

Covid-19 - Returning to school for students with a Hearing Impairment

As we begin to prepare for the gradual return to school, we are more than aware of the new challenges for all the children. However, for pupils with Hearing Impairment (HI) these challenges are even greater. Although no two pupils or two school environments are the same much of what they will face will be similar. Therefore, it is important that staff are fully aware of the specific challenges students with HI will face and the impact these challenges may have.

Challenges - Communication

You will know from attending deaf awareness training that there is a critical listening distance for those children who use listening devices, such as, Hearing aids (HAs), cochlear implants (CIs) or Bone conduction aids (BCs). The guidance is that you should be **no further away than 2m**. This is 2m maximum in a quiet environment. For listening outside or in background noise that distance would be reduced further. The child may hear voices but not understand what is being said. Children with HI need to see, as well as hear to communicate well.

But new social distancing requirements now mean that people should not be **no closer** than 2m to anyone outside their household. For students with HI this will be extremely challenging. It is not only vital that hearing aid users can hear the person speaking, but they also use facial expression and lip pattern to aid communication. This new imposed distancing may mean vital information is missed. We can expect to see increased frustration and fatigue amongst our students with HI and we must be ready to support them.

Children with HI will be particularly disadvantaged in playground situations due to distancing and noise levels. Communication with friends may be greatly hindered along with missing information or warnings given whilst outside. Even when using a personal radio aid, they would only hear the person with the transmitter.

Challenges - Equipment and Maintenance

For a variety of reasons, some students with HI will not have been regularly wearing their listening devices whilst at home. As this has now been for a significant amount of time they may require

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support to re-engage with their devices. Some devices may require repair or replacement and this will take time as clinics have also been closed during the pandemic and will have a backlog of enquiries. If students do come back to school and are using their radio aids please ensure there are procedures in place for minimizing infection risk when passing the transmitter between users.

Challenges - Learning and interactions

Children with HI naturally move closer to the person who is speaking to them to aid lip reading, to gain a clear view of facial expression or to give better opportunity for their listening device to pick up speech. In the current climate they will be unable to do this. The reduction in visual information may lead to anxiety, frustration and miscommunication.

What can we do to help?

Transition back to school

Preparation is essential - ensure parents are fully informed about the new routines and procedures in place for all students. It is important that they have the time to discuss these with their child so they are fully aware of how school will be different when they return.

Where possible, ensure the student with HI, return to their usual classroom and have at least one familiar adult with them. Ideally their class teacher or another adult who has attended deaf awareness training. It is essential that there is a member of staff within the school who has experience/ understanding of how to check any audiological equipment (HAs, BCs, Cis or radio aids)

If changes at school are significant then it may be useful to create a video or virtual tour of any physical changes. This can be watched prior to the student returning to school. Where possible caption any videos you produce or have a familiar adult commentate with their face visible.

Reassure the student that staff will be there to support the return to school and not to worry.

Communication

Where possible, students with HI should return to their original classroom, particularly if this has been considered appropriate for sound quality. It will also allow them access to much of the visual and practical support they have come to rely on.

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Ideally, those students who are hearing impaired should be situated in classrooms that are quieter. Those that are further away from external noise, such as, the dining hall, playground or any building works. Where possible, classrooms that have acoustic treatments, carpets, blinds and the use of a soundfield system will be favourable. Consideration should be made for minimizing internal noise when deciding on seating positions for students with HI. They need to avoid any additional noise that may hinder their ability to hear speech or that interfere with the listening devices.

As there may be many things that are different to their usual school day it is vital that the student is as near to the adult speaker as possible. Whenever possible, they should be positioned at the front of lines and queues. When a student has a radio aids it is recommended that they are used regularly and particularly when giving instructions.

As previously mentioned, new routines and procedures should be shared prior to the student returning to school. These changes should be explained again once they arrive at school. Visual reminders will also benefit students with HI. Visual timetables may help to reinforce new changes, such as, regular times to wash hands.

When unplanned changes occur, an adult will need to check the student has understood there is a change of plan and what that change is.

The usual recommended strategies should continue. Position students in the first row of tables to one side where they have the best possible view of the adult and the board and can turn easily to look at their peers when they are speaking.

In the absence of touch, you will need to find new ways of gaining attention. Ensure supervising adults in the playground use the student's radio aid and use an exaggerated wave to get children's attention. Remember, when the student is connected to the radio aid they may struggle to hear their friends unless they are talking through the transmitter.

Equipment and Maintenance

On return to school audiological equipment will need to be checked thoroughly. After that daily checks are recommended and when any other issues arise. Please see separate guidance 'checking audiological equipment and how to reduce infection risk'

During this unprecedented time, it is recommended that the radio aid transmitter is used by adults only. All parts of the transmitter, including the lanyard or clip should be wiped with alcohol wipes

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(70%) when being passed between users.

To prevent the risk of infection through the handling of the shared equipment, schools will need to ensure they have adequate alcohol wipes (70%), and gloves or alcohol gel.

Contact your Teacher of the Deaf from SENDSuccess for any support with equipment. This can be done by video call or the use of photos to show any repair issues.

Learning and Interactions

Where possible control background noise and keep it at a minimum. This will allow the student with HI a better chance of following speech/discussions.

Call the child's name before giving out any instructions or directing any questions to them.

Use other children's names when directing questions or taking contributions. This allows the student to locate the child who will be answering. ALWAYS repeat any comments or questions given by others if the student is unlikely to have heard it.

Share key words or information on the board. This can include words, pictures or images that will reinforce concepts visually.

Repeat key learning points and instructions and check regularly that the student with HI has understood.

Ensure that there is a staff member available to provide support for any unforeseen difficulties or issues that may arise. These are extremely difficult and challenging times, particularly for people with a hearing impairment and we must be proactive where possible.

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