Socialization Tips for Parents

The educational dilemmas facing children who are deaf or hard of hearing can be pretty intense. But as a parent, you’ve done the research and have a good idea how to minimize your child’s difficulties at school: reaching out to teachers, insisting on every assignment in writing, checking in constantly with your child to make sure he or she understands the assignments and is not just pretending to get them. All important and good…but what about the social issues, the emotional ones? What can you do to help your child with those? This is tricky. For the sake of discussion, let’s say your child is a boy. Often, parents, educators and the student himself will fall into the assumption that he’s “beaten” deafness if he gets A’s and is following the lectures. By approaching deafness as a problem to be overcome, parents put the focus on quantifiable gains and measures – quiz scores, hearing tests, college acceptance letters, etc. – and thereby miss the more subtle emotional issues. But put yourself in the shoes of your son. Recess and lunch, the highlights of most students’ days, are a struggle to him, a wall of noise. When students, family members or teammates gather in groups to socialize, he can clearly hear their laughter but much less clearly hear their jokes. In art class, there’s a cute girl he has a crush on, but his ears seem like a cruel and insurmountable obstacle to winning her heart. These are painful situations. Deafness will be with your child for the rest of his life – how can you make it a friend and not simply a hurdle? Because it can be a friend, a great and trusted friend. There are ways to break through and turn these and other difficult situations into vehicles for growth and empowerment, and it all depends on your example and compassion.

Avoid dismissing what someone said

Here’s one. Say at a social gathering, your son asks you, “What did I miss?”

Never, ever say “nothing important,” even if there really wasn’t anything important or if you know the joke won’t be funny if told out of context. Saying “nothing important” unfortunately says “you’re not important enough to bother repeating it to.” But neither should you laboriously repeat every word he missed. That’s boring and would make anyone feel self-conscious. Repeating everything verbatim stops the flow of conversation – something he is acutely aware of.

When your son asks “what did I miss?” he is really saying “Help me to connect with you, with others; help me to be in the world.” That’s a beautiful, valuable desire. Use his interest to draw him into the conversation and show him that his curiosity and opinions are valuable. “This is what we’re talking about…what do you think about that? Is that funny? Is that weird?”

Use nonverbal ways to connect

Here’s another avenue for connection: Lipreading. Almost all children who are deaf and oral are expert lip readers. Say you’re at a dinner party; the conversation is getting animated and it’s hard even for you to keep up. You catch your son’s eyes from across the table and soundlessly ask how he is doing, what he thinks of the food. This may seem awkward to you, but is very natural to him, and brings him out of his thoughts and into the gathering. Yes, you want your child to learn to distinguish voices in noisy environments and to speak loudly and clearly, but there will be
time to teach him that. Sometimes, especially in situations that can be isolating, it’s important to just connect.

Connection is everything. Hearing is such work for the deaf. Children with hearing loss have to work to hear everything that’s said, work to extrapolate meaning from things missed and work to keep their attention from flagging. Understandably, school can be exhausting and the first thing many children who are deaf do when they get home is take out their hearing devices. There is nothing wrong with that! Learn to connect to your child without sound – to have private conversations, shoot hoops, cook a meal, play a game, or walk the dog...without words.

Only after connecting with your child can you begin to discuss the many aspects of deafness in ways that can lead to understanding and self-confidence.

Use humor to diffuse potentially awkward situations

Here’s another example: FM systems. One of the biggest challenges someone with hearing loss faces in school is explaining the myriad hardware to his classmates. There is really no set answer or script for those moments, but there is a right way – with an open, confident manner and good sense of humor. Keep this in mind when you talk to your child about the devices. “Imagine if you could listen to music on that thing. Or the Yankees game. Or if you could talk to aliens in a space ship circling 100 miles overhead. What would you tell them?” Humor takes power away from awkward devices, awkward moments and missed words, and places it in the hands of your child.

To put it another way: are kids, hearing or otherwise, hardwired to think that deafness is embarrassing? No, they take their cues from us. If we present it as no big deal, that’s what it will be to them.

Your comfort sets the example

No big deal – this leads me to a most crucial point. Parents have to provide all this guidance and connecting like it’s perfectly natural. Sending your child into the hearing world thinking that deafness is a huge, code-red situation that has to be tiptoed around or game-planned down to the smallest detail is setting him up for anxiety. The world isn’t going to be making too many allowances for his disability. The key reason your child should have a friendly relationship with deafness is so that he can move past it. You can help him do this by constantly engaging him on levels that have nothing to do with hearing – politics, sports, friendship, or pop culture - and also by remembering to not worry too much. They will be ok–really, they will.

And about that cute girl in art class the young boy wants to talk to? Tell him to say “You seem like a really fascinating person, and I’m very interested in what you have to say, but I have a hearing loss. Can we go somewhere quieter, a little more private?” Let me tell you, in my experience, a line like that can create many exciting opportunities…but that’s another story.

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