

# Handy Handouts®

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## Having Good Auditory Skills Means Much More than Hearing Well

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### What are auditory skills?

Auditory skills are extremely critical in the development of receptive language (understanding what we hear) and expressive language (responding appropriately to what we hear). Both receptive language and expressive language create the foundation for achieving academic success. Beginning at birth, your family doctor and healthcare professionals monitor your child's ear health, especially after experiencing ear infections, illnesses that produce an extremely high fever, dizziness, oozing of fluid from the ear, or impacted earwax. Children who experience an undetectable hearing loss may struggle in school because of their poor auditory skills. Other children may not reach the auditory milestones for their age due to a lack of experiences and opportunities to practice language at home. All of these problems can interfere with language development. Even if your child never had any of the problems listed above, but you notice "something just isn't right" about your child's language skills (especially in comparison to his peers), make your concerns known to your family health professionals and the educational specialists in your child's school.

### As a parent, if I voice my concerns about my child's language to school professionals, how can they help?

In a school setting, a speech-language pathologist (SLP), a learning disabilities specialist, or audiologist can evaluate your child's auditory skills (and other related skills) to determine if a problem truly exists. Should the health professionals not find a physical reason for the auditory difficulties, the child may have an auditory processing disorder (also referred to as a central auditory processing disorder), or CAPD, which is a breakdown in the hearing process. In other words, the brain cannot make sense of what our ears hear because of some distortion of the auditory signal. If left untreated, CAPD can lead to academic deficits in areas such as phonics, reading, and spelling. The emergence of academic deficits may also alert a teacher, parents, or



other professional to suspect CAPD. However, it is vitally important to determine whether your child's difficulty comprehending and producing intelligible speech in the classroom is actually related to CAPD or whether the difficulty stems from another disorder altogether.

When a child is of school age, an audiologist specializing in CAPD follows up to conclusively confirm or rule out the diagnosis. Speech-language pathologists, psychologists, special educators, or other trained specialists in language development will be able to identify any disparities in the child's auditory skills, including:



- **Auditory attention:** noticeably antsy, can't stay tuned in, zones out during extended instruction, story time, or circle time. The child requires hands-on learning and/or visual support.



- **Auditory memory:** difficulty remembering a series of numbers or words or pointing to a series of items. This affects how your child processes and responds to school instructions and oral directions.

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- **Auditory discrimination:** ability to hear subtle differences between similar-sounding words (fever/beaver). When people speak rapidly, or there is background noise, the child may be confused even when he is really trying hard to listen.
- **Phonemic awareness:** ability to identify individual speech sounds in the beginning and ending sounds of words, tell whether or not words with rhyme with each other, and blend a series of sounds together to form a word. Difficulty with phonemic awareness can lead to the inability to decode (read) and encode (spell) because blending and isolating sounds are necessary for reading. If there is little phonemic organization (phonemes to syllables to words), word retrieval can also be very difficult.
- **Auditory figure-ground:** the ability (typically by age 7) to focus on the voice of one person (teacher) and block out competing noises (classroom). If the child is overly attentive to all sound input, the teacher's voice blends into the background noise, and then listening (particularly within group settings) becomes a challenge.

the results with you at that time, or contact you to come in and review the results later. In either case, you will receive a detailed summary of the evaluation. If the SLP/examiner pinpoints weak areas in your child's language development, he/she may suggest further testing in order to understand the specifics of your child's disability (if there is one) and develop a plan, such as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), in order for your child to receive instruction in school tailored to meet his needs.

If your child qualifies for an IEP, remember that *the IEP is a legal and binding document*. The school system must provide the individualized instruction promised to your child. Parents are equal members of the IEP team that will plan goals and suggest strategies for your child's instruction, the particular services your child will receive, how often your child will receive these services, where instruction will take place, and his grade-level expectations. After a certain period, your child will be re-evaluated to determine if he should continue receiving services or if he has reached the goals set for him. If the child does not make the anticipated progress the team expected, the IEP team may determine that the child should continue receiving services, and the team (along with parental input) will adjust any goals or strategies listed in the IEP at this time.



Auditory skills play an important role in all aspects of a child's development of language. Besides assessing his auditory skills, the SLP in the school will examine your child's social language (how we use language in "real life"), articulation (pronouncing words), voice quality (hoarseness, breathiness, and resonance), and fluency. Once the examination is complete, the SLP will discuss

Resources:

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Stanberry, Kristin. (2017). *Understanding Individualized Education Programs*. Retrieved September 5, 2017 from <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/ieps/>

WebMD. 2017. *Anatomy of an Ear Infection*. Retrieved September 5, 2017 from <http://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/ear-infection/ss/slideshow-ear-infection-anatomy>

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