



**A Parents' Guide to  
hearing care for children  
with a learning disability,  
autism or both**

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By parent or parent carer, we mean anyone with parental responsibility for children or young people with a learning disability, autism or both.

# Introduction

Getting the best health care for your child is very important to everyone. Identifying health problems and treating them early enables children to continue to lead fulfilling lives.

The NHS Long Term Plan aims to improve children's health by making sure they get the right health checks at the right time.

This guide is one of a series of three to give parents information about **hearing, eye and dental checks**.

The guides will explain

- ▶ Why hearing, eye and dental checks are important
- ▶ How the checks are done
- ▶ How to access hearing, eye and dental care
- ▶ How you can prepare and support your child
- ▶ How to find out more

**This guide is about hearing care.**

This guide has been produced in partnership with SeeAbility [www.seeability.org.uk](http://www.seeability.org.uk) and Contact - for families with disabled children [www.contact.org.uk](http://www.contact.org.uk)

To find out more about NHS plans to improve services for children with learning disabilities, autism or both, visit [www.longtermplan.nhs.uk](http://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk)

# What do I need to know about the ears and hearing?

Hearing is not only important in speech development and learning, children also use their hearing to take in information and to make sense of their world. Listening to music may be exciting or soothing. Hearing footsteps coming towards them means they know they are not alone.

For some children, hearing difficulties may be having a hearing loss in one or both ears. The level of hearing could range from mild to profound hearing loss. Some children are born with a hearing loss but for others it develops during childhood.

**4/10**

young adults who have a learning disability also have permanent hearing loss



**10x higher**

Hearing loss in children with autism is 10 times higher than in the general population



Hearing difficulties can be temporary. Most children will experience glue ear at some point during their childhood. Glue ear is one of the most common childhood illnesses, and happens when the middle ear (behind the eardrum) becomes filled with sticky fluid. Glue ear usually lasts less than three months and is often linked with ear infections, but long-term glue ear can affect children's hearing and their development.

**1/5**

pre-school children have glue ear at any one time

**8/10**

children will experience glue ear before the age of 10

Other children have normal levels of hearing, but still have difficulties listening and processing sounds leading to problems understanding speech and environmental sounds. This is known as auditory processing disorder (APD). Other factors also affect the way we process sound such as our language ability, memory and attention. This is because even a simple task like following the instructions of a teacher requires that all these different abilities work together. As a result, APD often co-occurs with other childhood developmental delays such as language, attention and memory difficulties, as well as dyslexia and autism.

## Why is ear and hearing care important for my child?

Hearing problems are common amongst children with a learning disability, autism or both but often they have not had a recent hearing check. Hearing difficulties can cause or contribute to speech or language delays, difficulties learning and reading, and cause difficulties communicating with others. Without support, hearing difficulties can make a child's learning difficulties more challenging, and impact on their educational progress and social development.



But if we know about a child's hearing difficulties there is support available and lots of things that can be done to help. When we understand a child's hearing difficulties everyone can work together to make hearing and listening as easy as possible for them and help them achieve their potential.

## Are there any signs of hearing difficulties that I should look out for?

The behaviours below can indicate a problem with the ears or hearing. It is also possible that they could be explained by a child's learning difficulties but it is worth having a hearing check to rule out any problems, particularly if it is noticed for the first time or it is a change from their normal behaviour:

- ▶ Does not respond when called by name
- ▶ Watches faces intently
- ▶ Appears to hear some voices better than others (e.g. low or high pitched)
- ▶ Sits close to the TV or turns the volume up
- ▶ Is upset by loud noises
- ▶ Is startled by people approaching from behind who they haven't seen/heard
- ▶ Speaks or vocalises very quietly or loudly
- ▶ Breathes through their mouth and has a 'blocked nose' most of the time
- ▶ Has discharging ears and/or ears have an unpleasant smell
- ▶ Frequently rubs their ears

## How would my child's hearing be tested?

There are lots of different hearing tests and the ones used will depend on your child's age and stage of development but it's likely that several different tests will be done to get a clear picture of your child's hearing. It's possible to test the hearing of all children from birth and you may remember having a newborn hearing screen done shortly after your child was born. Even if your child has had this check done, a hearing loss can develop at any time so it is worth having a further assessment later.

Hearing tests may be carried out in your child's school but if they aren't, then your school or GP can refer you to your local audiology service.

Hearing tests can be done which measure how well the ear, and hearing nerve between the ear and brain are working. They don't require your child to show that they have heard the sound. Other tests involve the audiologist recording your child's response to sound. This might be a startle, look or head turn, or they could move a toy or clap when they hear a sound.

Ask your audiologist to share with you a plain English written report of your child's hearing, and any hearing difficulties explained in language you and your child's teachers can understand.

## How can I support my child to have a hearing test?

It is often assumed that children with a learning disability, autism or both are unable to perform routine hearing tests because they do not understand what is expected of them or fears they will not cooperate with testing. In practice an experienced paediatric audiologist should be able to assess the hearing of all children from birth.

Every child is different but often the most challenging and time-consuming activity is to introduce the hearing tests in a way that reduces anxiety and establishes trust. It may be necessary for some children to get used to the audiologist, clinic and procedures very gradually, including getting used to having their ears touched, etc. Sometimes this can mean a series of different types of tests, over a period of time, in order to build up an accurate picture of their hearing.

Before your child's first appointment, it can be helpful to talk to the audiologist about what you can expect so that you can help prepare your child. Prepare a list of questions that you would like to ask beforehand. For example:

- ▶ Do they have any leaflets or videos that show children having hearing tests that you can show your child?
- ▶ Can I take a favourite toy that could be used as part of the hearing test?

- ▶ How long will the appointment take? (Should I bring a drink and snacks?!) )
- ▶ My child won't wear headphones – will you be able to test their hearing?

You can also practice playing simple games with your child to help them prepare for a hearing test. Playing these games teaches your child to wait and listen for a sound and then perform an action. If your child does well with a particular toy at home, you could take it with you to the clinic.

Choose a toy that your child enjoys and that they can perform an action with. This could be dropping balls into a bucket, building a tower of blocks, or hitting a drum, etc:

- ▶ Put the toys in front of your child
- ▶ Instruct your child to 'wait' and 'listen' until you make a sound such as a clap, bang a drum, or say "go"
- ▶ Show them the action you want them to do when they hear the sound (such as moving their hand with the ball to drop it in the bucket) and keep repeating the sound and action together until they do the action on their own
- ▶ Repeat until your child waits, listens and performs the action in response to each sound you make
- ▶ If they do this well, you can try this game sitting or standing behind them so they cannot see you make the noise. You can also try making the sounds louder or quieter

## What can be done to help?

If your child does have hearing difficulties, there is support available and lots of things that can be done to help. Your audiologist may recommend hearing aids, will continue to monitor your child and refer to other services if needed. Support could include training in good deaf awareness for school staff, support from a specialist Teacher of the Deaf, changes to teaching, learning and support strategies, assistive listening equipment, and improving acoustics to create good listening environments.



## Where can I find out more?

Talk to your child's school, GP, Health Visitor, or paediatrician about any concerns you have about your child's hearing.

You can also contact the National Deaf Children's Society who have information on hearing tests, types and causes of deafness, and support available on their website

[www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)

# Contact us

## Freephone Helpline:

0808 800 8880 (voice and text)

Email: [helpline@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:helpline@ndcs.org.uk)

[www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)

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National  
Deaf Children's  
Society

We are the National Deaf Children's Society, the leading charity for deaf children.

We're here for every deaf child who needs us – no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate.



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