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PARENTS AS ADVOCATES FOR THEIR HEARING IMPAIRED CHILDREN TRANSITIONING FROM A PRIVATE SETTING TO A MAINSTREAM SETTING

by

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An Independent Study
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

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Program in Audiology and Communication Sciences

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Approved by:
Barbara Lanfer, M.A. Ed., Independent Study Advisor

This was a project completed with the hope of creating a "parent friendly" binder to be used as an aid for parents whose child with a hearing impairment would be transitioning from a private setting into a mainstream setting.

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Independent Study Discussion

Many parents of children with hearing impairments have mixed emotions about the thought of their child entering a mainstream setting. After all of the work, emotional ups and downs, and intense dedication, the transition from private school setting to a mainstream setting may bring about both feelings of happiness as well as feelings of anxiousness. Parents feel happy and proud that their child has worked hard and learned how to talk and listen, but parents may also be nervous about the idea of their child entering a new and unfamiliar educational setting. While there are trained professionals who will be capable of working with the child in the mainstream, it is most often the parent who assumes the role of advocate for their child.

Keeping this in mind, I sought to collect information regarding the experiences that parents and their children had during the transition from the private auditory/oral program to a mainstream educational setting. I wanted to find out parent thoughts and opinions about how their children were progressing as well as how their children were handling the transition process. I wanted to learn about any struggles they were facing as well as to find out how the initial transition process went for their family. At the end of collecting this information, I wanted to have an idea about what topics were worth including in a "Parent Guide" that would provide parents with a valuable resource as they began this transition process.

I decided that structuring a short yet comprehensive open-ended survey to send to parents would be the best way to obtain the information that I needed. I wanted the survey to be confidential so that I could elicit the most honest data possible. Eventually, after several attempts, I created a survey of eighteen questions. The topics covered in the survey included, information about the child's current academic performance, advocacy skills, assistive devices

(i.e. hearing aids, cochlear implants, and FM systems), social adjustment, mainstream teacher, and mainstream preparation meetings.

I sent the survey to thirteen parents whose children had recently graduated from Central Institute for the Deaf (CID). I included the survey and a cover letter explaining my intent and the importance of returning the survey in a timely fashion. Each survey was sent with a self-addressed stamped envelope. In the eight weeks that I allotted to receive completed surveys, I received only three. What information I received was limited, but worthwhile, nonetheless.

At the beginning of this process, I hoped that I would have a strong return rate for the survey. I assumed that since I was asking for information about children who had recently graduated from such a close-knit program that more parents would be willing to participate. I anticipated that parents would welcome the chance to share information about their children's progress and give input about how the transition process might be improved. Reflecting on why I did not receive a greater number of surveys, one issue stands out. The low return rate could be due to parents' hesitation to share information about their children. This could be attributed to a feeling of doubt about their child's progress in a new educational setting. Each of the three surveys that I did receive reflected positively on the transition experience and their children's success in the mainstream. Not one survey had anything negative to say about their child's academic performance or the role of the mainstream teacher. The premise that only parents whose children are experiencing success in the mainstream are willing to share information may be true. However, my goal was to learn about children's struggles, both academically and socially as they entered the mainstream. I wanted to know how helpful teachers in the mainstream are and I wanted to know what was hardest for parents. I planned to compile this information to make a resource guide to help parents as they go through the transition process.

What I have chosen to include in the parent resource guide is mostly based on my knowledge as a teacher of the deaf and on information collected from other programs about mainstreaming, rather than parents' input. Regardless, I feel that this guide will be useful to parents whose children will be entering the mainstream. Perhaps over time, the guide can be revised as needed when more data is collected.

Binder Components

Classroom Acoustics

When your child enters the mainstream, it will be very important that he or she be placed in a classroom with the most optimal sound acoustics as possible. In this case, "acoustics" simply refers to the noise conditions of the classroom. If you ever stop to think about all of the background noise that occurs within the classroom, you will be quite surprised to know how great its impact can be on learning (Nixon, 2002). Noises like the overhead projector, the ventilation system, tennis shoes squeaking on the floor, desks slamming, chairs squeaking, the computer humming, fans circulating, lockers slamming, classroom chatter, and hallway commotion all decrease the signal to noise ratio. The signal to noise ratio (SNR) is a measure of background noise in relation to the sound signal (in this case the teacher's voice). It is important that the signal (teacher's voice) be loud and clear enough to be heard over the background noise (Nixon, 2002).

To ensure that your child has the opportunity to learn in the best acoustic conditions possible, there are several things that can be done. One of the most effective ways to control the background noise is make sure that there is carpet in the classroom. If this is not an option, there are a couple of tricks you can suggest that will help create a better acoustically treated room.

Placing large rugs around the room will act to absorb some of the perpetual background noise. Another trick of the trade is to attach tennis balls to the feet of the desks and chairs. This will greatly decrease the overall noise level in the classroom. Adhering cork board (bulletin boards) to the walls of the classroom also will act as a buffer for noise. In addition, hanging curtains on the windows will also cut down on noise from the outside (Nixon, 2002).

All of these techniques may not be feasible in your child's classroom. However, implementing even one of these can help reduce noise and increase your child's ability to hear the teacher more easily. If you're having difficulty conveying the importance of noise reduction in the classroom, it may be beneficial to mention the positive effects that it can have for all children. Recent research has shown that increasing the SNR within the classroom can have positive effects on academic achievement for all students (Siebein et. al.).

Classroom Set-Up

After having addressed the "classroom acoustics" issue in your child's classroom, there are several more things that you can suggest to help your child receive the most optimal speech signal.

First, remind the teacher of the importance of facing the students when speaking. It is natural for a classroom teacher to continue talking while writing on the blackboard. This may take some practice, but in the long run, will be beneficial to all students. Not only is the signal (the teacher's voice) more audible, but your child has the benefit of lipreading.

Another consideration is where your child is seated. The most appropriate area of the classroom for a child with a hearing impairment to sit is near the front of the room, away from the door, and away from other noise sources. If your child is a cochlear implant wearer, it is best that he or she be positioned in a way so that the teacher is nearest to the implanted ear. If your

child is wearing a hearing aid, it is best that he or she be positioned so that the teacher is closer to the better ear. We know that is impossible for a teacher to stay in the same position all day, but mentioning this may help the teacher be more aware of his/her position in the room.

Academics

Academics are the meat of education. After you have discussed the acoustical factors in your child's placement, you can begin to focus on academics. There are many ways in which you and the teacher can help your child be successful. This next section will list several suggestions and accommodations for the teacher to implement in the classroom.

Visual Aids

One way to help a child who is hearing impaired succeed is for the teacher to present material both visually and auditorily. Listening all day in a noisy environment can be very tiring for the child with a hearing impairment. It can help to have information presented visually in the form of print or picture. Suggesting that the teacher use an overhead projector, write notes on the board, or even provide the child with a print out of notes will be a great help. Also ask the teacher to write directions on the board or to provide written directions. This will allow the child to listen and not worry about taking notes during instructional times.

Questioning

Too often, children with a hearing impairment get into the habit of answering yes when the teacher asks them if they understood what was said. The difference between understanding what was said and hearing what was said is critical.

To help check for comprehension, it will be important that your child's classroom teacher asks different kinds of questions in differing ways to know if the child is actually understanding the information. While this seems like it may be a lot of work, it really is not at all. It is important that the teacher use these types of questions for all the students in the class and will result in helping the teacher better assess all students.

Examples of questions a teacher may ask are listed below.

Who did….?

What happened…?

What did…?

Tell me what you think about that.

Do you agree…?

What might happen if…?

What was the problem…?

Classroom Discussions

A common component of most classrooms involves students working as a group and participating in class discussions. To make discussions valuable to a student with a hearing impairment, several techniques can be implemented. It is important for the classroom teacher to follow these simple suggestions so that the child who is hearing impaired has the benefit of being able to follow discussions.

First, whenever possible, it is best if the students sit in a circle. This allows students to make eye-contact with others during the discussion. This is important for the student with the hearing impairment and allows him or her to follow the conversation. Second, requiring students

to raise their hands and at the same time asking the teacher to call the name of the student before the student makes a comment will ensure that all students are attending to the student who is speaking. Third, the teacher should remind all students to speak one at a time. This will help all students follow the discussion more easily. Finally, it may also be helpful for the teacher to repeat any comment made by students. This will give the child who is hearing impaired an opportunity to hear the comment a second time.

Other Helpful Hints

Other accommodations to help children with hearing impairment succeed in the mainstream may include setting up a buddy system within the class. Having a buddy will allow the student with a hearing impairment to have someone that he or she knows, and can count on to clarify directions as well as take notes. Using the buddy system is an appropriate way of making the student with a hearing impairment feel more at ease, and allows the student to watch during discussions and not worry about taking notes.

There is a lot of preparation that can be done at home that will help your child be less overwhelmed at school. Request an extra set of textbooks for home use as well as an overview of the curriculum. This will allow you as parents to prepare your child in advance for what is coming up. Especially discuss vocabulary that may be used with a new concept. This will give your child some prior knowledge and exposure to the information.

Technology

As the parent of a child with a hearing impairment, dealing with hearing aids, cochlear implants, and FM systems has probably become second nature. For some mainstream teachers,

however, this may be their first encounter working with a child using hearing aids, a cochlear implant, or an FM system.

Using an FM system everyday is an important part of a child with a hearing impairment's success. "If a student is eligible for services under IDEA, assistive technology must be provided if the student requires that service. Schools must also assume that those using assistive technology (including teachers) are properly trained" (Children and Hearing Aids). FM systems, working in conjunction with a child's device will increase the audibility of the speech signal and allow the child to listen with greater ease, and have better success in a mainstream classroom. A child with a hearing impairment in a mainstream classroom is learning in a very challenging environment. The classroom is noisy, there are a large number of students in the class, the pace of instruction is fast, and there is less time for one-on-one attention. Wearing an FM system and maintaining proper functioning of a child's personal device will assure that a child has every opportunity to succeed (Davidson, 2007).

While the mainstream teacher might have some training on troubleshooting, it will still be important for parents to be a source of information should a problem arise. Following up with your child's teacher on a regular basis about equipment is a good idea. In addition, having replacement parts and especially batteries is important for parents to remember. Make sure that your child has extra batteries at school and knows how to change them.

Since cochlear implants are a more recent technology for children with a hearing impairment, teachers may know less about them and may feel a bit unsure about how teaching a child wearing hearing aids and teaching a child wearing a cochlear implant will be different. Fortunately, there are few, if any, differences that teachers will need to learn about. It will be the job of your child's itinerant or deaf education teacher to discuss this information with the

teacher. It may be the job of the parent to remind the teacher about the importance of minimizing static electricity within the classroom for children wearing a cochlear implant. Remind the classroom teacher about avoiding static electricity, as it may erase the child's map on his/her cochlear implant. This is especially true in the winter months when the air is dry and static electricity is more prone to occur. Make sure to supply the child's teacher with some dryer sheets, static guard, or Downy spray to use each day to help eliminate static. Carpeted floors and standard plastic chairs are culprits for static build up. Ask the teacher to rub down the chairs or spray the carpet to help eliminate this risk (Davidson, 2007).

Other Issues

In this section we will touch on several other issues that are important to the success of a child with a hearing impairment in the mainstream. These topics will include self-advocacy skills, social skills, and the importance of communication between parents and the child's teachers.

Self-Advocacy Skills

Part of the process of readying a child to enter the mainstream will be to help him or her develop self-advocacy skills. These kinds of skills need to be taught and practiced to ensure that the child will be able to use these skills in the real world. Self advocacy skills that the child should be using during the school day may include; asking the teacher and other students to clarify something that was misunderstood, asking the teacher and other students to repeat what was said, and alerting the speaker that what was said was not heard. It is now the parent's job to make sure that the child is using these skills while at school in order to reach his or her fullest potential.

This may be a challenge for the child as he or she begins their school days in the mainstream setting. Now instead of the child being one of many children with a hearing impairment in a small class, the child is probably the only student with a hearing impairment in a much larger class. Self advocacy was easy at a private school where everyone was hearing impaired, and teachers expected and encouraged strong self-advocacy skills. Now it may be more difficult for the child with a hearing impairment emotionally to speak up and call attention to the fact that they did not hear or understand something.

Talking to the child about how important it is to speak up when they either cannot hear or have misunderstood the information is crucial. Asking the teacher to observe the child's attempt at self advocacy is a good way to determine it they are using this skill to their benefit. The classroom teacher should encourage all students to ask questions and to ask for help if they do not understand.

Open Communication

Establishing open communication between the parent and his/her child's teacher is an important part for success in the mainstream. Parents live with the child and can provide a wealth of information to the child's classroom teacher. Giving them information about how the child learns, things they like to do, situations that make them uncomfortable, and other personal anecdotes will help the teacher get to know a different side of the student. This may help the classroom teacher understand the child better and avoid potential problems in the classroom.

Devising a way to communicate with the child's teacher on a regular basis will help the parent to stay informed consistently. This can be arranged through weekly e-mails, telephone calls, or by using a special notebook that will allow the parent and teacher to communicate regularly through writing.

Social Skills

Part of attending school is creating peer relationships and being a member of the school society. Along with learning concepts, children learn how to establish relationships and maintain those relationships in a school setting. This will be especially important for the child who is hearing impaired and is entering the mainstream as a "new kid". Encouraging your child to talk about his/her hearing impairment and explain his/her device is an important first step. If your child feels uncomfortable doing this, then allowing the parent or itinerant teacher of the deaf to come into the class and give an in-service to the rest of the students may be a better option. Role playing with his/her peers during school time is a fantastic way to practice initiating or engaging in this sort of conversation. Remind your child that as a parent, you will always be there to listen and answer questions as well as help them socially.

Often children with a hearing impairment tend to fall behind their peers in the area of pragmatics. Many things that the parent thought the child would "just know" may have to be explicitly taught. The parent may find it helpful to ask the teacher to inform him/her about social situations that may come up during the school day. This way, as the parent, you can be aware of the problem and be ready to discuss it with your child in a more private and non-threatening way. Most of all, it is important that you, the parent, remember to be patient and always encourage your child to be themselves and nothing more.

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