

Educating Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students During COVID-19: What Parents Need to Know

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The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the concept of normal in the United States: education became homebound, social interactions moved behind the protection of digital screens and masks, the general population became non-essential workers as U.S. states went into lockdown, and regular activities were substantially modified to be conducted with physical distancing. To learn more about the changing education of deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) children during the pandemic, researchers at Kent State University and Texas Women's University recently conducted a national survey involving 133 parents of DHH children. Based on the survey results, here are five recommendations that parents should know about educating DHH children during this new normal.

1. Be assertive in getting the services that your DHH child requires.

Of the 133 survey respondents, only six reported that their DHH child received all services mandated by their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan, even if the minutes of service they received were greatly reduced. Some parents expressed frustration over services not being provided and/or taking too long to get set up. Only 23 respondents reported that their child received services from a teacher of the deaf, and only two reported receiving interpreting services. Reach out to professionals in deaf education and hearing care as needed; they will likely want to help in any way they can.

2. Look for universal design in online education programs.

Many parents reported that the design of online education programs provided by schools for their DHH children was inaccessible. DHH children struggle following the speaker during virtual meetings and videoconferences when many faces appeared on the screen simultaneously. Additional challenges included hearing teachers over computer speakers, lack of captioning for videos and announcements, background noise either on the speaker or child's end, and captions that were too fast or at too high of a

reading level. Suggesting speakers on a videoconference to raise their hand and monitoring the existence, reading level, and speed of captioning make a big difference in increasing accessibility.

3. Provide opportunities for DHH children to socialize.

One respondent commented: "Our children need socialization and I feel that our teachers are so worried about the academics that they forget about the other things that happen at school like socialization." While opportunities for socialization are limited for most children right now, for DHH children, the problem is especially intense. Most DHH children tend to be the only people with hearing loss in their families, making the stay-at-home experience even more isolating. DHH children using American Sign Language (ASL) may have no one in their households with whom they can fluently communicate. Creating online and physically distanced interactive opportunities with their DHH peers is essential to maintaining the mental health of DHH children through this pandemic.

4. Find opportunities for exposure to DHH role models.

Having DHH adult role models can help DHH children learn how to navigate challenges during this difficult time. Reach out to deaf education professionals and advocacy groups such as Hands and Voices and the American Society for Deaf Children to find role models who can help your child learn how to thrive in the new normal as a DHH individual.

5. Keep communicating!

Regardless of the assistive listening devices used or their preferred language, all DHH children need access to communication. Ensure that DHH children are actively involved in conversations at home during mealtimes, etc. Relay incidental information that is accessible to other children at home and, most importantly, let them know that their thoughts, feelings, and anxieties are important and worthy of discussion.

One survey respondent effectively advised: "Parents, while we may know our kids best, we are not trained in every little technique that professionals use to help educate our kids. Teachers—you have the training and knowledge, but do not expect parents to either have that knowledge already or be able to quickly grasp what you are doing. It takes both groups—parents and teachers—working together the best they can to provide kids with great education." Despite its overuse in the last few months, the phrase "we are all in this together" has truth to it. The combined efforts of parents and professionals in deaf education and hearing care are needed to guide DHH children successfully through this pandemic. 



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