

Children's Hearing Loss

As the parent of a child with newly diagnosed hearing loss, you will have many questions and concerns regarding the nature of this problem, its effects on your child's future, treatment options, and resources. This brief guide will give you necessary initial information, and provide guidance about the availability of resources, and the respective roles of different care providers.

It is always difficult for parents to receive bad news about any aspect of their child's health. Reacting with anger, grief, and even guilt are not unusual when finding out that your child is hearing-impaired. These feelings are best managed by discussing them with a family member, close friend, clergy, or mental health professional. At times, the feeling may also result in a degree of denial. Feel free to seek a second opinion, but it is inadvisable to delay further recommended diagnostic evaluations for your child. The best treatment for hearing loss of any degree is appropriate early intervention. Significant delays may result in irreversible harm to your child's hearing, speech, language, and eventual educational development.

You will come into contact with many healthcare and rehabilitation specialists during the long-term management of your child's hearing loss. Some of them will be involved early in the journey and again at intervals. Others may step in later on. The following are professionals you will encounter and the role each of them will play in managing your child's hearing loss.

THE AUDIOLOGIST

The audiologist is likely to be the first professional you encounter, and possibly the one who gives you the initial news regarding your child's hearing loss. The audiologist will carry out behavioral or objective testing (such as auditory brainstem responses) or a combination of these approaches to determine the degree and type of hearing loss. The audiologist will also eventually recommend appropriate amplification, following a medical consultation. The audiologist will also provide your child with well-fitting ear molds along with the hearing aids, as he or she grows. The audiologist may also be the professional who provides you with information and referral to an early intervention program. Over time, the audiologist will provide periodic follow-ups to chart your child's progress and to monitor his or her hearing loss.

OTOLOGIST, OTOLARYNGOLOGIST, OR PEDIATRIC OTOLARYNGOLOGIST (ENT PHYSICIAN)

Upon diagnosis of hearing loss, your child will be referred to an ear, nose, and throat specialist, (otolaryngologist), or one who specializes in childhood ear and hearing problems. This physician's initial role is to determine the specific nature of the underlying problem that may be at least partially causing the hearing loss. Additionally, the physician will also determine if the problem is medically or surgically treatable, and if so, provide the necessary medical or surgical treatment. Such treatments could include something relatively simple, like the placement of eardrum ventilation tubes, or more complex surgical procedures. The ENT specialist may also refer your child for additional diagnostic procedures such as imaging studies (X-rays, CT-scans, MRI scans) to further define the type and source of hearing loss. The doctor will also provide clearance for hearing aid fitting, after determining if no other intervention is indicated. If it is determined that your child needs a cochlear implant, the otolaryngologist, along with the audiologist, will carry out further tests and examinations, and will carry out the implant surgery.

PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN: PEDIATRICIAN OR FAMILY PRACTITIONER

Your child's primary care physician may be either a pediatrician or a family practice doctor. If your child is not diagnosed with a hearing loss in the newborn period but develops hearing loss later in life, it is the responsibility of this doctor to make appropriate referrals to an ear, nose and throat specialist and an audiologist to rule out or diagnose hearing loss. Your child's primary care doctor may also participate in the treatment of ear infections if they appear, or refer them to an otolaryngologist for treatment. The primary care physician or the otolaryngologist may also provide a referral to a doctor who specializes in medical genetics, to find out if your child's hearing loss may be hereditary. That may help you determine if a similar hearing loss could occur in your other children.

EARLY INTERVENTION SPECIALIST

This professional is typically someone with an education background. He or she can help you find resources in your community, define family members' roles in early intervention and management of the hearing loss, and can help you deal with questions regarding future educational placement. This specialist will also help you deal with your observations and concerns about your child and give you information and support regarding your child's educational needs in the future.

SPEECH / LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST (SLP)

This professional will evaluate the impact of your child's hearing loss on speech/language development, and monitor his/her progress, noting if progress with that development is falling behind. If this happens, the SLP may refer back to the audiologist or otolaryngologist to determine if any changes have occurred in your child's hearing. The SLP will also help your child to learn proper speech production, including correct articulation of speech sounds. If you choose oral communication for your child, in addition to the speech language pathologist your child may also be treated by an auditory-verbal therapist, who can help your child acquire the full range of speech sounds and guide the family to additional medical or audiological treatments. The auditory-verbal therapist will also help the child's family become familiar with appropriate speech/language, auditory, and cognitive developmental milestones you may expect for a child with hearing loss.

Finally, many other people can provide additional assistance for your hard-of-hearing child. Parents of older hard-of-hearing children, and hard-of-hearing adults, can share their experiences with you and may have suggestions for educational and recreational resources in the community.