

POLICY STATEMENT

Educating Hard of Hearing Children

The Hearing Loss Association of America views the sense of hearing as a human birthright, one that should be valued and exploited as fully as possible regardless of what system a person employs as a primary communication mode. By definition, hard of hearing children possess usable residual hearing and, with appropriate auditory management, are capable of employing audition as their primary channel for perceiving and developing an auditory-based language system. Because of this capability, their educational needs will differ from children who are educationally or functionally deaf, those whose primary communication mode is visually based. Because both groups of children have impaired hearing, it has been, and still is, common practice to routinely combine deaf and hard of hearing children within the same classes, offering all of them the same basic educational program and requiring all of them to communicate primarily through a visual mode. There is a major problem with this practice, conceptually and practically.

From a conceptual point of view, hard of hearing children generally have much more in common with normally hearing children than they do with deaf children. Like normally hearing children, hard of hearing children developed their auditory-verbal skills (however aberrant) primarily through audition. Deaf children, on the other hand, acquired their communication skills primarily through the visual channel. By combining both groups in a single educational setting, and exposing both to similar educational practices, the effect is a de-emphasis of the auditory potential of hard of hearing children. In this group, we include children who are the recipients of cochlear implants who have the capability to function as hard of hearing, given an appropriate auditory-based therapeutic and educational program.

The major practical implication in making this distinction is that for hard of hearing children education can proceed most efficiently through the "ear" (which then carries over to reading, given the heavy dependence of English orthography on the sounds of the language), while for deaf children, education must be primarily visually-based. Certainly, both groups of children deserve the best kind of education we can provide them. However, educating hard of hearing children with and like deaf children results in a heavy emphasis on the visual channel, in conflict with their need to have audition and oral communication emphasized throughout the entire educational process. The use and emphasis of audition can best be accomplished in a regular educational setting, where hard of hearing children cannot only benefit from the conversational models provided by their normally hearing classmates, but where they are also exposed to the same high academic expectations as their classmates.

It is the position of HLAA that most hard of hearing children can, and should be, educated in regular, as opposed to special, educational settings. We emphasize "most", since educational

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decisions should be made, for any child in any group, on the basis of the individual child's needs and not by some categorical, often arbitrary, grouping imposed upon a child. We do know that all hard of hearing children require appropriate auditory management. This would encompass any step taken to ensure maximum use of their residual hearing, such as the careful selection and supervision of various kinds of amplification devices (hearing aids, personal and FM sound-field systems, etc.) and the optimization of the acoustical environment in the classroom. This latter requirement is particularly important for hard of hearing children since it would assist them in hearing the questions and comments made by their hearing classmates. Other supplemental services such as speech/language therapy and academic tutoring must be provided when required. Given appropriate support services - and these should be written into a child's individual educational plan (IEP) - the vast majority of hard of hearing children are fully capable of performing at grade level while fitting in psychosocially with their normally hearing peers. In other words, placement in a regular classroom should be considered as the first option for a hard of hearing child, to be modified only as necessitated by specific circumstances (i.e. parental preferences, the child's performance, etc.).

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