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Tips for Creating a Deaf/Hard of Hearing Friendly Home Environment

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>> Hello, everyone. We have Robin Getz here. I'm the room monitor. There are papers to fill out and you can bring them to the back of the room when you're done. Thank you very much and enjoy the presentation.

>> Hello, I'm Robin Getz. I'm the coordinator for the Colorado Home Intervention Program. And also part of the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind. I'm going to talk about different ways we can be created a more deaf‑friendly and hard of hearing home for your child. These tips will be for families and providers alike. So... just to give you an idea, roughly two to three out of every 1,000 babies born in the United States are born with hearing loss. Over 90% of these families have no familiarity with hearing loss or how to support their children with communication within the home. This creates a lot of challenging communication situations within the home and beyond.

A lot of hearing children are able to pick up and acquire language naturally by overhearing things. This is our challenge for our children who are deaf or hard of hearing. They struggle from inadequate visual and auditory access to language. Whether it's spoken or sign.

They miss out on a lot of communication during typical family interactions. And that can be during meal times, play times, car rides and so forth. This can eventually lead to frustration, isolation, inadequacy and eventually low self‑esteem.

The goal here is to help you become more aware of your home environment, how friendly is it for the deaf and hard of hearing child regardless of what communication mode you're using?

So... what we'll be touching on several different things. We'll be touching on lighting, we're going to touch on accessible communication, incidental learning opportunities, different ways to gain your child's attention so you can communicate effectively with them and ways that we can help begin to foster independence within the home, even though they are young.

So... looking at lighting considerations. Lighting has a major impact on communication. Think about when you're trying to take pictures of your kiddos or your friends and they're standing in front of the window with bright light coming through, what happens? They become a silhouette. You can't see them very well. That's the same thing that happens if you stand in front of a bright window or the sun is right behind you, your child has a hard time seeing you, they can't lip‑read you, they can't see your signs, they can't read your facial expressions, gesture or even your body language. The same thing is true for if you're, if you have rooms in the home that don't have bright lights in it and it's very hard to see things. It really becomes a very big eye strain because it, you're really trying to figure out what's going on, what's happening and all of that.

So... some of the strategies to overcome this would be, don't have the child look at you facing the window so, you're standing in front of the window or a bright light, so... it's like the sun or a lamp right behind you. Move away from it. Don't... if you have blinds or drapes in front of the window, close them. If you have extra light that you can turn on in the room, turn those on or... if you're able to bring in extra lamps or lighting, bring them in. You want to make sure that the light is really good in the room that you're in.

I'm going to show you a brief video clip if I can get it to work. So... that's what this looks like. Okay... so, you see here, the mom is in front of some back patio doors and... she's trying to play a game with the child. This is the child's fear. It's really hard for the child to see what she's trying to say, even though she's next to the mom.

So, the very brief clip you just saw, the mom moved to a different side of the table and you see how much better the light was. Okay? Now this one you can see, they closed the drapes and added more light.

Okay... so you see how lighting really impacts the communication between the parents? We [no sound]. [Captioner no longer has audio coming through].

>> Thank you, okay, I apologize about that. Next we'll talk about accessible communication tips within the home and why this is important. A majority of the language learning occurs through ongoing communication and incidental learning within the home. Often there's multiple conversations and background noise, which is challenging in general for all people, but even more so for our deaf and hard of hearing children.

Take a look at this picture, that is, for the most part, a typical scene in a lot of our homes with lots of different things going on. Noisy chaos, the TV blaring, the air conditioning running, the phone ringing, the baby playing with toys and making noise and so forth. It's really easy for a lot of our kids to feel frustrated, lost and even isolated when they're trying to figure out what people are saying or what's happening.

So... we're going to talk about different ways we can improve communication access within the home. So... often, in the home, there's a lot of background noise happening in the room you're in. So... if you're in the kitchen, you can have the dishwasher going or the blender going or... in another room, the windows can be open and you have a noisy garbage truck picking up the garbage or things like that.

So... you're in those situations, reduce the background noise, turn it off or move away to a quieter room. I'm going to skip the video due to time constraints, okay... and... we also need to be thinking about seating arrangements. So... you're sitting at the kitchen table with your family and there are centerpieces or bowls of food or obstacles, move those away so there's a clear line of vision so that you and your child can see, everyone sees everyone seated at the table.

We've found that round‑shaped tables are easiest for deaf and hard of hearing families. It gives a cleaner lines of vision. With square tables or some of the rectangle tables, you're often trying to look around other people to try to see what is being said or signed. So... that's why round or oval tables are easier. I'm not saying you need to go out and completely refurnish your home, that's not the objective of this presentation, it's just something to be thinking about.

Same thing with sofas in the living room, great room, family room. We have found that L‑shaped couches or U‑shaped couches provide the best line of vision for communication. Okay?

Okay... you guys can watch the videos on your own. Okay? But... each one of these, the videos shows what I've been talking about. Another important factor is to get down and make sure that you have your child's attention. Don't tower over them, okay? It's really hard for them to look up and watch what you're saying or signing. Make sure you get down to their level. If you're sitting next to a sofa or ‑‑ I'm sorry, you're near a sofa, sit down on the sofa and have your child face you or get down with them on the floor. Okay? Make sure they're looking at you when you're communicating with them, okay?

And these video clips show these, the second one shows a really cool view from a child's perspective. The mom's doing the dishes at the sink and this is a really are tall momma. It's a 2‑year‑old and he wants her attention. So he starts crying. She turns around and looks down at him and realizes she needs to get down, she gets down and says "what's wrong?" It's a really cute, cool perspective. And like we talked about before, check the lighting situation to make sure it's optimal. Okay?

We want to make sure that we always have good visual access to signs, gestures and facial expressions at all times. Even if you're not talking with the kiddo. Okay? It's a good idea to make sure that no one is trying to talk or sign over the other person. Help your child identify who is talking at the same time by pointing in the direction of the person speaking or signing. Make sure that your mouth and your hands are not obstructed with food, cigarettes, facial hair, or a lot of people like to talk with their hands. You know... if you're at the table and talking like this or turned away, so, make sure you're not doing any of that.

I'm sure a lot of you know the value in being as close as possible to your child, you know... within three feet, is a good reminder so that your child can hear or see what you're saying.

During play time, meal times, even. If you're interacting with your child, whether you're on the floor playing with them or at the kitchen table eating something, if you hear something, the [indiscernible] are going or door bell ringing or a baby crying... tell your child what you hear. Okay? This video here is a very nice video of the child, mom's phone going off and the child reacting to the light flashing on the video display of the phone. And the mom looks at the phone and explains to the child what it is. Who it is, I'm sorry. And the child gets excited. So... but... another thing, never leave the room without telling them why you're leaving the room. I can't tell you how many times growing up, as a deaf individual, when I'd been interacting with my sisters or my parents and they get up and run out of the room in the middle of something and I'm like "what happened?" So... it really leaves a bad feeling in you, you feel like you're not important because you're doing something and then the next thing you know, they leave.

So... these next videos show some nice examples of ‑‑ the first one shows the mom asking her daughter while they're playing a game, to wait, and the baby's crying. So the girl knew why her mom had to get up. The next one is a family having a dinner and a conversation and then the dad says "wait, hold on, I have to go to the bathroom." So... he's asked them to hold the conversation, but... they carry on anyway. So...

During story time, it is really important to make sure that you're thinking about positioning. Can the child see you? And the book, at the same time. That is really critical. Okay? It's also really important to make sure that you get rid of any auditory or visual distractions going on, so... there's some lights flashing in the hall, the radio's playing, turn those off so you really can focus on the story time.

Make the story time a relatable and tangible experience. Maybe you convey something that happened to the child recently that day, okay?

I'm going to try one clip really briefly, see what happens. Okay... don't look. Okay... closed captions. It's very important that we have them on the TV or the tablet at all times. It really helps foster literacy, communication, inclusion and language development. One thing we never do is tell our kids "nevermind, it's not important or I'll tell you later." If they ask you what did a person say or why is this person laughing? It really makes them feel not important. And it conveys the idea they're not important as well. By the time the parent's able to tell the child what it was, they may have forgotten what the content was. But your kiddo will not forget that experience.

Incidental learning opportunities, for many of us, it's the ability to overhear or oversee what is being said and learn from it without being taught directly. This is challenging for many of our deaf and hard of hearing kiddos. A big reason why they struggle in the home, schools or out in the community. So... what can we do to help increase incidental learning opportunities for these kiddos? Check the seating arrangement, check the lighting. Provide visual access and support to language at all times. Reduce auditory and visual background clutter. If they're using amplification, take advantage of the assistive technology, FM, and closed caption at all times.

Next is a picture of somewhat ideal family hangout in, to promote incidental learning opportunities for our kiddos. A lot of times we're trying to get our child's attention and they may not be responding. So... here's some appropriate ways to help them respond to your attempts to call them. So... if they're up close, you can wave your hands, like this, or tap their shoulder, tapping a table if you're sitting at a table with them. If you have floors that are wood or ‑‑ [no sound].

Okay... these videos don't want to cooperate with me today. So... really quickly, we're going to touch on fostering independence in the home. There's technology out there to support our deaf or hard of hearing child in the home. They provide visual and tactile support. They decrease dependence on our caregivers and parents because the child has learned what these devices mean and so, when something happens in the home, like someone's at the door or... the smoke alarm goes off, or the ‑‑ the phone rings and so, they know, at the same time, what is happening. Okay? So... as you see, there's a door bell alert with strobe lights flashing and a lighted door bell.

This is an example of a smoke fire detector. Again, very bright strobe lights and loud alarm. Alarm clock to wake them up for school. There are several different things we can use. There's flashing lights or there's little alarm clocks you can stick under your pillow that vibrate. Or... even things like a FitBit can also wake you up by, by vibrating.

So... similar things for a baby cry alert, videophone is another great technology available to our deaf individuals. And close captions, again.

So... these tips are by no means comprehensive, but it's a good starting point for you to be thinking about, using within the home and even beyond. Now that you're understanding your surroundings and how to promote open and accessible communications at all times, regardless of what communication mode you're using, you're on your way to having a hard of hearing child who is an equal member of your family and it allows for more inclusive language‑rich environment for all. Take advantage of every opportunity to communicate with your child in a natural and accessible manner.

A happy child equals strong family dynamics. Okay...   
[applause]

>> Thank you. Sorry about the videos. But... yeah... feel free to access them on your own. Thank you.

[Presentation concluded at 1:26 p.m. ET/11:26 a.m. MT].

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