

Incidental Learning

Incidental learning is some form of indirect/additional/unplanned learning. For example, while playing a video game at home, a child improves eye-hand coordination.

Incidental learning is the main way that we develop vocabulary and learn about language. Of the thousands of words we know, very few have been directly taught to us. As much as 90% percent of what a person with typical hearing learns is from incidental learning. Only 10% is learned from direct instruction.¹

A significant way to learn incidentally is to learn by overhearing. Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing have fewer opportunities to learn by overhearing. If spoken or signed language is not directed specifically to a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, she may not get the message. This means that she can miss out on an opportunity to learn.

What Can We do About This?

Awareness is very important. Notice how many times during a day you get information by overhearing something that wasn't directed right at you. Siblings, extended family members, teachers, camp counselors, swimming coaches, and anyone who spends time with your child should be aware that she may not understand information that is not directly said or signed to her.

It is also a good idea to make your child aware. You can point out examples of learning by overhearing in daily life - such as in movies, when the plot moves forward because a character overhears a tidbit of information. If you are aware that she is missing subtle cues in family gatherings and social situations, point them out or discuss later what she may have missed.

Create a more favourable environment to increase chances of overhearing. Use visual cues and close, clear speech. While commuting or travelling in the car,

consider the following: use a remote microphone system; repeat what other people say; close the car windows; tell your child about changes in topic (“*Now we’re talking about...*”); and use additional mirrors in the car so that your child can see the faces of the driver and passenger. Encourage your child to self-advocate and participate in creating this favourable listening environment.

If your child wears hearing aids or cochlear implants, make sure that she can hear soft speech. Schedule regular audiology appointments.

Consider the impact in social situations. Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing may not be aware of subtle social cues. They may misunderstand sayings and slang. Fast-paced conversations between peers may be difficult to keep up with. Many conversations with peers happen in the lunchroom, gym, outside, and in small group discussions. These are difficult listening situations, making it harder to interact with peers.¹ If there are misunderstandings, it is important to recognize when lack of incidental knowledge could have added to the situation.

Expect that you may need to explicitly teach vocabulary knowledge. For children with typical hearing, vocabulary knowledge is learned indirectly through daily conversations with adults, siblings, and peers using routines, games, songs and reading activities.²

You can explicitly teach vocabulary by:

Using the right terminology. Don’t call hearing aids “ears,” or the worker at a supermarket “the Sobeys lady.” Use cashier, butcher, stock boy, etc. The terminology can be fingerspelled – it is vital for your child to see how the words are formed in addition to listening.

- When doing fun activities, take the opportunity to *use a wide variety of vocabulary*. If you are going bowling for her birthday, teach her words ahead of time, such as: bowling alley, lane, gutter, strike, spare, gutter guards and pins. Show your child what the setting of the event may look like by going on the Internet.

- *Teach new words every time you read with your child.* Ask your child to pick a new word, and then you pick a new word. Make it a game, not a chore. Reading is the richest source for learning new words. Again, fingerspelling is beneficial for new vocabulary. Fingerspell the new word first and show the sign for it. Go on the Internet to learn a new sign for the chosen word.
- *Repeat, repeat, repeat.* Once a word is taught, use it often and in different ways. Children with typical hearing get this repetition by overhearing. Children with hearing loss need the repetition too - but the repetition will need to happen explicitly, because it is not happening incidentally.
- *Label, label, label.* Label everything in the house. Put up a picture of your family members, classmates, neighbours, and friends and label everyone by their first and last name. Leave closed captioning on all the time. Vocabulary can be picked up through captioning.
- *Encourage your child to ask what words mean* or ask her if she knows what something is called. Play "Who Am I," "I Spy," or other word games in the car.
- *Strengthen her ability to use visual cues.* Play finger-spelling and/or speechreading games or use formal speechreading programs; point out examples of body language when you see it used well; play charades and mime games. Flashcards will come in handy. Direct your child's attention visually to important interactions or conversations. See the articles *Early Communication and Visual Attention* and *Speechreading* in this toolkit for more information.

References:

- ¹Doyle, Melanie and Dye, Linda. (2002). Mainstreaming the Student who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing Retrieved on June 14, 2013 from:
http://www.handsandvoices.org/pdf/mainst_cal.pdf
- ²Luckner, John I and Cooke, Christine. (2010). A Summary of the Vocabulary Research With Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. *American Annals of the Deaf*, Vol. 155, No. 1.