

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Most people think of a hearing loss as an affliction of the aged and infirm. There are, unfortunately, many children with some degree of deafness and who, as a result, have great difficulty learning to talk. Getting an education can be a monumental task for such a child.

If he is born with impaired hearing, he's often the victim of abuse since his parents, not realizing he can't hear, interpret his unresponsiveness and inattention to unwillingness to obey; hence, they punish him for ignoring them when they speak.

A youngster with a severe hearing loss may seem dull-witted, be uncommunicative, appear confused and seem to live in a dream world.

Until such a child's family recognizes the cause of the problem, the child's life may be particularly difficult. Often it's not until a youngster enters kindergarten that the difficulty is suspected. There's no outward visible signs that a child can't hear.

If a child has a sight loss, it's evident: he bumps into things. If something's wrong with his leg or hip bones, he limps. If something's amiss with an arm or a hand, it's recognized immediately.

The only observable sign of deafness is refusal to pay attention when a question is asked or a request made; unless the child happens to be looking at you when you speak, he seems oblivious. Parental reaction is usually annoyance, even anger.

If a child seems responsive and cooperative when you're working closely with him or when the two of you are involved in an activity together, but gives the impression of ignoring you completely when his back is turned, when he can't see your face, and his attention is directed elsewhere, he may be deaf.

If you suspect a child you know may not be hearing adequately, a few simple experiments can help you make preliminary tests. Try these while you and he are alone in the house since the presence of other adults or children will affect the child's behavior.

If several children are playing, for instance, and you call the one you're trying to test, even if he doesn't hear you, the others will. Their distraction from their play will draw his attention to your intervention. He will seem to respond to you when he is really reacting to their response. He will have learned to be attentive to that, even though he cannot hear.

When you and the child are alone in the house and he is absorbed in independent play, arrange it so you're out of the child's line of vision, but so you can see him in a mirror or can watch him when his back is to you.

Call his name softly, and then more loudly to see if he appears to hear anything, and if so, at what volume. Ring a bell; does he show any curiosity? Drop something that makes a clatter, like a pie plate or a handful of silverware on a bare floor, and watch for signs he has heard.

Stamp your foot hard on the floor; does he pick up hints about what's happening by physical vibrations?

Be alert to how the toddler communicates with adults and his siblings. A deaf child may be dealing in sign language without you even noticing.

Carrying a plate of cookies and a pitcher of milk, you approach the table where the children are eating; all the youngsters want some. This child passes his glass, just as the others do. When the cookie plate reaches him, he takes two. "Just one," you say. He pays no attention. You remove one on the cookies from his fist and raise an admonishing index finger, repeating, "I said, 'just one!'"

He sees the finger, relates one finger to one cookie, sees the others get but one, and is satisfied.

Tragically, no one notices the boy is not hearing, not talking, not making intelligible sounds. He's slow in talking, you think. No one realizes he's not making consistent noises that always mean the same thing.

A child who's slow to talk may be perfectly normal; however, a child who doesn't repeat the same noises to communicate the same meanings isn't associating sounds with items and actions. Usually it's because he's not hearing these words being constantly repeated.

After two or three years of watching, he can probably recognize facial muscle-action and expression in some cases. He's learned to lipread to some degree; that won't help him talk.

When visitors come to his third birthday party, he's totally confused. He's unprepared for what happens. He can't comprehend the excitement, the gifts, the attention being centered on him.

He can't hear the traditional song being sung nor the urgings to blow out the candles on his cake. He sits, mute, among the happy group, wondering what in the world is going on.

Should you suspect your child has a hearing loss, your first step is to have him checked by his pediatrician, of course. If he agrees there's a possible problem, he'll recommend special tests. The road ahead may be long and difficult.

Your child may need to attend a school where teachers with special training will help him learn to talk, read and lip-read, to deal with his handicap in a world where being different all too often means being rejected.

Learning to talk, form words, control voice, volume, speak in modulated tones, enunciate, put sound inflection and lilt into speech is not easy when it's never been heard.

You've probably read about whistles dogs can hear but we can't; they can because their audio equipment is more acute than ours. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to imitate that sound, a sound you can't hear?

That's what a deaf child must do while learning to talk. He must produce sounds he's never heard and relate them to particular objects, sensations, emotions, achievements. How do you define music? A bird's song? A bark? A moo? A whinney?

How do you make such a child aware of differences between humming and carolling? It helps when he learns to read. This, too, takes time, since he can't easily associate printed words with spoken noises.

Time. Time and patience.

Patience. Is such patience possible? Yes, parents learn it because they love the child enough. Yes, some teachers are dedicated enough to work with these children.

Such children, given enough encouragement, praise, appreciation... and enough patience... learn and love doing it. They're some of the most enthusiastic students I've ever seen.

That's not to say raising a deaf child is easy; it's not. It's expensive in time, effort, patience --- and in dollars. Everybody in the family is called upon to help because without a concentrated effort on the part of everyone around him, the youngster may fail.

With years of help, however, deaf children can overcome their handicap and participate to a remarkable degree in the normal activities of our complex society.

Often we forget how blessed we are to have all our faculties, to have youngsters whose equipment for functioning normally is complete.

The wonder is that so many of the millions born each year arrive and grow up complete and whole. Given the odds, one might expect birth defects to be far more common than they are.