

Ring, Ring Goes the Bell

Must-have school gear for children with assistive hearing devices

By Tiffani Hill-Patterson

Notebooks...pencils...glue...soundfield system...scissors...paper... wait a minute, a soundfield system? In a list of school supplies?

For some children with hearing loss, a soundfield system can be as essential to success in the classroom as notebooks and pencils. A soundfield system helps cut through background noise so students can better hear the lesson because a teacher's voice is amplified through a microphone and broadcast through a speaker in the classroom.

Other supplies – some high-tech, some basic – can also help your child with hearing loss make the most of his or her class time.

Testing, Testing

Parents should make sure their child's cochlear implants (CIs) or hearing aids are working properly. If your child is having problems with a hearing device, he or she is missing out on valuable instruction. Several tools can help your child's teacher check CI and/or hearing aid equipment while your child is in school.

For children who use CIs, a variety of testing equipment is available to check that sound is being transmitted through the processor. The type of testing equipment will depend on the device used, so check with your child's audiologist or CI manufacturer to determine what equipment you should get.

For children who use hearing aids, a testing stethoscope can be used to check that the device is receiving and transmitting sound. This device allows parents or teachers to hear the sounds the device is producing. Check with your child's audiologist to identify the best way to purchase one.



Photo Credit: FunTup Productions

School-age children with hearing loss will need a wide variety of special school supplies in addition to books, pencils and paper.

Finally, Jodi Cutler Del Dottore, mom to Jordan who uses a CI, says extra batteries are a must. "We keep a supply at the school in case of emergency," she says. If your child is old enough, he or she can be responsible for changing the batteries in the sound processor or hearing aid. If not, show your child's teacher how to do it. It's also a good idea to have a battery tester in the classroom to ensure that your child's hearing aids are working at optimal power each day.

Safety First

In addition to making sure the hearing devices are working properly, you also want to make sure the equipment stays safe at school, especially when it's time for gym or recess.

Val Blakely, an Alabama mom to two children who both use bilateral cochlear implants, shares this tip: "We use fabric tape to keep the processors on, so we send a roll of tape to the teacher." Other families find toupee tape or body glue (think beauty pageant contestants) work

well to keep the sound processors and hearing aids from falling off.

Parents should also find a way to secure the CI sound processor or hearing aid to their child's body. Some devices have body clips built in to ensure that the hearing device does not fall off and get lost. For those devices without this feature, a mic lock (small plastic tubing that attaches to the ear hook and bottom of the sound processor or hearing aid to form a loop) may be a viable option. A cord clip ensures that if the processor does fall off, it will still stay attached to the child. A sound processor swinging from a child's back is much better than one lying on the ground in danger of being trampled.

Finally, while some sound processors are no longer susceptible to static electricity, this remains a concern for many parents. Blakely sends a box of fabric softener sheets in the winter to help tame static. "The kids like the fresh-scent rubdown they get when their hair is standing on end," Blakely adds.

Classroom Enhancements

Like a soundfield system, an FM system is another high-tech way to enhance a student's hearing in the classroom. With an FM system, sound is broadcast directly into the student's sound processor or hearing aid, reducing background noise and reverberation.

In addition, TV-video cables and personal audio cables can help children with hearing loss get more out of the classroom experience. While children with typical hearing can easily use headphones, children with CIs or hearing aids may find it difficult. Personal audio cables allow sound to be transmitted directly to a child's sound processor or hearing aid, making listening to videos or computer programs much easier. However, be sure to use these cables with battery-operated devices only. Using the cables with a device that is plugged into a wall can result in an energy-surge that could damage the hearing device or frighten the child.

Also, CART and C-print systems can be good alternatives for students with hearing loss during a lecture, says Elizabeth

Boschini, a speech-language pathology graduate student at Fontbonne University in St. Louis, Mo. "Systems like CART or C-print are like closed captioning for the classroom. They can give students with hearing loss a text display or print summary of what is being said during a lecture or in a class discussion."

Low-Tech Essentials

Despite all the electronic enhancements available, sometimes a simple notebook can be your child's most valuable asset in the classroom. "We have a separate folder that goes back and forth with notes that Jordan's support teacher sends us," Del Dottore says. "He carries a journal so that we know what his assignments are at least a week in advance. It works really well."

Boschini also notes, "If your child has a note taker, carbon paper is another helpful tool." This ensures that a copy of the notes is available in case the originals are lost.

Special education teacher and bilateral cochlear implant user Valerie Deleon of Clarksville, Tenn., says, "Make sure you label everything! And put hearing supplies in a hard case; pencil cases are too

easy to lose."

Elizabeth Harris of Wrentham, Mass., whose daughter Li-Li uses bilateral cochlear implants, agrees with Deleon's labeling suggestion. "Li-Li is in class with nine little pre-K kids with cochlear implants, mostly bilaterals, and they love to take apart and share parts – it can look like a Transformers set some days. So I'm all for labeling, even down to the small parts level."

Harris also suggests giving your child's teacher a "cheat sheet" for the CI or hearing aid's programs and any special settings. "I tape an index card to the inside of Li-Li's backpack with some basic information for the teacher," said Harris.

Whether it's a soundfield system or simply a communication notebook, adding a couple of these supplies to your stash of glue sticks and erasers can enhance your child's time in the classroom. ♪

Tiffani Hill-Patterson writes about parenting, fitness and health. She is author of Sound Check Mama, <http://soundcheckmama.blogspot.com>, a blog about her daughter's hearing loss and cochlear implants.

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