Making hearing easier for babies and young children: Ideas to support speech development

Children’s Speech and Language Therapy
Why is hearing important?

From birth, babies start learning about speech from the sounds they hear around them. It is these experiences that help them start to develop their own speech. Without good hearing, this early speech and language learning could be affected.

What can go wrong?

The Newborn Hearing Screening Programme will identify the very small number of newborn babies who have a hearing loss at birth. Later on, children’s hearing can fluctuate, meaning that they may hear better on some days than others. This can be for a number of reasons, including everyday coughs and colds. Most children won’t require any treatment. Children may still be able to respond when you talk to them, but their hearing may be reduced.

How can I tell if my child’s hearing is reduced?

Sometimes children don’t show any outward signs of fluctuating hearing loss. However, sometimes you may notice:

- changes in behaviour
- tiredness and frustration
- not responding when called
- difficulty working out where sound is coming from
- lack of concentration
- preferring to play alone
- sitting close to the TV, or wanting it turned up
- saying ‘what?’ a lot
- reduction in clarity of speech
- seems quieter
- less babble and smaller range of sounds produced.

If you have concerns about any of these things please talk to your doctor or health visitor who can refer your child to an audiologist to check hearing, if appropriate.

How can I help if my child has a fluctuating hearing loss?

Think about these things when you are talking with your child:

- can your child see your face when you are talking?
- are you close enough for your child to hear you as well as possible?
You can help by:

- getting your child’s attention before you start talking to him/her
- choosing well-lit places when talking with your child
- getting down to his/her level, e.g. on the floor if this is where s/he is playing
- talking at a normal volume, making sure you are close to your child
- holding objects up to your face as you talk to naturally bring your child’s attention to your mouth as you speak
- facing your child when talking with him/her. When sharing a book, try holding the book to the side rather than in front of you so your child can look up at you every so often
- keeping background noise to a minimum. Turn televisions off when they are not being watched. Try to make time for taking turns when talking as a family
- play games such as ‘peek-a-boo’ to encourage your baby to look at your face.

Remember, a hearing test will only reflect your child’s hearing levels on the day it was taken but may not reflect fluctuations at other times. If you think your child’s hearing needs retesting, you can request this.

These ideas will help make hearing easier for your child and minimise the risk to speech development if hearing is fluctuating. These suggestions are also helpful for the speech development of all young children.
For further information about this service contact:

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If you require this information in a different format such as in large print or on audio tape, or in a different language please contact the service on the details above.

If you have any compliments about this service or suggestions for improvements, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 0300 131 1000 (charges may apply depending on your network) or email: ccs-tr.pals@nhs.net.

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