Handling Hearing Loss at School
Advice from Students and Parents
Annabelle Jacobs, 18
This recent high school graduate and hearing loss advocate from Connecticut is starting her freshman year at the University of Virginia, studying toward a career in the hearing health field. She was previously featured on HLAA’s website for launching an online YouTube web series, “Hear for Hope” during the COVID-19 pandemic and starting a hearing loss support group at her school. Her main advice for supporting students with hearing loss:

- Sit up front in class so you can see the teacher and be able to read their lips and hear them if they turn to write something on the board.
- Parents should arrange an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan [see next page] for their child and notify teachers before school starts, because having extended time for assignments and accommodations such as closed captioning on videos can help tremendously.
- I also recommend that parents have children bring spare hearing aid batteries to school and even add them to the children’s back-to-school supplies list.

“On a personal level, I do understand feeling self-conscious and embarrassed. I’m even struggling a little with that now as I am transitioning to college with people I have never met. I have learned to stay true to myself and I know that just because I wear hearing aids doesn’t make me that different from others. I always tell people that having hearing aids is just like having glasses, but on your ears—once you treat it that way, then others will follow.”

John Butchko, 24
Diagnosed with profound hearing loss at age 14 months, John was mainstreamed from preschool to high school in the Los Angeles area, graduated from Stanford University during the pandemic, and is now a second-year medical student at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

“It is critical that students learn to advocate for themselves in a strong, yet respectful manner. This is often quite challenging, since most people don’t understand what it means to have a hearing loss. For example, when I was learning to play the viola in elementary school, I told the music teacher that I could not hear the notes she played for us and needed to read the music. She assumed that I could feel the vibrations through the floor because I am deaf. Similarly, my middle school gym teacher was yelling instructions into a bullhorn. I told him that I could hear sounds but could not understand what he was saying because the distortion from the bullhorn hurt more than the loudness helped. He thought that my hearing aids provided me with typical hearing.

“Incoming college students should email the disability office before they start, outlining what accommodations they will need to be successful and why. Both my college and medical school have offered additional accommodations that I did not request. For instance, Creighton offered to buy a digital stethoscope that sends sounds directly into my hearing aids via Bluetooth.

“Most importantly, remember that you are not your hearing loss. It is something you have, but it does not define you. The things we ask for are not big impositions on other people, and it is surprising how eager some people are to help. Ben Franklin had a trick of asking people for a favor, because he found that they would like him more after they helped him. People like to feel needed or be useful. So don’t be shy…go ahead and ask for the accommodations you need.”

Toni Dickerson, Mother of Addie, 5
Even as a preschool special education coordinator, Toni didn’t realize that her daughter, Addison, had a hearing disability until an unsuccessful screening at her preschool, as she had passed previous tests. At four years old, Addie was diagnosed with unilateral sensorineural hearing loss and received a hearing aid several months later.

“Addie loves showing off her hearing aid to friends, as well as any adult who will look at it! Our small-town school district has been wonderful about
IEP and 504 Plan Basics

Both Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans are designed to provide free assistance to K-12 students with challenges in school. Although there is some overlap, they are distinct programs. See this helpful explanation adapted from the Student Academy of Audiology website:

- 504 Plans only provide accommodations such as: wearing hearing aids in school, use of FM systems, and preferred seating. They are utilized for children who have hearing loss but are performing well and have no other educational needs.
- IEP Plans provide accommodations as well as specially designed instruction. They are utilized for children who have hearing loss and need more help beyond a 504 Plan. IEP Plans can include goals on language acquisition, speech production, mobility (if appropriate) and much more.

“In addition, we are staying abreast of legislative changes and activities that may affect kids with hearing loss and connecting with other advocates. We’ve also learned a lot from people on social media platforms who are sharing invaluable advice—there is a wealth of information at our fingertips.”

Additional Resources

- What is an IEP (Individualized Education Program)? [bit.ly/3NJBQYF](bit.ly/3NJBQYF)
- IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [bit.ly/3XVxYbL](bit.ly/3XVxYbL)
- The difference between IEPs and 504 Plans [bit.ly/3rc5q13](bit.ly/3rc5q13)