

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARENTS RAISING A TEENAGER WITH HEARING LOSS



By Karen Anderson

Many parents raising teenagers face challenging times but most parents do not have the added challenge of raising a teenager with hearing loss. It can be easy to ignore this invisible condition and hope that your child will not be affected in any way by not being able to hear as well as other people. Most hearing loss allows the individual to hear part of what is said. If it is quiet and he is only a few feet from the person speaking, the teenager may be able to hear most of what was said. This is very deceiving and makes it easy to believe that the hearing loss has little impact.

Along with only being able to hear part of what is said, hearing across distance and in background noise are the BIG 3 reasons why hearing loss impacts listening and learning, even in the teen years after many years of school attendance. Hearing loss always has some degree of impact – potentially to academics, socializing, future planning, and/or lifetime earning. The amount of the impact depends on many things, including the degree of hearing loss, consistent use of hearing aids, and – very importantly - on the attitude and support of the parents.

A challenging age to have a hearing loss

Being an adolescent is a time of contradictions. No longer a child and not yet an adult, adolescence is the time when children want to establish their independence, find their own sense of style that sets them apart from the crowd while at the same time they do not want to be identified by their peer group for being 'different'. Adolescents that have hearing loss typically have concerns that wearing hearing aids will make them seem different or that their peers may think that they are stupid because they need to wear hearing aids. Indeed, other children in school, their neighborhood or people they do not know in the community may make these assumptions. For a teenager to be willing to wear hearing aids he needs to understand the critical importance to his future, and to be armed with the attitude and confidence to be among his peers while wearing hearing aids and not be affected by the casual flippant remark.

Understanding the realities of listening and learning with hearing loss

All parents want their children to excel academically, socially, and other ways that will build them a wonderfully successful future. Teenagers with hearing loss have just as much potential for success as those who do not have hearing loss. The difference is the barrier that hearing loss creates to accessing the sound in the world around them. It is very possible to take steps so that your teenager can indeed fulfill his or her potential in the world – but it takes action, understanding, consistency, and much support.

Always putting the puzzle together without all of the pieces

Although your teenager may seem to hear you pretty well at home (with and sometimes without their hearing aids), the world is far from always being quiet and communication usually does not happen face-to-face, especially in school where the foundation of your teenager's future is formed. If you were able to see only 4 out of every 5 words on a page it is obvious that it would take you longer to figure out the content of what was writ-

ten and that you may not be able to understand it all. Similarly, your teenager with a hearing loss is unable to hear all of the words or parts of words that the teacher is saying. Although it seems obvious, the teenager with hearing loss probably does not realize how much he does not hear or misses out of everyday conversations or classroom instruction. Your child's audiologist can ask your teenager to repeat words in quiet and in low background noise, like what is typical in a classroom. This is one way to illustrate to him just how much the hearing loss is effecting everyday listening. It is natural for your teenager to struggle more than many of his classmates – he has to work harder to figure out what was said, before he can begin to understand the information. His brain is actually receiving less information and is not able to process the information as well. Hearing aids (and an FM system) will allow your teenager to hear more and process the information more completely with his brain, so learning will be easier and less tiring and grades will be better.

More hearing helps, but pieces are still missing

Children with mild hearing loss may be able to 'fake it' pretty well at home because they can hear most of

the speech sounds in quiet and from a close distance, but school listening is still a sizable challenge. The greater the degree of hearing loss the less speech will be perceived and the harder it will be to 'get by' without amplification. Your teenager has his own hearing challenges and innate ability to cope. Regardless of how smart or resourceful, your child will be able to perform his best in school if he can clearly hear as much of the teacher instruction as possible – and to do that consistent use of hearing aids is necessary.

Hearing loss can show up when speaking

How clearly we hear speech sounds is something that we constantly monitor and adjust. If your teenager doesn't hear all of the speech sounds then he cannot hear when he is not saying them right. This often leads to speech that sounds imprecise, or mushy.

Listening across distance is challenging

Because of difficulty listening across distance, your teenager may not hear a teacher's question correctly and give the wrong answer. This is embarrassing! Your teenager's hearing loss is obvious even without wearing hearing aids, only people will tend to think that he is not smart instead of that he may not be able to hear. Your teenager may think that the answer is to not talk in class or to people other than a few close friends but that still won't keep people from wondering about him when he 'slips' or is required to talk. Wearing hearing technology is more honest and will be better understood and accepted by peers and teachers than the consequences of not wearing hearing aids.

Socialization can be affected

When people talk about high school the part that is the most fun is the time spent with friends. Teenagers who hide their hearing loss tend to isolate themselves from others. They don't join clubs or groups as often,

go to sporting events or dances less frequently, or are so busy expending energy and worry about faking what they didn't hear and covering up communication slips that they end up not fitting in. Sometimes when people with hearing loss hear only bits and parts of conversations they begin to worry that other people are talking about them. This causes even more reason to feel isolated. To be the fun person your teenager is, he needs to hear his best!

Harsh truth about future earning

People with hearing loss who try to 'get by' without hearing aids on average end up earning 50% less than people with hearing loss who wear hearing aids*. The choices made in middle and high school set the stage for success in the future. If your teenager does not wear hearing technology his or her grades will not be as good, opportunities for training after high school will be limited, ability to perform in a job may be affected if hearing, speech, and willingness to talk with others are less than what they could be if hearing aids were worn. Why should your teenager's future be limited? Wouldn't any technology that could boost future success by 50% be seen as an advantage?

Arming your teenager with confidence and attitude

The teenage years include turbulent pressures that adults may not always recognize. How children cope with these pressures and peer influence has much to do with their self image and feelings that they are a well-loved person with many qualities that make them worth acceptance by others.

Attitude is learned at home

Parents' attitudes towards the hearing aids are critical. Parents who try to hide the hearing loss by insisting on the tiniest hearing technology as possible or by sug-

* Sergei Kochkin, Ph.D, The Impact of Untreated Hearing Loss on Household Income, Better Hearing Institute, August 2005.

gesting that the child not wear their hearing aids in all settings are communicating that they do not accept the hearing loss as part of their child's life and future. No friend, teacher, or family member can undo a negative attitude about wearing hearing aids if that is what the teenager has learned at home. This sense of rejection of the hearing loss and hearing aids is usually internalized by the child as a rejection or dissatisfaction with themselves. A belief can grow within the child that they are less worthy of love or are a bad person because they have a hearing loss and in order to be more acceptable to family and others they need to hide their hearing loss and try to 'pass' as normal hearing or deny difficulties caused by the hearing loss. Parent attitudes that do not support the recognition of the hearing loss and the need for hearing aids almost always result in the child refusing to wear the hearing aids, thereby potentially having a negative lifelong effect.

An opportunity for individuality

Discovering individual style is part of what teenagers do. Eyebrow piercings, blue Mohawk hairdos, flashy clothes, jewelry, make up, technology are all ways in which teenagers assert themselves as individuals. You and your teenager may not like the fact that he needs to use hearing aids but you have a choice in your attitude about the hearing aids. He can be fit with the smallest hearing aids or choose hearing aid cases the same color as his hair hoping that the hearing aids and hearing loss will be invisible. It won't be invisible. Or your teenager can pick bright colored cases, neon swirled earmolds, and even hearing aid decals or jewelry. Even the students with multiple ear piercings, distinctive clothes or jewelry will notice this technology and your teenager can impress them that he chooses to show them off and it gives him an 'edge' to learning.

Technology is cool

New communication devices and music technology is becoming available all the time. Today's hearing aids are like a high end stereo system crossed with a sophisticated computer. Hearing aids can automatically focus in on sound from the front, have noise cancellation capability, or can switch so that the sound is heard better in the car, for music, or other programs tailored to the individual person's listening situations. Having an FM system paired with the hearing aids is like a personal listening assistant – your teenager doesn't have to hear through all the noise his classmates do to pick up the teacher's voice from across the room. He can hear her as though she is talking right next to him. Hearing aids and FM are technologies that give your teenager an edge.

A shield of humor

Humor is necessary in all stages of life but especially when you are a teenager. Adolescents constantly make fun of one another, usually to pay special attention through teasing, but sometimes to degrade a person into feeling that they are less worthwhile than others. We all have control over our own feelings. We have control over our own reactions. How a person reacts in situations lets people know about their level of confidence and vulnerabilities. Everyone respects someone who will stand up for themselves and make others laugh. When asked "What are those things?" your teenager could say something like "I'm a spy and can't tell you." Use humor as a shield and a way to earn respect.

Encouraging consistent hearing aid use

Below are some ideas on how you can support the teenager's compliance toward consistent use of hearing technology.

ENTICEMENTS

Peer groups have more influence over a teenager's sense of well being than parents. If a teenager's circle of friends know about the hearing loss and realize that the hearing aids are necessary they can be a powerful support group and help to deflect negative remarks. A group of peers could be hosted for a special meal or event during which the teen, with the support of the parents, could show off the hearing technology. If your teen is a new hearing aid user, the first week of wearing the hearing technology (or teeth braces, an arm cast, or any other new and different 'must-do') is the most difficult. A special reward at the end of the week to congratulate the teenager on making it through and something that also rewards the circle of friends for their ongoing support can be ideal.

REWARDS

As with recognition of good grades, a long term recognition of use of the hearing aids is very helpful to reinforce continued daily wear and is good for the teen's self esteem. For example, for each grading period that goes by without hesitation in wearing the hearing aids can be rewarded with an extra incentive (i.e., choice of music, movie). Your teenager is doing something above and beyond what his classmates have to deal with and his courage, perseverance, and commitment to his own future success is worthy of applause. Also, it is customary for a hearing evaluation to occur annually during which hearing aids can be recased with different colors

and earmolds can be remade. This could be at an added expense to the parent, but if possible would allow the teenager to change his or her 'look' as tastes change with maturation.

DISCIPLINE

It is not unreasonable for parents to pay for replacement or repair of hearing technology that appears to have been purposely lost or damaged – but only once. Just as with rewards, ways to encourage teens to follow through on what is best for them needs to be tailored to what an individual holds most dear and meaningful. Since the hearing technology is extremely expensive, perhaps it is reasonable to allow the teenager to enjoy favorite activities but make their continued enjoyment contingent on good amplification wear habits. Make it clear from the start just how much you as parents value the teenager wearing the hearing aids and keeping the hearing aids in good repair, and the consequence for willful neglect or damage.

Hearing aids and choice

Every person must do some things that they would rather not do. Outside of building character, it is a fact of life. Consider the situation of a child who did not like to ride the school bus and deliberately was late for the bus pick up, then missed school because the parent had already left for their work. It is obviously unacceptable for the child to choose to miss school. Missing school affects grades, socialization, and ultimately the child's future. A child is NOT given a choice about whether they will attend school or not attend school. For a teenager with hearing loss, not wearing hearing aids means that they will miss part of each lecture, each assignment, each class, each social interaction, and overall each school day. Hearing loss has a substantial enough impact on the child's school and future success - it is NOT appropriate that the teenager be able to choose whether to wear the hearing aids or not.

For almost all teenagers with hearing loss, wearing hearing technology is a prerequisite to performing their best in school. That said, your teenager gains more independence daily and you may find yourself at a point where, despite your insistence and attempts of behavioral control, your son or daughter will absolutely not wear the amplification. As a parent this is difficult as you are aware of the potential high cost of not hearing on your child's future. Making the child's teenage years miserable for the child and the harmony of the family comes at its own price. If you find that you have tried your best to influence your child's hearing aid use without result, recognize that you are not alone.



Karen Anderson has worked in paediatric and educational audiology settings with families, early interventionists, teachers and children with hearing loss for over 25 years.

It is not uncommon for young people to reject their hearing aids for a while during secondary school due to turbulent teen pressures that adults may not recognize. Many return to wearing hearing technology after a while as they come to realize the importance of good grades on their future. Others choose a future path that can be accomplished without optimal hearing. Parents love, nurture, and provide as much guidance as possible, realizing that children do not always make the choices they would prefer.

The parent's role in helping their teenager navigate learning the skills to building a successful future takes patience, love, rules, and understanding. The teenager's role as they move from late childhood into adulthood is to establish their sense of individual identity and develop the foundation skills and abilities that will allow them to be the best and most successful adult in the future. Hearing loss is a challenge to potential success that can be overcome by consistent use of hearing technology and extra attention on school progress and skill attainment. The end product – a wonderfully independent and self-sufficient adult – is worth it!

Karen Anderson

Deaf Teens and Their Parents: How We Cope

By Ellen Dolich



Ellen and her daughter Lindsey

As parents of deaf or hard of hearing teens, we belong to a special club. I, for one, am a better and stronger person for it. My deaf daughter Lindsey would say the same: her patience, keen observation, and focus are end products of her hearing loss. It hasn't been easy, but it has been an interesting and windy road with lots of rewards along the way.

Discovering your child has a hearing loss provokes common reactions such as grief, anger, frustration, "why me?" Once I accepted my daughter's deafness, my life immediately changed for the best. I set my sights on doing everything in my power to support, mentor and encourage her. Today at 23, my daughter is a resilient young woman fresh out of college and beginning a writing career in New York City.

Here are some of the lessons we've learned along the way:

Our children mirror our feelings

If YOU believe your deaf or hard of hearing teen is capable of doing anything they want in life, then THEY will believe it. This was the first invaluable life lesson that I learned after Lindsey was diagnosed with a profound hearing loss at three.

A supportive family

Every member of your family needs to lend a helping hand to your teen—parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins and close friends. Educate your friends and family about your teen's needs. You may have to remind them to face your teen when talking, to repeat words and to refrain from exaggerating their speech. Do they

recognize that confused look on your son or daughter's face when they miss something in a conversation? When everyone is on the same team providing guidance and support, your teen will become more confident and be willing to take risks.

Push your teens to their fullest potential

Don't let them make excuses they can't do something. Empathize but don't pity them.

Network, network, network

Find other teens and parents of hearing impaired teens and talk. Compare your tips, strategies and stories. If a teen has hearing impaired friends, he can share his feelings and feel part of a group. Be proactive and join clubs and associations for the hearing impaired such as the Alexander Graham Bell Association, Self Help for Hard of Hearing and other local hearing loss organizations for parents and teens. AG Bell offers a teen summer program called LOFT and service clubs such as the Lion's Club offer summer camps for deaf and hard of hearing youths. Research college scholarships awarded to deaf and hard of hearing high school teens. Take advantage of local communication companies that loan phones and other communication devices to people with hearing losses.

Read and then read some more

You and your teen will want to learn everything there is about hearing loss, hearing instruments, and communication technologies. Reading will also help your teen improve and acquire better language skills. Encourage your son or daughter to use closed captions when watching TV. Encourage your teens to read newspapers, magazines, and books so they will be more aware of

their world. Let them use email and instant messaging on the computer to communicate with people. It will help their writing skills and allow them to interact with their peers without their hearing loss holding them back.

Fight for your beliefs and use creativity to solve problems that seem unsolvable

You may find some people saying your son or daughter can't do certain things. Be wary of generalizations like these. Hearing impaired teens can do anything a hearing teen can do by using certain strategies and compromising. I remember when Lindsey's eighth grade music teacher would not let Lindsey sing a solo at a school show because she couldn't carry a tune. Crushed, Lindsey rallied and the following year was allowed to sing and dance to a rap song.

Find hearing impaired role models

Does your teen want to be a pilot, surgeon, professional baseball player, lawyer, FBI agent, police officer or chef? There are hearing impaired individuals in all of these professions and more. Support your son or daughter in their dreams. Did you know that Bill Clinton wore hearing aids as President?

Encourage teens to advocate for themselves and to be open about their hearing loss

Does your teen go to high school with other special needs teenagers? Your deaf teen can team up with others and organize a disability forum. During Lindsey's high school years she joined forces with two other students—one blind student and the other with a severe learning disability. They fielded questions from fellow students about their disabilities and helped cre-

ate more awareness of their special needs. Teenagers are less inclined to make fun of something when they understand it.

Preach the following to your teen: Be proud of yourself, and don't be afraid to try different things.

Take Latin instead of French or Spanish if your high school offers this language. (Latin is a silent language and forms the roots of many English based words.) Try out for your sports teams, and join clubs. If you are willing to take risks and be a joiner, you will have the respect of your classmates and be treated like an ordinary teenager.

As you and your teen's coping skills increase, managing hearing loss does get easier.

Ellen Dolich

Ellen Dolich is a freelance writer in Memphis, Tennessee, a former publisher of HiP Magazine and HiP Publishing Group for deaf and hard of hearing children. Her daughter Lindsey graduated from Haverford College and is now a freelance writer at ESPN Magazine.

Two different Teenagers - two different solutions

By Teri Augustine



Teri and her son Peter

Ask any parent of more than one child how similar their children are and you will most likely hear “I can’t believe they came from the same parents!” It is a mystery how very different our three teenagers are from each other. However, two of them have one thing in common...hearing loss. Holly is 16 and was diagnosed at age 4. Peter is thirteen and his diagnosis at age 3 caught us completely off guard.

I believe those little bundles of joy come to us completely pre-wired with their own unique God-given personalities, talents and yes, challenges. I guess that is why when we learned of their hearing loss we were never very upset, but accepted it as part of who they were designed to be.

Being like opposing sides of a magnet, both Holly and Peter have reacted to their hearing loss in two completely different ways. In addition to her hearing loss, Holly also struggles with attention deficit disorder. Holly’s hearing aid history is full of memories of neighbors on hands and knees with flashlights searching for lost aids, bus drivers checking under seats and retracing our steps through the Museum of Natural History. One year, they became lunch for the piano teacher’s dog (fortunately he spit out the batteries).

Upon entering middle school, Holly, whose loss is in the mild range, became very self-conscious about her hearing aids and it wasn’t long before they were in the book bag the minute she walked out the door. After years

of unsuccessful motivational tactics and frustrating discipline, and since the school employed no “hearing aid police”, we let Holly enter eighth grade without the aids. With her entrance into high school and the challenges of changing classes without teachers taking time to monitor whether or not you are in your “preferential seat” Holly’s academic and social life took a dive. Holly is now a sophomore at a private school with only 12 other high school students. Each student has a computer and many of the classes are taught online with the classroom teacher monitoring. Like many teens with hearing loss, Holly is adept at keyboarding and loves to communicate with instant messaging. Instead of slouching in the back of the classroom, Holly is engaged and hearing far better than she could in the public school while unaided. Failing grades have turned to A’s and B’s and Holly is feeling far less “lost”.

Peter, whose loss ranges from mild to moderate, on the other hand also comes pre-wired with an obsessive-compulsive personality. So his hearing aids are always right where they are supposed to be, and at night.... lined up on his desk....not touching each other, right next to the dry-aid container and two sets of batteries! It’s almost too good to be true.

Peter has always been confident and willing to share about his hearing aids with anyone who asks. He has always gone for the funky colors and currently sports a pair of “yellow” Oticon digital aids though now that he wears his hair long they are no longer visible. Peter has always appreciated the benefit of the FM system and I feel he has done so well in school because of it. He has never been self-conscious about it and the kids

at school don’t seem to make much of it because he doesn’t.

Peter has a beautiful singing voice and is involved in musical theatre and enjoys drawing. He does tend to hang out with a lot of girls. I think he appreciates their tendency to be “verbal,” and they look right into his face and speak. The boys seem to run out on the soccer field and shout out into the air at one another. I think he feels more comfortable with them.

Two different teens with hearing loss, two different experiences, two tired parents who wouldn’t trade any of it for any other kids in the world!

Teri Augustine

Teri Augustine does marketing and fundraising for a non-profit agency equipping young women with unplanned pregnancies to care for their babies.

Her son Peter is the author of the children’s book “Having Hearing Aids”.



People First We believe that it takes more than technology and audiology to create the best hearing instruments. That's why we put the individual needs and wishes of people with hearing loss first in our development of new hearing care solutions.