



Mainstream News

Information about hearing loss for students, families and educators

Teacher Selection: By Choice or By Chance?

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Choosing appropriate teachers for a student with hearing loss is an important undertaking on several grounds. A teacher who is interested and flexible and whose basic teaching style can accommodate a student with special needs will be able to do a more effective job. If the teacher's communication style also meets the specific auditory and speech reading needs of such a student, that student will hear and understand better and will find greater success in class. We know that it isn't always feasible to choose teachers for the next school year, whether a student is in elementary, middle or high school. Scheduling conflicts can be unavoidable, and sometimes there is only one teacher available for a particular grade or course. However, whenever possible, it is in the student's best interest to make teacher selection an important part of the planning process. It is a decision that should be made as a team, with input from the student and her parents, her current teacher and other service providers, and the prospective teachers.

Because mainstream schools are designed for students who hear normally, all students with hearing loss, regardless of their degree of loss, are at risk for missing information. It is important that school teams and administrators realize that deliberate selection of teachers is not about preferential treatment. It is about placing the student in a setting where she will have a chance to be a part of the classroom, not just a decoration. Those who have the final say in teacher assignment may not necessarily be familiar with the student or her specific needs as a student with hearing loss. The points presented in this article are offered as a starting point, to help guide your discussions and observations when there is a choice of teachers for the coming year. It may be that there is one clear choice, or there may be a number of teachers who would be appropriate. Careful selection will reduce the chance that the student ends up in a situation where it is difficult for her to understand what is being said and be an active participant.

Know the student

Teacher selection begins with knowing the communication and learning needs of the student. What are her strengths and weaknesses? How much repetition and reinforcement does she need? How does she handle group work? What situations cause her to feel stress or communication fatigue? In what settings is she most successful? How well can she use her hearing in a group situation? How important is visual support? Depending on the age of the student, it can help to give her an opportunity to visit classes and to meet prospective teachers informally.

For example, a teacher may have a structured teaching approach, which is typically beneficial for a student with hearing loss, but if her articulation is such that the student finds her mouth movements impossible to speech read or her voice too soft or fast paced, it would be difficult for the student to understand her.

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Observe and talk with prospective teachers

The purpose of observing classes is not to pass judgment on the teachers themselves. You are focusing on the elements necessary for your student to be able to understand and to function. Pay close attention to the teacher's communication, instructional and management style. How expressive is she? Is her articulation clear and deliberate? A student who uses speech reading as a support to listening will be relying on mouth movements and facial expressions to help fill in information that is missed through her imperfect hearing. A teacher who speaks indistinctly, talks too fast, has a flat affect, or who moves around constantly will be difficult to speech read. How does the teacher communicate with students? Does she alert them before she speaks? Does she make eye contact with them and expect the same of them? Does she identify speakers and repeat or rephrase what they've said? Our student will be more successful when good communication practices are a natural part of the classroom routine. She will easily lose track of speakers and miss information when communication is free-flowing, when students are allowed to talk in quick succession with little structure and few comprehension checks. Check for evidence of visual support that helps students know where they should be looking and what they should be doing. Organized agendas, vocabulary lists, and outlines on the front board, for example, are a sign that the teacher is making an effort to provide structure and predictability. A student with hearing loss performs best if there are multiple cues to know what is expected of her. A classroom that is orderly and neat may indicate that the teacher's presentation of material is the same.

In addition to teaching style, sensitivity to the learning needs of a non-traditional student is a key factor in teacher selection. The whole philosophy of inclusion pivots on the assumption that it can really work. A positive attitude will be critical because the student will be sensitive to, and will quickly detect, resistance or resentment. It is always important to observe *and* talk with potential teachers about the possibility of working with a student with hearing loss, as experience is not the only indication of an appropriate teacher. A new teacher who is excited about the experience and willing to put in extra time and effort can be an equally good choice. Experience doesn't necessarily mean a teacher will be interested in working closely with a support team or inviting other professionals to observe or work in the classroom. Remember that the planning process does not end once teachers are selected. There will need to be training at the beginning of the year and monitoring and support available throughout the year to ensure both the teacher and student have what they need to be successful. In a sense, it will be the first time for both of them. No teacher is expected to demonstrate every single trait we've presented here. A teacher who is open to the idea of working with this student can receive guidance in the areas she may not have needed to consider before.

Consider the physical environment of the classroom

When potential teachers are identified, take a look at the physical characteristics of their classrooms. Where are they located within the building? Are there sources of background noise in those areas that will be difficult to improve upon? A teacher's excellent communication style will be wasted if background noise interferes with the student's ability to hear her. For example, does the classroom look out on a busy street or on the playground so that when windows are open there is significant noise that can't be controlled? In some cases, this can be the determining factor as to who will be chosen. It may be that moving the teacher to another classroom is an option. It is also possible that sources of background noise can be easily addressed. Can a noisy heating/ventilation system be dampened? Can drop seals be installed on the bottoms of doors leading to hallways and other classrooms? Can sound absorbent materials be hung in the classroom to cut down on noise? Is the lighting even so that the teacher's face will be seen clearly for speech reading purposes? Uneven lighting can cast shadows on the speaker's face that make it difficult for the person's mouth movements to be seen clearly. Are there drapes or blinds on the windows? If sunlight is streaming into the classroom and the teacher is positioned in front of the window, her face will not be visible for speech reading.

The Whole Picture

Good teacher selection involves weighing a combination of factors – the student's communication needs, the attitude and teaching and communication style of the teacher, and the physical environment. It is not about choosing a person based on reputation. A teacher who is popular because of her unorthodox style may work for students who hear normally but can present serious obstacles for a student with hearing loss. It is helpful to gather input from a variety of sources, including the student, so that your team has information with which to back up your recommendations. Clearly, the process does not end with teacher selection. A combination of technology and support services will likely be needed to help provide the student with access that is as complete as possible, and

teachers will need support and training throughout the coming year. Care in choosing teachers, though, is an important starting point in getting the next school year off to a smooth start.

Traits of teachers who are typically a good match for students with hearing loss

Communication Style

- Has clear and visible speech (lip movements)
- Projects voice and gets the attention of the class before he/she speaks
- Facial expression is dynamic and supports his/her comments
- Presents thoughts in an organized way
- Uses repetition, summarizes regularly
- Repeats or rephrases students' remarks
- Pace of instruction is deliberate
- Makes sure students can see his/her face when talking
- Speakers are identified

Instructional Style

- Classroom activities are organized and predictable
- Lessons are supported with visual aids and organizers
- Knows who is following, who is not, and how to bring all students into the learning process
- Expectations for attention and participation are high
- Students are encouraged to participate, and to listen and respond to each other

Classroom Management

- Attempts to control noise
- Students are expected to look at each other when talking
- Communication rules for group activities are established and reviewed regularly

Attitude

- Approachable – students feel comfortable asking for help at any time
- Flexible
- Sees the student as more than a person with hearing loss
- Genuine interest in the student
- Considers the experience an opportunity for professional growth, not a burden
- Persistent –will make the extra effort to find a video that is captioned or share material consistently with the tutor and speech pathologist
- Willing to work as part of a team – there may need to be other adults in the classroom such as an aide or oral transliterator, and there may need to be regular contact with a tutor, consultant, SLP or resource room teacher