

As Published on www.hearinglikeme.com

Advocating for Your Child's Rights in the Classroom

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I will never forget sitting at an IEP with the family of a 6th grade student. The family's focus was to boost teacher expectations in the area of Language Arts in order to prepare their daughter for success in High School. Their daughter was functioning at a third grade reading and reading comprehension level. When the mother expressed her concerns to the Teacher of the Deaf (TOD) he literally leaned across the table, extended his arm, and said, "Don't worry Mom, all dhh students plateau at third grade." In contrast, I will also always remember an experience with the family of a successful cochlear implant user. This girl was functioning so well in school that the team told the parents, "We just don't know what to work on." The school district shared the the girl no longer needed an IEP. As wonderful as it is that the girl was functioning at grade level, once the IEP was gone, the school district took away the Low Incidence support meaning that she no longer had an FM system and was no longer accessing what her teachers and peers were saying.

My Daughter the Teacher

In addition to being a special educator and professional in this field, I am first and foremost the mother of three fantastic children. My oldest child, who is now 20 years old, has a bilateral profound hearing loss and was born in California prior to Newborn Hearing Screening. She has been my teacher in how best to be the parent and educator of a deaf child.

My parenting journey with hearing loss has been one of creating a path where a path did not previously exist -- personally, for my own child, and professionally, for all of us working in this field. Our family was the first in the city to have a child with a cochlear implant, using listening and spoken language, and educated in our local public schools.

Before my daughter entered the mainstream classroom setting, however, I realized that most general educators were unaware that she and many others like her were on the way. Technology had given them access to sound, and they were about to push the boundaries of what it meant to be deaf and in school. Most districts were unprepared for the needs of this new generation of children with hearing loss. Seeing what was about to happen, I returned to school and earned my Master's Degree and teaching credential preparing myself to teach the system about this new population of children who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) and use listening and spoken language.

Teamwork

The key to helping DHH children in the classroom, I have learned over the years, is teamwork. Creating a collaborative team of parents and professionals with the focus on my daughter served to be the most effective way to handle her public school journey. Each year that I met with our individual education plan (IEP) team was filled with firsts and discoveries -- by the entire team -- of the support my daughter needed in the classroom, and on campus. Was it always positive and did we always agree? Absolutely not. Did we positively impact her education and the school's ability to best serve deaf or hard of hearing children? Undoubtedly.

“What services and supports should my child have in school, and how do I get them?”

As an educational consultant for kids with hearing issues, I hear this question all the time. Unfortunately, the answer's not that simple. Children who are Deaf and hard of hearing all have their own journey, their own level of hearing loss, hearing age, knowledge of vocabulary, and their own receptive and expressive language skills.

Here, however, are some general guidelines of your child's rights under the federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA).

Rights guaranteed by IDEA

- Your participation in the IEP process
- Your consent before the district assesses your child
- Access to assessment results and proposed goals prior to the IEP meeting
- Provision of the “least restrictive environment” (LRE) for your child, which does not automatically mean a DHH class for all children who are classified as DHH
- A discussion of the full continuum of placement options, beginning with the general education setting in your neighborhood school
- Like peers in the educational setting
- The opportunity to agree or disagree with assessment results, proposed goals, educational setting, and services
- The ability to partially agree/disagree with the IEP and the district's offer
- The opportunity to take the IEP document home to sleep on it, read it over, and process everything
- Continuation of services from the last agreed upon IEP during negotiations or disagreements regarding the current contract.
- The guarantee that nothing will be changed in your child's program without your consent

Additionally, here are considerations that I have personally found to be extremely successful in my work as an advocate for children that are deaf or hard of hearing. Some of the services and support available may be new territory for your district, so remember to work collaboratively.

Supports available in the educational setting:

- FM/Sound field amplification system
- Pre- and post-teaching of key concepts and vocabulary that may and may not be considered “vocabulary” or “new concepts” by the writers of the curriculum. Our children often miss out on non-academic information due to their lack of incidental hearing and the plethora of language and language concepts that come from incidental learning during the formative years.
- Support for your child's hearing devices (i.e.: spare equipment and trouble shooting kit)
- Language facilitator/interpreter services, including:
 - Support for listening and spoken language
 - Conceptually Accurate Signed English – CASE
 - Sign Supported English – SEE
 - Cued Speech

- American Sign Language – ASL
- Providing follow up and clarification to lessons
- DHH Itinerant support: push-in or pull-out classroom support for both your child and their teacher
- Educational audiologist
- Vocabulary development beyond the typical – and typically fabulous -- front-loading done by great teachers
- Idiom development
- Auditory skills training
- Note-taking
- CART or alternative transcription services
- Preferential seating
- Staff and peer in-service training

I realize this was a lot of information at once. What I have come to realize in my own journey is that if the road were straight we would probably freeze and not take another step forward. The path is curved with mountains and other obstacles so that we can overcome one thing at a time. When you are having a moment remember to look back at all you have dealt with and how far you have come (even if it is just finding this article after the initial diagnosis). There will always be a new challenge. Know that you can handle it because you will never be alone unless you need to for a minute.