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What Parents Should Know: Your Deaf Child's Social-Emotional Development

2025

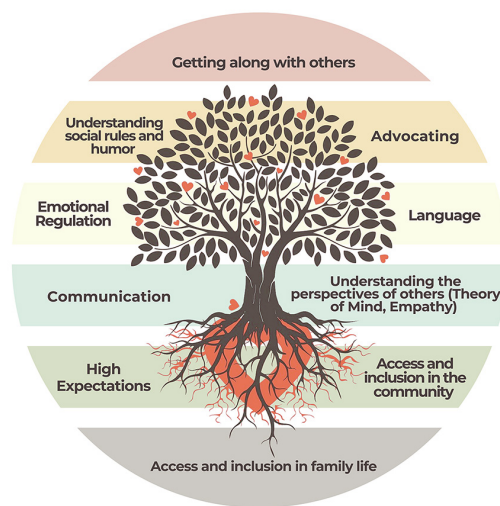
**Developed by the Early
Hearing Detection &
Intervention Parent to
Parent Committee**

What is social-emotional development?

Social-emotional skills are a set of everyday abilities we use to navigate the world—having an awareness of our own feelings, the ability to control our own behavior, understand other people's expectations, and much more. We learn these skills as we grow up, and they're what "acting like a grown-up" often means.

For young children, a key step is the ability to recognize that other people have their own thoughts and feelings, and being able to guess what they are—this is called "theory of mind." But deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, deaf/hard of hearing plus children¹ can face unique challenges developing theory of mind and building other social-emotional skills from there.

Babies and young children need language for the three building blocks for social-emotional development: high expectations, full access to and inclusion in family and community life.



Why is this important?

Social-emotional development is foundational to almost all other aspects of a child's life. Kids who develop age-appropriate social-emotional skills have an easier time in school, higher self-esteem, better relationships with others, and eventually have happier adulthoods. This foundation is especially important for DHH kids, who will have to assert their needs with hearing people throughout their lives.

Positive childhood experiences and opportunities to practice social interaction are essential to building social-emotional skills—things like being included in family traditions, having trusted adults and peers, feeling free to ask questions, etc. But for DHH kids to have these experiences, they need early access to language so they can understand our expectations and get feedback, love, and support from us, their peers, and their community.

Since they can miss complex social interactions, DHH children can struggle to develop theory of mind and the skills that follow from it, and this can be made more challenging if they have a language delay or have faced language deprivation. Early intervention and supportive educational environments assist with language development and give children opportunities to practice social interaction, but they aren't the full picture.

At first glance, many deaf people, myself included, are able to make it in the mainstream. We do it with smoke-and-mirrors fake smiles and lots of nodding. Often, we're reinforced by well-meaning parents and teachers who gush over how well we appear to assimilate. They're thrilled if we learn our ABCs, but oblivious to the social isolation we deal with."

Mark Drolsbaugh, author
Madness in the Mainstream

¹ We'll use the term DHH in this document to encompass this very diverse group of kids.

Parents' role

You play a key part in this adventure. As parents, you are your kid's first role model. Learning to accept and cherish who your child is and what their unique gifts are contributes to their sense of self and well-being; if your child uses a signed language like ASL or ProTactile, learning that language yourself—even imperfectly—will be a major step in that direction. When a child feels safe and has trusting relationships and full communication with caregivers, they have a strong basis for developing social-emotional skills.

Be deliberate

Don't assume that your child is picking up these skills along the way; especially in mainstream environments, language challenges mean that DHH children must often be directly taught social-emotional skills. Seek out checklists for age-appropriate social-emotional milestones to make sure your child is on target, like you would for other aspects of their education.

Provide opportunities for your child to connect with DHH peers and adults from infancy onward. This gives them more practice developing basic social skills with people who understand and appreciate them and fosters a positive self-identity and the ability to navigate all environments, empowered for themselves.

As your child grows older, reflect with them about social events and anticipate the barriers they may encounter, and encourage them to troubleshoot with you and members of your child's team. Your team might include your extended family, friends, neighbors, your early intervention or educational professionals, and Deaf mentors or coaches.

Be positive

It's important to keep your expectations high, focus on your child's strengths, and encourage providers and educators to do the same. Celebrate your child's social victories—"you made a friend!"—and be ready to push back negative assumptions about your kid whether they are with you or not:

"I am sorry your child has to wear hearing aids."

"Actually, Charlotte is doing great and has so many interests! You should see her at the zoo with the bats!"

Don't accept "doing well for a deaf kid". Every D/HH child needs a strong advocate. That is a parent's responsibility until a child can take it over. You weren't expecting this, but there is a path forward for your child to a fulfilling life. "What parents dream for their child doesn't have to change, it's just the 'how' that may need to adapt."

Paul Ogden, author of [Silent Garden](#) and Professor Emeritus at California State University, Fresno

We weren't sure what our son would get out of attending a live concert with his class. His intervenor prepared by attending the performance the weekend before, getting him a Braille copy of each scene's script, and even getting tactile objects to introduce each scene (she had bubbles whenever the bubble machine was used onstage).

He still enjoys reading his brailled program and remembers much of the event. He tapped out the drum beats and smiled through the whole thing.

The Family Guide to Intervenors has seven prompts to consider when planning an activity with peers that inspired her to create better access and inclusion.

Jodie, parent of a deafblind child

Be reliable

Establishing routines at home gives a child structure, helps them predict what will happen next and build independence. Routines like morning checklists, bath time, chores, and cleaning up after dinner help set clear expectations for family life from a very young age.

A predictable schedule also helps a child handle emotions and cope with challenges; they provide a sense of comfort and safety, and help kids move beyond upset and regain calm. Consider creating a visual schedule so your child can know what is happening each day. For example, you can refer to the pictures on the chart and say, "Look; bathtime comes after dinner!"

Social skills are essential for self-advocacy. Kids need to know appropriate ways to handle rejection, find help when they're struggling, or fight back when something is unfair, so as adults, they can hold down a job, find a date, or buy a car.

Will, father of a Deaf child

Communicate before you discipline

All kids have to learn to wait, to calm themselves, and to get along with others, although how you express those lessons may look different with a DHH child. But because there's a greater chance your child might have missed critical instructions or social cues, you need to confirm they actually understood what was expected of them *before* addressing "bad" behavior. Communication breakdown can lead to conflicts with peers and family members, but they can also be an opportunity for learning. Both the child and the parent should understand what the problem is, before coming up with an appropriate solution.

Avoid dinner table syndrome

How can you ensure that communication at home is clear and inclusive for your child? When clear communication doesn't occur, DHH children (and adults!) can experience "dinner table syndrome."

The name comes from the very common experience of a DHH child eating with their hearing family. Someone tells a joke that the child can't hear. The rest of the family laughs, so the child asks, "What's so funny?" and the response is "*It wasn't that funny. I'll tell you later.*"

Dinner table syndrome happens any time children feel excluded or clueless: in moments of family life, at school, in appointments, or in the community. Other examples may include not knowing the day's plan, like going to the dentist, missing a homework assignment because of a teacher's unheard instructions, or not understanding that the family car is in the shop.

Whenever there are hearing people around them sharing information, perspectives, or even having an argument, there is a chance for DHH kids to miss out on important information and context. "Dinner-tabled" children can feel isolated from their families, and miss critical social-emotional development opportunities by not having full access to these sorts of discussions.

Even with the best hearing technology, a DHH child may not be able to understand conversations due to overlapping talk, noise, and poor acoustics. Whenever your family gathers, be ready adjust your strategy so they can be included, whether that's rearranging the seating so everyone's face is visible, or reducing background noise, or switching to sign language. Also be aware of listening fatigue and overstimulation (especially if your child is the only DHH child at home/school).

Parents should model how communication occurs; showing how each child is important and valued, regardless of how they communicate the burden of figuring out what's going on should

never be placed on the DHH child. One strategy some families use during dinner is the “Roses and Thorns” activity, or one of its many variations, where each family member shares one at a time about something positive and something that worried them that day with the whole group.

Who is qualified to evaluate social-emotional development?

You are. Parents are the first and most important guardians of their kid’s well-being, but you shouldn’t be alone. Does your child have DHH expertise on their IFSP or IEP team? Deaf professionals will have important first-hand insight into a DHH child’s social-emotional growth. If not a Deaf professional, is there someone on the team familiar with social-emotional skills and behavior from a DHH perspective? Social-emotional skills should be evaluated and discussed at every IFSP / IEP meeting.

Children can get exposure to different social environments and cultures as they grow up.

At a young age, it can be easier for children to make Deaf friends, hearing friends, or both.

Growing up and interacting in diverse communities while having appropriate communication access will help with understanding and navigating social structures and norms. This can be as simple as knowing who is the popular student or the funny student, to eventual positive influences from peers, to learning to deal with peer pressure and bullies. Having support from parents as well as D/HH leaders, teachers, and role models throughout childhood will aid children in being a part of any community that fits them as they grow.

John, father of a Deaf child

What tools are being used to support your child at school?

Check if Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are being used in your child’s school. What curriculum is being taught and how? If your child has difficult behaviors, you and the team need to tease out why that is happening. Considering that all behavior is a form of communication, we need to discover what the child is trying to share. **Deafness (or other sensory disability) in and of itself is not a reason for behavior problems or delays in social-emotional learning.**

Additional strategies

Here are some specific strategies parents can use to support social-emotional development:

Communicating and bonding with your child

- Take time to just be together with your child without an agenda.
- Catch your child doing well; praise them in front of others.
- Ask the child what they understood to ensure communication was clear.
- Do what you say you will do.
- If you don’t know, say so.
- Keep your child informed, especially when things change. (A visual schedule, timers, and posted lists may be empowering.)
- Adopt a family rule: We don’t say “Never mind” or “Tell you later”.

- Give reminders and information for transitions and plan changes big and small. Use a “no surprises” rule.
- Explain what is happening in the environment: noises, other languages, conversations, why someone might be leaving the room. These are all opportunities for incidental learning.
- Anticipate a child’s questions and encourage them to ask more.
- Ask your child open-ended questions like: Who did you eat lunch with today? Did you have any disagreements today? Tie these questions to their interests and use humor. Ask more directive questions when kids are younger. Watch for opportunities for dialogue as they mature.
- Use books to help teach about new experiences (going to the dentist, getting sick, a new baby in the family, a death in the family) or make your own photo books to reinforce social learning and background knowledge for your child. Sharing experience books helps you intentionally teach your child about what they will experience in the world.

Managing emotions

- Label the emotions and thoughts you see in real life—“that baby looks sad”—and in books—“the monkey is SO confused!”—so your child can learn to name and express these. Use “mental state” verbs: think, feel, opinion, dream, decide, remember, forget, imagine. Exposing your child early and often to these words and concepts gives your child tools to talk about thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.
- Share your thoughts and feelings—positive and negative—so that your child learns that it is okay to feel emotions. One doesn’t have to act on them.
- Help your child understand that people think and feel differently from each other. (“Some like outside games; other kids like to read in quiet.”)
- Model how conflicts are solved within the family. Some families use tools like dolls, role play, timers, etc. to help manage and diffuse “big feelings” and return to a calmer place
- Include your child when discussing challenging moments (hospital stays, first day of school, disappointments, canceled playdates).

Building relationships and managing conflicts

- Role-play and model situations with your child. Ask your child to predict what could happen: show your child how to lose a game, or what they should do when a guest arrives for dinner.
- Using books, parents can also point out how characters see a situation differently from each other.
- If you make a mistake with your child, acknowledge it and apologize.

As your D/HH child grows older, there will be a shift from your support (or intervention) to them being able to self-advocate. The idea is that when the child has effective strategies, they will avoid the communication gaps or barriers that prevent them from becoming independent adults. Support from other D/HH leaders, peers, and understanding family members helps them build confidence and a strong sense of self. A positive identity gives them strength to handle the constant effort of self-advocacy. Connecting with D/HH leaders and peers offers empathy, encouragement, and advice from people who have faced similar challenges when the hearing world just won't accommodate.

Emily, Deaf Leader

- Give opportunities for your child to grow in independence from early childhood on. Give them chores to do: setting the table, cleaning their room, etc., and opportunities to stay alone at home or go out by themselves when age-appropriate.
- Give opportunities to play with other children; reflect together on those experiences and feelings afterward.

Specific strategies to address challenging behavior

- Give gentle reminders and review of expectations for behavior. Praise and positively reinforce expected behavior.
- Model taking your time to communicate clearly. Take a minute to breathe, center, and organize your thoughts.
- Ask “Do you know why I was upset with you?”. Explaining the “why” is critical. Focus on actions.
- Be consistent.
- Set predictable patterns (how much time to clean up, time for bed, using timers, etc.)
- Break down the steps needed (bath before reading, pick up toys before dinner, changing diaper before snack).
- When introducing new expectations such as potty training, previously learned skills can backslide. Be sensitive to overwhelming your child, ensure their understanding, and focus on comforting.
- Apply consequences that match the misbehavior.
- Set limits by giving two acceptable choices.
- Explain that some tasks are not a choice. Communicate using empathy and acknowledge frustrations. Using play and humor helps to defuse frustration.
- Seek the reasons for your child’s behavior. (Was your child left out of an earlier conversation? Was it a tough day at school? What are they trying to communicate? Seek to understand.)
- Monitor what your child is watching even from afar. Interacting while watching is always best. Screen time should be balanced with interaction, outside time, and learning, and be age-appropriate. Especially take notice of what your child is seeing older siblings watch.

“Are you getting a divorce?”

My 5-year-old asked this often when my husband and I were discussing anything with intensity—even a movie that really made us think.

I kept a note with this question on my refrigerator for years to remind me to make my expressions match my communication so that it was clear for her.

Sara, mother of a deaf child

Using the strategies above, parents have opportunities to lead and foster their child’s social-emotional development. Making your home a place of comfort and access models the importance of relationships with parents, siblings, and extended family members. Remember that activities that are okay for you to watch/participate in may not be appropriate for your child’s stage of development. For example, be mindful about what television you are watching or the games you or others play in front of your child.

Taking your place on your child’s educational team can foster collaboration and ensure that your child’s school environment (classroom, lunchtime, recess, school-sponsored activities) is a place of comfort and access, as well. A child’s growing relationship with peers is equally critical.

Parents should be empowered to use strategies to support social-emotional development (the when, where, what, and how are up to you). What's important is planning as a family how to support social-emotional development in your D/HH child at home, at school, and in the community.

How will you know your child is developing strong social-emotional skills? Your child is understanding and expressing emotions, has a positive sense of self, and is learning to regulate their own behavior and interact well with others. When you see your child trying to understand the perspectives of others or asking questions about social situations, you know they are developing these skills. This is a journey for both you and your child and it can be a rewarding one, too.

Resources for more information and practice:

Building Trusting Relationships: National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB) Practice Guide:

https://documents.nationaldb.org/Building_Trusted_Relationships_Practice_Guide_a_v2.pdf

California Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) Used for preschool and a similar tool for K and up, holistic, charts growth over time, and assists in goal-setting. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/documents/drdp2015preschool.pdf>

Checklists for social-emotional development milestones:

- <https://pathways.org/topics-of-development/social-emotional/> Birth to five
- Social Communication Skills – The Pragmatics Checklist, Goberis, format of information designed by Karen Anderson, Supporting Success for Children with Hearing Loss, 2013, ages birth to 60 months. <https://successforkidswithhearingloss.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Pragmatics-Checklist.pdf>

Emotional intelligence video explanation, featured on the Kimochi site (A social-emotional curriculum with stuffed animals that illustrate emotions): <https://www.kimochis.com/about/sel-benefits/>

Expanded Core Curriculum examples:

- Illinois Department of Education: Social and Emotional Learning for DHH Students FAQ: <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Social-Emotional-Learning-Deaf-Hard-Hearing-Students.pdf>
- **Iowa Expanded Core Curriculum:** Resource for developing educational plans (IFSP/IEP/504) for DHH students to address areas either not taught or that require specific direct teaching compared to the general education curriculum for all students. See the seven documents that comprise the Expanded Core Curriculum here: <https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/special-education/programs-services/deaf>
- **Michigan Department of Education:** <https://mdelio.org/deaf-hard-of-hearing/expanded-core-curriculum/social-emotional-skills>

Experience books: Prepare and Thrive: Story by a mother of a deaf child who uses experience books extensively; Hands & Voices <https://hv-library.com/family-perspective/prepare-and-thrive/>

- **Making Experience Books:** <https://handsandvoices.org/fl3/topics/tipsheets.html>

Fly-Five Curriculum: A K-8 social-emotional learning through guided exploration and social stories, site for teachers with sample lessons, blog, etc. focusing on five areas: cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.

Hands & Voices Language and Literacy Tipsheets for families: See the *Language: Social-Emotional Development* tipsheet, activity, and video of a parent of a DHH child interviewing a psychologist about what parents of DHH children should know about social-emotional development. <https://handsandvoices.org/fl3/topics/tipsheets.html>

Listening Fatigue Scales: Learn more about listening fatigue and see the self-reporting scales for pediatrics and adults from Vanderbilt University: <https://www.vumc.org/vfs/vanderbilt-fatigue-scales>

Making Friends and Developing Social Skills: NCDB site: <https://www.nationaldb.org/info-center/educational-practices/making-friends-and-developing-social-skills/>

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a framework in education to provide targeted support to all students. In this system, all students receive “Tier One” supports and frequent monitoring to ensure they are on track with skills. If a student needs more support, Tier Two adds teacher coaching and Tier Three adds individual educational program (IEP) goals, supports, and accommodations. Read more about this here: <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/mtss-what-you-need-to-know>

Optimizing Outcomes for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Educational Services Guidelines by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc. (also called the NASDSE Guidelines): Free to download: <https://www.nasdse.org/docs/nasdse-3rd-ed-7-11-2019-final.pdf>

Parent Profile ASL and English Language Milestones, 0-5 Years: This checklist includes simple but critical language and pragmatics milestones for children birth to five years old. The checklist can be discussed at IFSP and IEP meetings. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ss/dh/documents/sb210-pamplet.pdf> from California LEAD-K, California Department of Education.

Positive Childhood Experiences as a buffer to adverse experiences: Bethell C, Jones J, Gombojav N, Linkenbach J, Sege R. Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental and Relational Health in a Statewide Sample: Associations Across Adverse Childhood Experiences Levels. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2019;173(11):e193007. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.3007 (cited by Jenna Voss, Ph.D. in her EHDl Plenary, 2020.)

Pragmatics in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children: Volume 146, Supplement 3, November 2020. See all 11 articles in this Pediatrics journal supplement for medical providers, audiologists, educators, and parents including Deaf/Hard of hearing adult experiences, rubrics, and a call to action to teach pragmatics in early childhood. https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/issue/146/Supplement_3

VL2 Issue Brief: Raising the Whole Child: Addressing Social-Emotional Development in Deaf Children: <https://vl2.gallaudet.edu/research-briefs/265>

Zones of Regulation: a curriculum and tools for educators to use with students at <https://zonesofregulation.com>. Visual tools showing the zones were modified by a Deaf artist: See Feeling Zones at <https://moeart.com>)

***A note about terms:**

Within this document, we used the abbreviation DHH to refer to all children who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf/hard of hearing plus, or deafblind. Deaf is also meant to be inclusive. We want to recognize that up to 60% of children (DHH Plus) experience additional considerations to their hearing difference, adding to complexities in support and services for the whole child. Additional considerations may be medical, developmental, sensory, cognitive, physical, or social-emotional. DHH Plus is meant to indicate the child's unique needs along with the expanded team, including the parents, necessary for positive future development.

About this document:

This 2024 resource was developed by the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) Parent to Parent Committee, a volunteer, interdisciplinary, interagency/ inter-organizational, and diverse parent/ professional group.

This committee is open to all parents, professionals, and DHH leaders.

There is a large community of parents and professionals who can support your journey. We hope this guide has given you some ideas, resources, and reassurance as you and your child journey together. Most of all, we want you to know that you are not alone. Reach out to us at parentadvocate@handsandvoices.org