Back to School with Hearing Loss

BY ALISON FREEMAN
Alison Freeman, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and single parent with severe hearing loss who adopted and raised a 28-year-old hearing son. Based on her personal and professional experience, including three decades of counseling students with and without hearing loss from grade school to college, Dr. Freeman offers a wealth of expert advice on supporting kids of all ages as they go back to school for another year. She describes common issues, what signs to look for and how best to help children with hearing loss navigate their school environment.

Starting a new school year is often stressful for many students. For those living with a disability such as hearing loss, this anxiety can be magnified. Issues vary among age groups. Younger students from preschool to second grade tend to be less self-conscious about their hearing loss. The most difficult timeframe for kids with hearing loss is between the ages of 10 and 25, and problems usually show up at school, which is their primary social foundation.

I generally end up seeing patients later in the year after their issues become deeper, when they are falling behind or failing, but would encourage students to receive counseling sooner to learn coping and management skills before this happens.

Growing Up Deaf and Overprotected
In my own childhood, when I returned to school each fall, I wondered how teachers and classmates would respond to me, and I struggled with the decision to tell my peers about my hearing loss. Most of the time, I chose not to say anything, which increased my stress about understanding what others said.

My mom and dad were young, hearing parents who had never known anyone with hearing loss before me. This was back in the 1950s, when there were very few resources. The use of American Sign Language (ASL) was discouraged due to the prevailing thought that signing would delay speech development. Also, in the hopes of making my life easier, my parents wanted to spare me from the pain of being seen as different from other kids. So, I was raised orally and didn’t learn ASL until I was an adult.

As a result, I grew up with the idea that I wasn’t good enough because of my hearing loss. That’s why I went to my first therapist at 17. Ironically, my mother was also a therapist. Years later, she told me, “I really wish I hadn’t overprotected you as much as I did. I was so worried you’d get your feelings hurt, that I didn’t give you the chance to work things out on your own.”

Even today, this kind of overprotectiveness is quite common among parents of children who have hearing loss and other disabilities.

The Effects of Parental Denial
At the other end of the spectrum, because hearing loss is invisible, there’s a lot of denial among parents of children with hearing loss, especially those with cochlear implants (CIs). This is particularly true of children and teens who were born hearing and then later implanted with a CI. Parents who are in denial don’t see their child’s cry for help. They may say, “Our kid is normal, they are fine.” However, children with hearing loss sense something is wrong that needs fixing. Because of this denial, these kids frequently grow up feeling like they need to be perfect. Children with hearing loss also tend to feel overly self-conscious and experience loneliness, peer pressure and a lack of social skills—even more so than typical adolescents and teens.

As an example of this dynamic, I recently counseled a 16-year-old girl with hearing loss who had begged her parents for therapy for two years. It wasn’t until she landed in the hospital after a suicide attempt that the parents called me. She’s doing better now, but it could have been much easier to see this girl before the situation turned into a crisis.

I advise talking regularly to your child about their feelings, especially if they wear hearing aids or CIs and are raised orally. Even though they may function well during the day, they are still deaf at night. There may be an unspoken fear that they are not good enough if they have assistive technology that was perceived as trying to “fix” them.

Helping Teens with Hearing Loss
Denial isn’t reserved only for parents. Students themselves often attempt to hide their hearing loss from peers to “fit in” and be as normal as possible. This approach can sometimes backfire by making kids conspicuous in other, unwanted ways. Kids who hide their disability rather than being open about it are often misperceived as being stupid, weird, rude or uncool by their peers, as well as any teachers who are unaware.

A college freshman I counseled last year wears a CI. She had attended an elementary school with other children who were CI wearers, but sign language was frowned upon. After being mainstreamed into public schools and feeling like she didn’t fit in, she behaved typically by not telling others about her hearing loss. At college, she began to realize how this behavior negatively impacted her academic and social life, so she reached out for therapy.
To catch potential problems, I would encourage parents of teens with hearing loss to proactively pay attention and never assume their child doesn’t need help. Some signs to look for include:

- Spending more time in their room
- Not engaging in dinner conversation
- Changes in eating habits
- Being overly secretive
- Withdrawing from friends or social activities
- Vague or obvious statements reflecting thoughts about death, such as, “I am better off not being here.”

This can be challenging because this may also describe normal teen behavior. But asking questions and listening without judgment to their responses can assist them to open up and be honest about their feelings.

I strongly recommend asking for therapy if free counseling is available through a child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) or other state services. Unfortunately, many parents see therapy as primarily something to use in a crisis, rather than a helpful tool to provide essential coping skills, before the crisis stage. However, I truly believe that every child with hearing loss has some degree of delay, because they can’t absorb everything. Counseling gives them an extra armor of support to help develop their emotional intelligence.

Parenting Students with Hearing Loss

One of my favorite quotes is by social psychologist Brené Brown, Ph.D., who says:

**Raising children who are hopeful and who have the courage to be vulnerable means stepping back and letting them experience disappointment, deal with conflict, learn how to assert themselves, and have the opportunity to fail.**

Good parenting strives for a balance between being protective and “letting go” as a child moves toward independence. It is important for parents to learn to talk to their kids, help them to identify their emotions and let them express how they feel in certain situations. As parents, we often tend to jump in when our kids are expressing how they feel. We want to help and fix it, but we need to give kids space to talk about how they are feeling and encourage them to make their own choices. We can learn a lot from listening and paying attention to nonverbal cues that indicate there may be a problem.

Younger kids tend to be more accepting of their hearing loss. Parents need to step in as their advocate to make sure they get the services they need. For instance, taking the lead in developing and updating their child’s IEP and meeting in advance with teachers before the school year starts, to educate and familiarize them with their child’s needs and assistive technology.

As children grow older, depending on their maturity, they can begin advocating for themselves more with friends and classmates, starting in grades 3, 4 or 5. Teaching your kids age-appropriate self-advocacy can empower your child and model important life skills for them.

**Teaching Kids to Advocate for Themselves**

Engaging in games, “narrative preparation” about typical scenarios or role-playing situations can help identify issues kids may encounter and come up with solutions. Use the DIBS acronym to teach your child to:

- Define the problem (“Other kids make fun of me.”)
- Investigate the reason (“They don’t understand why you don’t hear them.”)
- Brainstorm possible strategies (“Explain that you have hearing loss and ask them to face you when they speak.”)
- Select a solution to try

Other age-appropriate questions you might ask a child while role-playing include:

- What would you do if someone started to bully you on the playground?
- What can you do if someone starts yelling at you, thinking you are Deaf?
- Would you like me to talk to your teacher or would you like to do it?
- What do you need to do if you need help?

I also recommend playing The Ungame—a popular family communications board game that explores feelings and teaches players to listen without jumping in.

**When a Parent has Hearing Loss**

In addition to students, I have also spoken with parents whose hearing loss causes difficulty communicating with their child’s teachers.
Often, a parent with hearing loss defers to the hearing parent and can feel left out of the education information process—especially if the teacher addresses the hearing parent more frequently. There may be a lack of accommodation for parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings.

In such instances, I suggest talking with your child’s teacher to communicate your hearing loss and explain how they can best communicate effectively with you. Wear your “educator’s hat!”

What’s more, the children of parents with hearing loss may feel embarrassed or different. Teaching your hearing child to be an advocate for that parent can help them develop empathy, which is a valuable life lesson in general.

What Students with Hearing Loss Should Know
As an adult who grew up with hearing loss, I understand firsthand how challenging school can be—and how tempting it is to pretend you don’t have a disability at all. Yet, as much as you want to be seen as “normal” by friends, classmates and teachers, the best way to cope with hearing loss is to be upfront about it and not apologetic. Be brave and realize that when you educate others about your hearing loss, they will see it as just part of who you are, rather than as a liability. And don’t be afraid to ask for help when you need it. HL

Alison Freeman, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who works half-time at California State University at Northridge counseling students with and without hearing loss. She has had severe hearing loss since early childhood, was orally trained and is a long-time member of HLAA. Dr. Freeman has developed mental health service programs in several counties and did her post doctorate fellowship at UCSF Center on Deafness. She also has a private practice providing therapy, assessment, consultation and expert witness services. Dr. Freeman is “young at heart,” passionate about her work as a psychologist and honored to be the role model for others that she wished she’d had as a child. Email her at dralisonfreeman@gmail.com or visit her website: dralisonfreeman.net.