so you can approach the situation efficiently and effectively.

### **8. Communicate your concerns calmly with the school.**

Positive communication is usually the key to getting results. Approach your child's teacher and the parents of the bully in a calm, objective manner. Let your demeanor show that you are just there to find a practical solution to an unfortunate problem. The other parties involved might respond defensively if they feel you are angry or judging them. You are all going to have to work together on a solution, so eliminate resistance before it begins by communicating calmly.

### **9. Be persistent.**

Bullying is not to be tolerated after it has been discovered and reported. If the bullying continues and your child's teacher doesn't rectify the problem in a prompt fashion, do not hesitate to take the matter to a higher authority. Alert the school's guidance counselor or principal. Keep a written record of all the communications and conversations you've had with teachers and school staff or school administration.

## 10. Set up a plan with your child's learning team.

If the bullying of your child is based on his hearing loss and the harassment is interfering with your child's learning, the school is obligated to stop the persecution and provide support. Set up a meeting with the school team to collaboratively figure out an anti-bullying action plan.

### **Final Words: There is no quick fix to the problem of bullying.**

Bullying is a serious situation that requires the ongoing involvement of family, school staff, and community members. Once you have come to a resolution, share your experiences with the special needs community. We're all in this together and the more information that is available, the easier it is for everyone.

*This article (adapted from [https://dcmp.org/ai/bullying/dhh\\_web.pdf](https://dcmp.org/ai/bullying/dhh_web.pdf)) was prepared in collaboration with Hands & Voices ([www.handsandvoices.org](http://www.handsandvoices.org)), the National Association for Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (NAPVI) and Bridge Multimedia ([www.bridgemultimedia.com](http://www.bridgemultimedia.com)).*

## Related links

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**Kidpower:** Kidpower is dedicated to providing empowering and effective child protection, positive communication, and personal safety skills for all ages and abilities through their free online library, affordable publications and K-12 curriculum, workshops, and professional consulting  
<https://www.kidpower.org/>

**National Bullying Prevention Centre:** A website created by PACER, a parent training and information centre for families of children with disabilities, to address bullying through educational, creative, and interactive resources.

<http://www.pacer.org/bullying/>

**PREVNet:** PREVNet is a national network of leading researchers and organizations, working together to stop bullying in Canada. It is the first of its kind in this country and a world leader in bullying prevention. Through education, research, training and policy change, PREVNet aims to stop the violence caused by bullying - so every child can grow up happy, healthy and safe.

<http://www.prevnet.ca/>

**StopBullying.gov:** A website that provides information from various U.S. government agencies about how students, parents, educators, and community members can prevent or stop bullying.

<http://www.stopbullying.gov/>