

Deaf Plus: Education of Deaf Children with Multiple Challenges

“Deaf/HH Plus is meant to be a positive term, not in any way negative or insensitive to the child who has medical issues along with hearing loss. In fact, I see it as an “A+” or “B+,” meaning the child carries additional positive qualities, but it is a gift that needs to be carefully unwrapped. And it may not appear to be a gift when you first receive it. Time helps you appreciate, understand, and unfold the possibilities. And the “Plus” most often means the child and family has added responsibilities and requires additional expertise.”

-From Children Who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing PLUS, NCHAM E-book: A Resource Guide for Early Hearing Detection and Intervention

The term **“Deaf Plus”** refers to children who have a hearing loss in addition to other conditions that affect them medically, physically, emotionally, educationally, or socially. This can include:

- intellectual/cognitive disabilities
- emotional and behavioural disabilities
- learning disabilities
- ADD/ADHD
- visual impairment
- cerebral palsy
- autism
- orthopedic involvement, or
- other physical disabilities.

The presence of hearing loss may make it more difficult to diagnose other disabilities. Hearing loss and the other disabilities may interact in such a way as to make it very difficult to tease out exactly what is happening. Conversely, the other disabilities may mask the hearing loss, particularly if these other disabilities are also associated with delays in communication and language development.

It is important to understand how hearing loss interfaces with a child's other challenges in order to facilitate language acquisition and communication. A child who is Deaf Plus may demonstrate significant gaps that impact development and learning. Often a parent is the person who best understands a child's unique needs; this is especially true of some of the less common aetiologies and syndromes.

Consequently, educational needs will vary significantly depending upon the nature of the disability. A child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing on the autism spectrum will have very different needs than one with a severe emotional disorder. In both cases, the low incidence of children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing with such disabilities and the need to prioritize language access pose unique challenges for educational decision-making.

What We Know and What We Don't Know

Here's what we know:

- When special education services are needed, finding an appropriate placement and supports is dependent upon first obtaining a reliable evaluation of the child's abilities and needs.
- When a child has a complex profile with multiple disabilities, the evaluation becomes more critical.
- Finding qualified evaluators can be extremely difficult.

Evaluations must be done by qualified and licensed professionals who understand the nature of the child's disabilities, the impact of those disabilities on learning, and the implications for educational placement. What makes the assessment of a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing unique is something often taken for granted in other situations: the evaluator must be able to communicate fluently and effectively with the child.

Full language access is essential. A child whose primary language is American Sign Language (ASL) must be evaluated by someone who is fluent in that language. The evaluator must also understand how being Deaf or Hard of Hearing shapes that child's cultural and social experiences. For children who do not sign, the evaluator must understand the child's language abilities and limitations, and the potential impact on the validity of test results. Evaluators must also be aware that a child's English language skills cannot be considered indicative of his cognitive abilities.

The evaluation is essential but cannot stand alone. An evaluator cannot know firsthand how a child responds over time. Parents, other caregivers, and educators offer a rich perspective of the child's abilities and needs that cannot be obtained through testing.

Once an appropriate evaluation is completed and the team has met to discuss parent/caregiver assessment of needs and review the child's history, the question then becomes "How does one find the school placement or supports to meet those needs?" Language access is a prerequisite to learning, but while this must be the first consideration, the child's cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and medical/physical needs must also be addressed through specialized educational programming. Placing a child with significant disabilities in a classroom without the structure or supports that child needs will compromise the education of all children in that class.

In addition to language access, one must consider:

- The nature and severity of the disability.

- The child's age, prior education, and current functioning.
- The child's ability to work independently and in groups.
- Support services needed – speech and language, mobility, occupational and/or physical therapy, behavioural support, mental health services, etc.

Materials & Strategies Used with Children Who are Deaf Plus

No single specific educational technique is appropriate for all children who are Deaf Plus since each child has unique needs. Characteristics of a successful program should include:

- a high level of structure
- specific, clearly stated objectives
- a focus on the individual needs of each child
- instruction that is step-by-step in nature
- practical experiences in natural environments
- consistent routines
- age-appropriate materials are important
- a focus on motivating the child
- provision of successful experiences
- an emphasis on the student's skills in given situations, not his limitations
- over-learning (going over a skill after it seems to be mastered) may be necessary
- planning for the transfer of instruction to real life situations

There may be specialized programs and services available locally for some children who are Deaf Plus. Coordinating services across many different providers, and with the school, can require considerable effort.

Even in the best of circumstances, we cannot know with certainty what will work for a child with a unique profile of complex needs. We must continually observe, assess, review progress and be prepared to make changes if needed.

Successful strategies for children who are Deaf Plus are future-oriented - the goal being to prepare students to participate in society as fully as they desire once they leave school.

Adapted from:

-[Communication Considerations: Deaf Plus, Hands & Voices](#)
-[Judy Vreeland, Educating Deaf Children with Multiple Challenges](#)
-[Deaf Students with Disabilities, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center](#)

Additional Resources

Deaf Students with Disabilities Network, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, Gallaudet University - <http://deafwdisabilities.grou.ps/home>

- This on-line network is designed to provide resources, tools, and information to parents and professionals who have or work with Deaf and Hard of Hearing students with disabilities. The site includes discussion forums designed to promote information sharing and ongoing opportunities to engage with others living and working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing students with disabilities.

NCHAM E-book: A Resource Guide for Early Hearing Detection and Intervention: Chapter 9: Children Who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing PLUS
http://www.infanthearing.org/ehdi-ebook/2015_ebook/9-Chapter9ChildrenPLUS2015.pdf