

Early Communication & Visual Attention

Ways Encourage Good Communication and Visual Attention

- Get your child's attention/eye contact before you communicate.
- Be sure you have joint attention or are both giving attention to the same thing.
- Position yourself so that it is **easy** to look at you.
 - Be in front of him.
 - Be close.
 - Be at his eye level (this usually means that you have to crouch down).
- Make yourself **interesting** to look at.
 - Show special interest.
 - Be animated (use facial expressions and natural gestures).
 - Bring objects close to your face.
 - Use movement to bring attention to your face (for example, wiggle a toy close to your face).
- Wait, wait, wait.
- When your child looks at you, it's your turn to talk.
- Be brief. Finish before your child looks away.
- Waiting is a skill related to patience. Be patient with your child and with yourself.
- Do what you want your child to do.
 - Look at him when he communicates with you.
 - Respond immediately when he calls you.

- Encourage your child to keep the conversation going.
 - Keep interactions fun and simple.
 - Use repetition.
 - Practice turn-taking.

If you'd like to **learn more** about why these strategies work, keep reading.

One question you may be asking yourself is "How am I going to bond with my child when they can't even hear my voice?" It is not only possible but it is essential!

"When I discovered that Tess was indeed deaf, it impacted how I interacted with her. I stopped talking and singing to her. I was very sad for a few months. I love music. I thought that was an area she could never appreciate and share with me. But after becoming more educated about deafness, I realized that Tess could still benefit from these things. She may not be able to hear it, but she could see my facial expressions that come with talking and singing. She could see my lips move and feel my chest rise and fall with my songs and laughter. She could still enjoy music by dancing with me and feeling the vibrations on the floor and on balloons and drums. I have learned to enjoy her more than I ever thought possible."

-Quote from a mother of a daughter who is Deaf

Bonding happens at any age but is especially important early on in your child's life. A strong attachment during early childhood can form the foundation for trust and self-esteem later in life. You can connect in many different ways using all of the senses that are available to your child. Communication is an important part of bonding, but does not need to rely on speaking and hearing.

Communication means sending a message and having the other person receive it. For instance, when your baby cries, you may be able to decipher if this is a hunger cry or one associated with pain. Besides crying, your baby is attempting all forms of communication with you by using her eyes, smiles, kicks, etc.

You will instinctively learn to use touch, sight and movement to communicate, thus building the bond between you. You can do all the things you normally do with a child; you will just need to do them a little differently. In particular, you will need to get your child's visual attention before communicating with her.

Why is Visual Attention so Important?

When a child is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, other senses are even more essential for learning.

To help you understand how essential visual information is for learning about the world, try watching a television show with the sound turned off. You'll probably be able to answer most of these questions:

- Who is the most important character in the show?
- What happened first? Next? Last?
- How did the people in the show feel?
- Was the show funny? Scary? Sad?
- Did you enjoy the show? Why?
- What helped you to follow the story?

In addition to learning, a child's safety in many situations - crossing streets, for instance - depends on his attention to visual information. Helping a child to learn to focus on this kind of information is vital.

Children with typical hearing are able to continue looking at what they are interested in while someone talks to them. But children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing usually need to look at the speaker to be able to understand what is being said and/or signed. To look at you, *they must look away from what holds their interest* and direct their attention to you. (Note: Some children who are Hard of Hearing respond without needing to look.)

Ways to Gain Your Child's Attention

The following are some suggestions on how you can gain your child's attention without using cues that require them to use their hearing:

- Get on the same eye level. If she is lying on the bed or floor, get down there with her.
- Tap her gently on the arm.
- Wave your hand within her field of vision.
- Lightly shake her bed or chair.
- Stamp on the floor.
- Bang on the table.
- Turn the lights on and off quickly.
- If your child is able to perceive sound, make a noise. If she can perceive speech, teach her to recognize her name.
- At a distance, use vision and/or vibration cues.

For a parent with typical hearing, **it takes practice** to wait for eye contact before communicating with their Deaf or Hard of Hearing child. **Joint visual attention** means that both parent and child are giving attention to the same thing. Deaf mothers frequently move objects of interest to an area within the mother-infant line of sight. *They also wait* - giving their infants ample time to focus on the shared objects. For mothers with typical hearing, this provides a useful clue for better communication.

Your child indicates what he is interested in by his non-verbal behaviour (what he does), as well as his verbal behaviour (what he says). For better communication, parents can:

- **Watch.** Observe what your child is interested in and where his visual attention is directed.
- **Wait.** Give him time and opportunity to use all of his senses - especially the sense of sight. Wait until he looks at you.

- **Communicate.** When your child looks at you, communicate about whatever it is that interests him.

Ways to Keep Your Child's Attention

The following are some ways that you can keep your child's attention:

- Face your child and maintain eye contact.
- Create a visual world - use gestures, facial expressions (to convey happiness, sadness, sleepiness, questions, etc.), body movements and sign language to explain the world to your child.
- Make a scrapbook of your child's favourite people and things and talk about them.
- Point things of interest out to your child.
- Move the child's legs and engage in a variety of touching behaviours such as tapping, stroking and tickling. Keep the hands free for possible communication efforts.
- Play, play, play. Anything that engages your child. Copy facial expressions, teach him to blow raspberries, play peek-a-boo.
- Offer them books. See the *Early Literacy* article in this toolkit for information.

Ways to Enhance Communication with Your Child

The following are some ways you can enhance communication with your child:

- Clear the visual path between you. Keep your hands away from your face so she can see your eyes and lips.
- Be aware of light sources and the impact of shade. Do not stand in front of an un-shaded window or in front of a lamp that is on. The light from these sources makes it difficult to see you.
- **Building conversations builds the child's language base.** Conversation is a lot like a game of volleyball. The rules are simple: you pass the ball back and forth, taking turns. Everybody gets a chance to serve the ball,

and players try to keep the ball in the air. When a child cries or points, she is serving the ball to you. You respond by turning to her and maybe raising your eyebrows as if to say “What do you want?” She then communicates again. **Turn-taking is an important part of communication.** She will learn that when she gestures, you will respond. Research shows us that turn-taking has a strong positive relationship with language development in children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. As the number of turns increase, language scores increase.

- Be aware of competing background noise. Turn off the radio or television when communicating. Also, **turn off the television and the radio to promote more communication.** Research also shows us that when the television is on, there are fewer conversational turns between parents and children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. In other words: **television has a significant negative relationship with language development in children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.**

Tools in Developing Turn-taking and Conversation

Use the following tools in developing turn-taking and conversation:

- Be a good observer. Watch and become aware of the ways he is trying to communicate. Look for gestures, reaching, tugging, pointing or other body movements that can communicate meaning. Pay close attention to your child’s facial expressions, smiling, fussing or crying, furrowing eyebrows, and eye gaze. Remember that there are many ways for your child to communicate his needs. It is up to you to watch, listen and respond to his cues.
- Also, tune into situational or contextual clues to figure out what the child is trying to communicate. Does she go to the kitchen? Maybe she is hungry. Follow her lead and comment on her world. It is much easier to communicate with someone if they are interested in what is taking place. As your child explores and plays, comment on what is taking place or attach labels for objects that are being played with. For instance, sign or say ‘sticky’ if your child is exploring something sticky or ‘cat, black’ if your

family pet walks by. You will probably find that your child will be interested in looking at what you have to say and your signs will make more sense if you match her interests.

Ways to Encourage Your Child to Keep the Conversation Going

- Smile, clap, and nod your head up and down.
- Use encouraging words, signs and/or gestures: yes, right, good, thank you.
- Rephrase what your child is communicating; for instance, if he points at a bear, you could sign “The bear is big.”
- Act as if the child’s signal has meaning and sign back.
- Imitation is a good way to respond. If you can’t understand the child’s sign or gesture, imitate it and sign ‘yes.’
- Remember, children love **repetition**. If you are teaching your child a new word or sign, use it as often as possible.
- Be expressive; use your face and body to support your words. For instance, if you are sleepy you could sign “sleepy” or you could yawn and lay your head on your pretend pillow. When signing “no,” you should not be smiling. This might be confusing.
- **Draw your child’s attention up to your face** when you are talking to him. If he is looking at an interesting toy that is lying in front of him, pick it up and put it close to your face before you begin talking about it.
- Sometimes, exaggerated facial expressions help make meaning clearer. It may feel very awkward, silly or unnatural to exaggerate your facial expressions. The exercises listed below may help you feel more comfortable.
 - During a meal or some other time when family members are together, communicate only with facial expression and gestures (no voice or sign).

- Play charades. Act out events that have particular emotions attached, such as a surprise birthday party.
- Play follow the leader – everyone must copy the leader’s expression. A large mirror makes it more fun so you can see each other and yourself all at once.
- Produce the facial expression that shows each emotion: fear, sadness, surprise, delight, anger, terror, shock, smelling something awful, doubt, excitement.

Ways to Engage Your Child’s Other Senses

Remember that your child has four other senses that may be more acute because of their hearing loss.

- Offer toys that light up and vibrate.
- Provide different fabrics and textures. Let your child develop the sense of touch by allowing him to explore all types of fabric, foods, paint, play-dough, water, etc.
- Make drums out of empty oatmeal containers, coffee cans, pots and pans. She may not hear the noise but will feel the vibrations.
- Balloons will pick up vibrations. Offer these to your child under close supervision since broken balloon pieces can be swallowed.
- Place mirrors around the house at your child’s eye level. There are some on the market that are not breakable.

My Child Doesn’t Look at Me!

The following are some suggestions on how you can gain your child’s attention.

When your child refuses to look at you, it’s easy to try “quick-fix” strategies that may work for the moment or work in an urgent situation. But, in the long run, this won’t help your child to become an active communication partner.

Some children may have learned from past experience that **they don’t really get enough information** from looking at other people. This can happen when:

- Parents are using only speech with a child who is not able to learn through hearing alone.
- Families are struggling to use signs, or know only a few signs to use. Or they feel awkward, uncomfortable, or unsure about the importance of using signs.

Some children may have learned from past experience that when they look at others, **there will be demands made of them**. This can happen when:

- Families are using a lot of questions and commands in their communication.
- Parents are not following their child's lead in play and interest.

Some children may have learned from past experience **that looking at others and trying to make sense of what they're saying/signing is very frustrating**.

This can happen when:

- Families haven't had enough information or support to help them learn how to communicate with their child.
- Families with a child who has additional special needs lack information about how to communicate in ways to meet their child's unique needs.

What to Avoid

The following actions should be strictly avoided as they may be unhelpful or even harmful:

- Roughly tapping your child.
- Waving your hands too close to her face.
- Forcibly trying to turn your child's face towards you.
- Glaring at your child when he finally looks at you.
- Any behaviour or action that shows your frustration. (Remember, you want to **model** what you want your child to do.)
- Demanding that your child understand or respond in a way that he finds difficult.

Strategies that work

- Waiting.
- Gently tapping your child's shoulder or arm once or twice.
- Bringing the object your child is interested in close to your face.
- Looking pleased when he finally looks at you.
- Offering more comments and fewer commands and questions.
- Relaxing and having fun with your child.

An important note: Deaf mothers usually sign by moving themselves and their hands within their infant's line of vision, rather than by physically moving their child. Mothers with typical hearing may also find this a useful strategy.

What if My Child has Additional Challenges?

If your child is visually impaired, use his other senses to alert him to communication and play. Gently tap him. Let him feel your face as you talk and smile. If he is able to see contrasts of light and colour, try wearing bright clothing, or using voice-activated lights to get his attention. Stay close when speaking and signing to make the best use of the vision he has.

If your child resists eye contact because of additional behavioural challenges (associated with autism, for example), continue to be animated in your communication. Speak and sign close to your child and down at his level. Use interesting sound, light and action toys. Use pictures of routines and objects and signs to get your message across. Some parents have observed that if they persist - keep trying for several minutes to get their child's visual attention - this can pay off.

If your child resists touch (is tactile defensive), go slowly but continue to gently encourage him to try touch activities. Finger painting, sand and water play, textured books, and play with soft materials like bubbles or cloth balls can help him to become more comfortable with touch. Continue to get his visual

attention by speaking and signing, using intonation and animated body language.

Adapted from:

-Getting My Child's Visual Attention in *My Turn to Learn: A Communication Guide for Parents of Deaf or Hard of Hearing Children* from Elks Family Hearing Resource Centre. The book is available from Alberta Hands & Voices Lending Library

-[*Babies & Hearing Loss Notebook: An Interactive Resource for Families of Young Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*](#)

-*Outcomes of Children with Hearing Loss: Results from a Multicenter, Longitudinal Study (Walker et al, 2015)*