

What teachers can do in a classroom to improve ear and hearing health



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Ear and hearing care workers can help teachers to play an important role in improving schoolchildren's ear and hearing health. This article focuses on what classroom teachers can do to identify hearing difficulties and ear problems in children, how they can raise awareness of ear and hearing health, as well as improve learning conditions for children with hearing loss.

Identifying possible ear and hearing health issues

Many school-age children develop hearing loss that remains undiagnosed. This has an impact on their learning and can cause children to drop out of the education system, particularly in low-resource settings. Sometimes a child is referred to as having a learning disability or learning difficulty, e.g. Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), when in fact the root cause of the behaviour is an inability to hear well. Even a hearing loss in one ear can have an impact on a child's learning.

Many conditions can lead to hearing difficulties, temporary or permanent, and need to be spotted and treated early. Listed below are indicators that teachers should look out for among the children in their class.

Indicators of hearing loss

Children with a hearing difficulty can display the following:

- **Speech problems:** a child may say words or respond incorrectly or have delayed speech, language and communication. They may feel more comfortable with gestural communication.
- **Poor attention span:** a child may not respond to being called by name most of the time or may not

respond to things the teacher has said. This in itself is not enough of an indicator of hearing difficulties, but if this child looks confused or does not carry out instructions on a regular basis and seems to look at the teacher's face more than other children (lip-reading and looking for clues such as facial expressions), this could be an indicator.

- **Need for higher volume or louder speaking voice:** a child might speak more loudly than some of their peers or turn up the radio/TV in order to hear sounds. Children with a unilateral hearing loss often speak loudly, or conversely speak very softly.
- **Not following instructions:** a child may be confused, bring the wrong items, or regularly ask for repetition.
- **Looking the wrong way:** a child with a hearing loss in one ear or with an asymmetrical hearing loss may look first in the wrong direction when their name is called.
- **Learning difficulties:** the child may have a learning problem or may not seem able to follow the discussion or conversation.
- **Social withdrawal:** children with hearing loss can have a tendency to avoid social situations, sports, parties, and family events. Inability to communicate and understand during such gatherings can be overwhelming for an individual. Sadly, if a child is hard of hearing and is asked why they avoid these situations, they might not know. To them their hearing loss is normal, so the child remains unaware that they are not hearing at the same level as everyone else.
- **Disruptive behaviour:** a child with hearing loss may also show quite disruptive behaviour, distracting the teacher and other children, displaying attention-seeking behaviour to mask the real issue of not being able to hear well. Attention-seeking behaviour may, in some instances, indicate that the child is also suffering from verbal or physical abuse. If this is suspected, then the teacher should report their suspicions to a health worker.

Indicators of ear disease and risk factors

Ear disease can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss. Even temporary hearing loss caused by a recurring ear disease can have a significant impact on learning.

Teachers should refer for ear and hearing care children who present the following indicators of ear disease:

- discharging ears
- ear ache
- trauma to the ear
- problems with balance.

Lesson on healthy ears in a primary school.

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Continues overleaf ➤

Personal experience



“As a child in school I was aware that I couldn't hear as well as my peers, but I didn't know what to do about it. Continuous requests to repeat were considered disruptive to the class and teacher, and my peers might have thought that I was foolish and slow to understand. To avoid a negative label, I'd pretend to understand, which reflected itself in poor performance.

For teachers who were aware of my hearing loss, repeating was no problem – they encouraged me because my parents had informed them in advance. They also gave me extra attention, so my performance in their subjects was good.”

Nassozi B Kiyaga

Some children also need to be monitored for hearing loss by teachers if they present the following risk factors:

- They have been exposed to very loud sounds over a long period or have been exposed to an explosion.
- They have had a very serious illness (requiring strong medication which could be ototoxic).
- They have had meningitis, measles, or malaria.
- They have suffered trauma to the head.
- They have an unusually heavy, persistent or recurrent cold.
- They have a family history of hearing loss.
- They complain of noises in the ears (tinnitus).

Referral pathways

Ear and hearing care workers should make sure that teachers and school staff know where and how to refer a child they have identified as having potential ear and/or hearing problems.

They should explain to teachers when the child needs to have an ear examination and/or hearing test by a professionally qualified person, as well as the type of professional they should consult (e.g. audiologist, ENT specialist, specialist teacher of deaf children, etc.).

Raising awareness of ear and hearing health among children

It is very important for teachers to explain the importance of healthy ears to schoolchildren.

Key messages

It would be a good idea to ask a health worker to come and give a lesson on healthy ears at the beginning of a school year, so that children build up a good relationship with health workers and are then not afraid to go to a clinic, e.g. if they have an ear infection.

The Box on this page contains key messages that teachers can share with children in their class.

KEY MESSAGES FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN

Our ears help us learn. This is what you can do to look after your ears:

- Do not swim in dirty water.
- Do not listen to loud noises, particularly if they last for long periods of time. If you are listening to music with headphones, do not listen at maximum volume.
- Do not put objects in your ear, particularly sharp objects (and do not use Q-tips).
- If you cannot hear well, there are many ways to help you, so ask for help.
- Avoid loud noises in your surroundings, e.g. loud music, loud bangs or explosions.

Tell an adult to take you to the health centre if:

- You have a runny ear
- Your ear hurts
- Your ear feels hot
- There is something stuck in your ear, even if you put it there yourself
- You feel you cannot hear as well as before, or as well as other children
- You feel dizzy when walking.

It is always much better to ask for help as soon as possible. Waiting can make things worse.

Involving children

This will encourage ownership and help children remember.

Ideas for involvement include:

- Asking children to help formulate key messages and slogans.
- Designating 'ear monitors', i.e. children responsible for ear and hearing health in the classroom.
- Asking children to assist with creating resources about ear and hearing health.
- Organising a competition for the best poster or resource.
- Using practical materials easily available in the community (e.g. leaves, plastics, cardboard) to make toys or learning materials. Such materials are sustainable and have cultural value.
- Messages for hearing children to help them understand the problems faced by their friends who are deaf or hard of hearing (see page 9).
- Bringing these topics into social science or science classes.

Optimising the classroom for better learning for children who are hard of hearing or deaf

Environment

- Good lighting (from windows and lights) is important.
- Seating arrangement: depending on the size of the class, a 'U' shape is better because it enables all speakers to be seen.
- Sitting children with hearing difficulties near or at the front, next to a hearing child, to make sure that missed instructions can be reinforced.
- Good sound insulation is very important. Carpeted or soft flooring reduce background noise and reverberation.

Resources and materials

- Visual aids can be made by the children if not available from education authorities. You can also ask parents to help.
- Make sure that key points are written on the board.
- Send key words and lesson plans home with the children so that they can learn them at home before coming to school (pre-teaching).

What teachers can do

- Keep the noise level in class to a minimum, to encourage better communication.
- Repeat key points; rephrase them using different words. Children with a hearing loss may need to hear something 5 times to 'get it' when their peers may only need 1–3 times (because the more effort is spent listening, the fewer cognitive resources are available for understanding new information).
- Explain vocabulary such as idioms and words with multiple meanings: these are often learned by overhearing others use them in daily conversations, which will be more difficult for a child with a hearing loss.
- Use innovative teaching methods, eye catching and colourful materials, including gestural communication for technical subjects.

- Provide opportunities for active learning which are child-centred.
- Create a learning environment where all children's contributions are valued.
- When possible and available, make sure to use any assistive device a child might have, e.g. a hearing aid or cochlear implant.
- Discuss a sign or signal that the child can use to let you know when he or she is struggling.
- Set up peer support so that the person sitting next to the child can repeat a page number or simple instruction as necessary – the child needs to learn to advocate for her/himself.
- Be prepared to provide extra lessons to help children to catch up with their work.

A better experience for all learners

Most of the improvements listed above will not only support children with a hearing difficulty, but will improve learning for all in the class. All schoolchildren benefit from repetition and the use of a variety of teaching methods and support materials.

Similarly, minimising noise levels in classrooms avoids annoyance and disturbance, and improves performance of both children and teachers. Research indicates that it helps children with:

- long-term memory
- reading ability
- attention span
- letter, number, and word recognition
- calm.

Finally, a positive, friendly, motivating teaching attitude is essential, not just for children with hearing difficulties, but for all children.

Managing a successful inclusive classroom

Over the last decade and more there has been an increased international commitment to inclusive education.^{1,2} This means that all children, regardless of gender, age, disability and other factors, should go to school in their local community. Both the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD 2006) and Agenda 2030 (2015) reflect this commitment.

To successfully include all schoolchildren:

- Parental involvement is crucial.
- Children with disabilities need to learn at their own pace and have reasonable accommodations and alternative assessment strategies in place to meet their unique needs.
- Schoolchildren need to experience success: learning goals need to be specific, attainable and measurable and have some challenge to them.
- There need to be opportunities to devote time to non-academic subjects, like music or sports, to make it possible to identify a child's development and strengths in other areas.
- There needs to be a climate where children help each other. Teachers can also give tips on how to communicate better with a child who has a hearing loss (see Box on this page).

TIPS TO COMMUNICATE BETTER WITH A CHILD WHO HAS A HEARING LOSS

- Communicate in the way they find works best for them – be that spoken, signed, written communication or a combination of all of these
- Get their attention before communicating
- Face them when communicating
- Speak clearly and naturally
- Do not cover your mouth
- Use visual cues where possible
- Make it clear what the topic of conversation is
- Stand with your face to the light
- Speak one at a time and reduce background noise
- Do not give up – keep trying.

- Teachers should also be aware that children with hearing loss may have additional learning needs, such as dyslexia or visual impairment.
- When there are deaf or hard of hearing learners in the class, adults who are deaf or hard of hearing can be invited to school to help or tell their life experiences.
- Additional specialist support may also be required, such as sign language support, provision of close captioning, amplification aids and the support of a specialist teacher to help the teacher manage an inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

Teachers can play an important role in helping to identify hearing loss and ear problems, in encouraging families to seek treatment early and making sure children are aware of situations and behaviours that can threaten their ear and hearing health.

Capacity development is essential to enable teachers to fulfil this role. Ear and hearing care workers should establishing links with schools, in order to train and support teachers in acquiring the basic skills and knowledge necessary to improve ear and hearing health. Ear and hearing care workers can also ensure that the school nurse is trained in ear and hearing care.

In addition, for additional specialist support, schools should link with inclusive education services and specialist teachers who work with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

References

- ¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/GC.aspx>
- ² <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

Useful resources

www.hear-it.org/10-signs-that-your-child-may-have-a-hearing-loss

<https://deafchildreinaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Deaf-Child-in-Classroom-2012.pdf>

www.ndcs.org.uk/professional_support/our_resources/index.html

<https://wfdeaf.org/>

www.ifhoh.org/

Sign language interpretation in an inclusive classroom.

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