

EXPLORING COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH HEARING DIFFERENCES: AN OVERVIEW



A JOURNEY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION

Families have choices about language and communication for their young children. When a family has a new baby, they may think about what language(s) their child will learn. Families may know and use one language or multiple languages. Babies' brains are amazing. Like little sponges, an infant's brain soaks up all the language that they hear or see used meaningfully around them.

Many people think of language as listening with our ears and talking. However, just as there are many different languages, there are many ways we all communicate. We can communicate with words and phrases, gestures, facial expressions, sign language, reading, and writing to name a few. This is especially true for children and adults who have *hearing differences*.

Families who have just found out that their child has a difference in hearing levels, which some people call *hearing loss*, *deaf*, or *hard of hearing*, often have many questions about how their child will learn to communicate. Becoming a successful communicator and learner is a journey for each child and their family. Each family will have communication choices, or opportunities, to consider as roads to explore on this language journey.

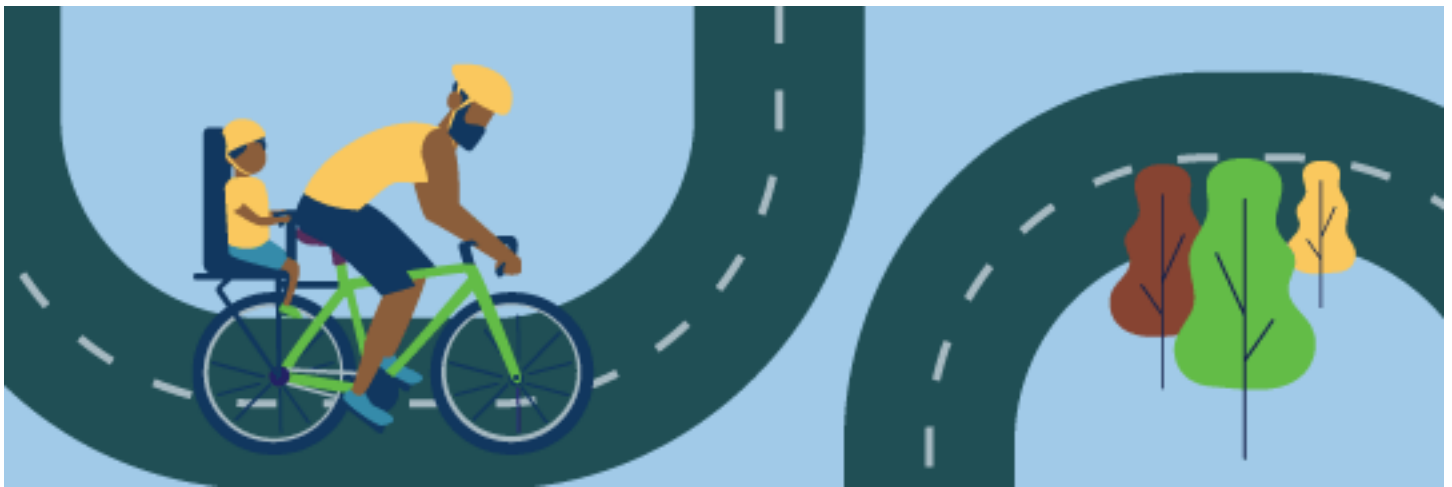
LANGUAGE NUTRITION FOR YOUR CHILD'S BRAIN. LANGUAGE IS CAUGHT, NOT TAUGHT.

Babies and toddlers do not learn language through daily lessons that their parents and caregivers teach to them. Babies' brains come ready to learn, or *catch*, whatever language surrounds them every day in meaningful ways. Those little brains need lots of loving, interactive, meaningful language shared with them beginning in infancy to grow their understanding, just as little bodies need loving care and nourishing food to grow physically.

A child can only learn the language(s) that are shared with them in meaningful ways and that their brain can *catch*. Young children with hearing differences may need their families and caregivers to share language in different ways for that very important *language nutrition* to get to their child's brain...for their child to be able to *catch* their family's language and learn it. Families may use listening and speaking to share language with their child. They may share a visual language system. Or families may use a combination of ways to provide their child's brain the language nutrition it needs.

WHAT DO COMMUNICATION OPTIONS, CHOICES, OR OPPORTUNITIES MEAN?

As you begin your language and communication journey with your child, you will have different roads to explore as ways to help your child catch as much language as possible. Each road on your journey of language and communication represents a different way you can share thoughts, ideas, experiences, and feelings with your child. These different ways to communicate are *choices* and *options* because YOU, the child's family, are the ones who will make decisions about how to communicate with your child. In Minnesota, families and service providers like to use the phrase *communication opportunities*, because each provides unique ways to nourish your child's brain and communicate with your child. Whatever you choose is a commitment. You will need to communicate whenever you are with your child so that their language can grow. Your beginning communication choice needs to be one (or more) that your family can comfortably do all the time. It may take some time to figure out which communication opportunities feel right for your child and family and which ones will help your child learn language well. It is good to be flexible. As you learn more about hearing, hearing differences, hearing technology, your child's development, and different ways to support your child's language development, your communication choices may change over time. Start your journey with what feels right for your child and family and be open to learning more over time. Together with fellow family members and supportive professionals, follow your child's lead and watch how they grow and develop.



WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT ROADS, OR COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES, THAT FAMILIES MAY EXPLORE?

It can help to think of *communication opportunities* as a continuum from auditory ways to communicate (listening and speaking) to visual-only ways to communicate, such as American Sign Language (ASL). No one communication opportunity is the “right” or “best” way for all children with hearing differences or for their families as they support their child's language learning. Most children who wear hearing technology and can hear a lot of speech often learn spoken language through listening. Some children may need to have a visual boost like facial expressions, gestures, or signs along with listening to speech to understand well. To have full access to language, some children with hearing differences may use American Sign Language (ASL),

a completely visual language. Children and families may grow to be bilingual, learning multiple spoken languages or a combination of ASL and spoken or written language(s). Families are encouraged to consider their child's individual needs and their own personal ideas and preferences for how to communicate with their child.

Four main roads, or *communication opportunities*, that families may explore to help their child learn to understand and use language are listed on the next page. You can learn more about each one of these communication opportunities through a series of articles that are posted on the MN Low Incidence Projects webpage *Exploring Communication Opportunities* (www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/Projects/ehdi/ehdiCommunicationOpp.html) Each of the four articles explains more about one of the communication opportunities. Within each of the articles, you will also find additional web links for more information.

• AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL)

American Sign Language (ASL) is a true language. It has a sign for every language concept. It is a visual language that includes signs, facial and body movements, and visual emphasis of ideas and feelings. Speech is not part of ASL. ASL is the language used by many members of the Deaf community in the United States.

• LISTENING AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Listening and Spoken Language is generally how babies and toddlers with typical hearing learn language. Children learn to listen to the language spoken by their families and communicate with others through talking. There are two main educational philosophies that support children's development of listening and spoken language. They are *Auditory Verbal Philosophy and Practice (A-V)* and the *Auditory-Oral (A-O)* approach. There are many similarities between the two practices and some differences, too.

• CUED SPEECH

It is also possible to make spoken language into a visual form through Cued Speech, which provides hand shapes and hand movements for speech sound combinations. Cued Speech may be used to assist with speechreading or for helping some children learn the sounds of letters (phonics) when learning how to read.

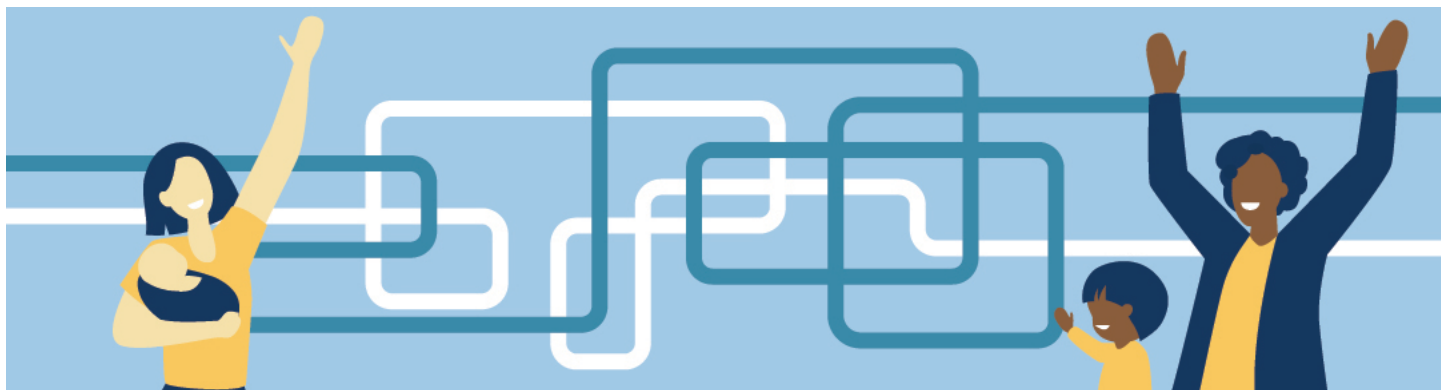
• COMBINED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Some families use a combination of communication strategies with their children. One common goal of combining strategies is to try to provide both auditory and visual forms of language for the child. Some families may use spoken English, ASL, and/or Cued Speech at different times and for different communication purposes. Other families may try to sign main words or concepts at the same time as they are talking.

BEGINNING YOUR COMMUNICATION JOURNEY

Learning about the impacts of hearing differences on listening and communicating with a spoken language, such as English, Spanish, Somali, or Hmong, is unexpected for most families. In some ways it is like needing to take an unexpected trip. Your trip needs to start as soon as possible, and it will take time to get to your destination. There are several different roads you could take that are available to you and your family on this journey. Some roads may be more difficult; other roads may be much easier. You might start down one road, but then experience some unexpected bumps or roadblocks. You might decide to change your route in some way as you go along your journey. Changes in expectations and pathways are a part of parenthood. It is part of the beauty of the journey.

In a similar way, the journey of language and communication for your child and family needs to start right away. Remember that your child's brain is eager for the language nutrition you can provide. Your journey will take planning, time, and effort, too, as you help your child learn and grow. As you begin to plan your communication journey, you will be thinking about which road, or communication opportunity, you might want to explore first. There are information resources that can help you learn about the different ways to communicate. And there are caring people who can help you along the way. Each child and family are unique. Your choices for your child and family are respected and valued. As you and your family embark on this learning journey, know that there are many Minnesota organizations, services, and other families who are here to support you.



SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU START TO PLAN YOUR COMMUNICATION JOURNEY ROUTE(S)

1. When you think about your child and family, what hopes and dreams do you have? How might others help support your hopes, dreams, and needs, too?
2. What are some of your child's special characteristics? What are some of the special characteristics of your family, community and culture that will be part of your journey?
3. How much does your child hear? This is often referred to as *residual hearing*. Has your child been fitted with a hearing aid or cochlear implant? If so, does your child have auditory access to sounds, voices, and speech when using their hearing aids or cochlear implants?
4. How well is your child able to see? It is important to check and monitor your child's vision in addition to their hearing. When children have hearing loss combined with vision loss, there can be a significant impact on how they may be able to understand others' communication. Not being able to see clearly affects a child's ability to speechread and/or to see sign language.
5. What language(s) do your family members and extended family members use at home to communicate with each other? If your family uses more than one language at home, how important is it to you that your child learns multiple languages?
6. How important is it to you that your child learn to understand and use spoken language?
7. How important is it to you for your child to learn to understand and use American Sign Language (ASL)?
8. What supports might be helpful to you and other family members as you learn new strategies for communicating with your child, or learn a new language to use with your child?

“THIS FEELS A LITTLE OVERWHELMING! WHAT DO I DO?”

You do not need to learn about different communication opportunities alone. Caring people from several Minnesota programs stand ready to help with information and support.

- It helps many parents to talk with other parents who have already experienced making decisions about language and communication with their child. If you would like to meet with other families of young children with hearing differences, Parent Guides from *MN Hands & Voices* can help you get connected.
 - MN Hands & Voices
(www.lssmn.org)
- Parents and caregivers may also find it helpful to learn more from individuals in their communities who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guides from *MN Hands & Voices* and/or Deaf Mentors from the *MN Deaf Mentor Family Program* can share their lived experiences with you.
 - MN Deaf Mentor Family Program
(www.lssmn.org)
- If you would like to talk with other parents and specialists about combined hearing and vision loss, the *Minnesota DeafBlind Project* is a helpful resource to get answers and support.
 - MN DeafBlind Project, For Families
(www.dbproject.mn.org/Families/index.html)
- There are education professionals available through your school district's Infant and Toddler Intervention Services and Early Childhood Special Education program who can help you learn more about communication opportunities. Information about child development and support services for young children and families can be found at *Help Me Grow MN*.
 - Help Me Grow MN
(helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/index.html)
- Your child's audiologist may have information they can share with you about communication opportunities in addition to hearing technology resources.

Along with receiving information and support from Minnesota programs, you can also learn more about different communication opportunities from online information resources. Links to three selected resources are listed below.

LINKS TO SELECTED INFORMATION RESOURCES

A Parent's Guide to Hearing Loss, Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

(www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/parentsguide)

Exploring Communication Opportunities, MN Low Incidence Projects

(www.mnlowincidenceprojects.org/Projects/ehdi/ehdiCommunicationOpp.html)

My Baby's Hearing

(www.babyhearing.org)

The Communication Opportunities resource series was written in collaboration with representatives of the MN Low Incidence Projects, the MN Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing, MN Hands & Voices, and the MN Deaf Mentor Family Program.

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