

## Listening Fatigue

You may notice that your child gets more tired than other children with typical hearing. If so, you are not alone - listening fatigue is common in children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Even people with typical hearing can find listening to be hard work, when someone is speaking softly, or while communicating in a noisy environment. Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing have to pay closer attention when listening than children with typical hearing. This means that they have to use more of their cognitive (brain) resources to listen.

The brain uses huge amounts of energy for an organ of its size - about 20% of the total amount that the body uses. If children have to use more resources to listen, it makes sense that they will have less energy for other things. Not only do they listen with their hearing devices, but they also rely on their eyes to speechread the teacher and classmates, watch out for the change of activities, and to read body language.



Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing may be more tired at the end of a school day than their siblings or friends. In a typical school, 65% of the day is spent listening. As a result, fatigue can have a significant impact on their learning, development, and well-being. Adults who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing also report increased fatigue and tension.

“My 15-year-old takes herself off to bed exhausted by 7:30 or 8:00 on a school night.”  
-Parent

### What does Listening Fatigue Look Like?

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- Sleepiness in the morning or falling asleep on the way home from school.
- Not paying attention, or having a hard time concentrating on work.
- Giving up easily as tasks become more difficult.
- Easily frustrated.

- Mood changes.
- Saying “Pardon?” frequently.
- Changes in play activities (such as a decrease in energy or not enjoying some activities, especially in noisy environments).
- Making careless mistakes.
- Not showing creativity in solving problems.
- Laying head down on the desk in the classroom.
- Headaches.
- Rubbing eyes.

### **Strategies to Deal with Listening Fatigue**

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- *Ensure listening is as easy as possible.* Consistent use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and FM/DM systems are critical. In the classroom, adaptations to the environment to create a quieter learning environment can include *HushUps* on classroom chairs and closing the classroom door. Contact your educational audiologist for more information on this topic.
- *Help your child to understand that being tired is OK.* Naps should be encouraged as needed. If possible, role model this behaviour for your child. Avoid saying that you are “too busy to nap.” If you consider naptime to be unproductive, your child might develop a needless (and perhaps harmful) association with the need to rest.
- *Help your child to develop self-awareness of what is tiring, and what helps her to recover when tired.* For example, some foods may make her feel tired. If you notice that she “crashes” after eating a sugar-filled snack, bring that to her attention. Discuss your own strategies.
- *Show your child how to take “time-out.”* Help him learn to take care of himself; eat reasonably, exercise, and get to bed at a good hour. Explain

that, because of all the energy needed to follow and understand others, he may need more rest than his siblings, and that's okay.

- *Music.* Listening to music or music lessons are activities that could be beneficial for your child. It may strengthen your child's ability to hear in noise.

## Strategies to Deal with Listening Fatigue in the Classroom

- *Provide listening breaks.* When your child demonstrates some of the signs of listening fatigue listed above, she may need a listening break. These breaks only need to last as long as it would take to eat a cookie (2-3 minutes). She should not remove her hearing aids. She can remove herself from the classroom environment by bringing a note to the office, getting a drink of water, or simply walking to the library. It is helpful to schedule breaks following noisier activities (such as group work or Phys Education).
- *Pre-teach vocabulary.* Children with typical hearing may be able to figure out the meaning of an unknown word through the context of a story. However, children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing are already using the context to fill in the gaps of what they do not hear - expecting them to also infer vocabulary will demand even more cognitive (brain) resources. Pre-teaching new vocabulary will help to reduce listening effort.
- *Provide a quiet workspace.* A quiet workspace is especially helpful during group or partner work. Allowing the student to work in a quieter space will reduce listening effort. If possible, use assistive technology, such as an FM/DM system, during group or partner work. See the *Assistive Technology* article in this toolkit for more information.
- *Use visuals.* Visual information such as the daily timetable, diagrams explaining the relationship between concepts, and keywords may help to



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reduce listening fatigue. Visual information can also help children to remember more of what is said. A whiteboard at home is a good way of reinforcing the value of visuals (i.e., this is not just for school). If audiovisual materials will be shown in class, ensure the material is closed captioned or subtitled. Captioning will give your child a break from listening.

- *Monitor workload.* It should be noted that while students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing may not appear fatigued during the school day, parents often report that children are extremely tired after school, and more so after mid-week. Be aware of the amount of homework that is assigned, knowing that they may experience greater fatigue than their peers or siblings.
- *Consider modifications to timetable.* For children in junior high or high schools, try to schedule Social Studies and English in different semesters, as the listening demands are high with group discussions, audio-visual materials and presentations. These classes also have heavier reading and writing requirements.
- Use your child's name before giving an instruction and make sure she is looking at you before you talk. Extending your hand with your palm up towards the child could provide a visual cue. (Research has shown that Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults have enhanced peripheral vision compared to adults with typical hearing.)
- Use simple language. Allow your child time to respond. Simplify the instructions by dividing them into smaller pieces.
- Ensure that instructions are specific, and given in the order that you expect them to be carried out.

## Other Causes of Fatigue

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While fatigue in children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing is often recognized as being related to listening effort, there are other causes of tiredness in children. If you are concerned, you should also speak to your physician.

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