



# **Fathering a Deaf or Hard of Hearing Child**

## **An Onboarding Checklist for Dads**

**2022**

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



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## About this Guide

This 2022 Guide was developed by the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) Parent to Parent Committee, which is an interdisciplinary, interagency/ inter-organizational and diverse parent/ professional group.

This committee is open to anyone who is interested--professionals, parents, D/HH adults. For more information contact [parentadvocate@handsandvoices.org](mailto:parentadvocate@handsandvoices.org)

*\*D/HH Plus: For the purposes of this document, this term refers to children who experience any type of deafness and additional considerations adding to complexities in support and services for the whole child. Those additional considerations may be medical, developmental, sensory, cognitive, physical and/or social-emotional in nature. D/HH Plus is meant to indicate the child's unique needs and the expanded team, including the parents, necessary for positive future development. Other designations/terms we want to acknowledge are Deaf Disabled, Deaf/hard of hearing Disabled, Deaf Plus, Deaf/hard of hearing Plus, deaf with disabilities, DeafBlind and others.*

*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. Please feel free to reach out to our committee for more information and for any questions at: [parentadvocate@handsandvoices.org](mailto:parentadvocate@handsandvoices.org)*

A special thank you to Rob Bogen, Will Fertman, Damian Guerra, Darren Luddington, John Marton, Milez Penninger, John Pong and Tony Ronco who made this document possible.

# FATHERING A DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING CHILD:

## AN ONBOARDING CHECKLIST FOR DADS

Welcome to fatherhood of a child who is deaf/hard of hearing. You have learned something key to your child's development. Now what? This guide is written by fathers of D/HH kids. We know how important it is to be involved with every part of your child's life from the very start.

*"Our commitments ultimately become the anchor and engine of our lives. This is your defining commitment." - Damian, Colorado*

Raising a D/HH child can be challenging. You'll need to learn about language development, disability rights, and navigating relationships with professionals and medical and educational systems. If your child has additional health challenges (D/HH Plus\* including deafblindness) there will be more to learn. Your connection to your child is unique, and your knowledge, strength, opinions and life experiences will all contribute to your child's success. You will be a key player and role model for your child if you show them how to ask questions and fight for what they need. Here are some tips we want to share with you:

*\*This checklist focuses on the role of "father," and it applies to any person who feels that they fulfill this role in a child's life.*

### Learning Curve for New Dads:

Relationships are built on language and communication. You don't want to miss out on knowing your child. The learning curve is steep. Be patient with yourself.

- Whenever you find out your child is D/HH, *that* is the best time to start understanding their hearing status and how to communicate and grow their language abilities.
- You have the right to ask questions as a father and it is your role and responsibility to do so. Don't assume that someone who says they know what they are doing really does. Ask what their experience has been.
- Parents are the decision-makers and professionals are the advisors. You can either accept or not accept advisor advice. You are the expert in your child's needs through your lived experience (culture, language, community, other).



*The Morris Men*

- If your child is using equipment, mastering how to care for and troubleshoot equipment can be a challenge but a necessary one.

### **Action Steps:**

- ✓ Make a list of questions you want to ask your professional team. Seek input from parents, professionals and D/HH adults to create that list.
- ✓ Learn about the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) system. <https://www.infanthearing.org/components/>

*“Give yourself a little bit of grace. Let yourself be overwhelmed. Let yourself make mistakes. You’ll forget to charge the technology. You are sleep-deprived, just like any parent. But your child will be okay!” - John, Indiana*

## **Language and Communication:**

- *Now* is the best time to start understanding your child’s hearing status, how language facilitates communication with them and grow their language abilities. Language is the foundation for everything that comes next.
- Your child needs to acquire language as soon as possible. This step in the process cannot be skipped.
- The goal is for your child to use language to communicate. This may include spoken languages like English or your home language, and/or a sign language like American Sign Language. They may also use additional auditory and visual supports such as gestures, body language, cued speech/language, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ACC devices).
- Your child’s communication may change depending on where, when and with whom they are communicating.
- Compared to hearing children, language development for children who are D/HH is deliberate. You need to plan for it and work at it.
- Don’t oversimplify your language. Your child is capable and needs language complexity. For example, use the word “massive” not just “big”; “parakeet” not just “bird”. Read, read, read with your child.

*“After learning about the struggles deaf and hard of hearing kids can have with communicating, I promised myself, ‘Not on my watch’ and learned whatever I needed to help our son who is deaf and who has multiple health issues.” Ron, Minnesota*

### **Action Steps:**

- ✓ Start exploring all your child’s language opportunities.
- ✓ Find D/HH role models and peers.
- ✓ Intentionally narrate what you and your child are doing with words/signs/cues help a child grow language.
- ✓ Use Dad story time to connect and grow language.

## Relationships:

### If You Have a Partner:

- Have discussions with your partner before you meet with professionals. You are both learning as you go. Some days you are the coach, some days you are getting a lesson.
- Trust and work equitably as a team and present a united front.
- Dads are not always number one when a child has significant needs. You may have to work at your relationship. Make time for your relationship with your partner.
- Talk to your partner about balancing work, caregiving, and other responsibilities. You may need to change schedules or make new plans as a family.
- A parenting class may be helpful.

### With Medical, Educational, D/HH Adult, and other Providers:

- If you can, have solo visits with professionals to build relationships with them. Share your experiences with the rest of your family to help make decisions together. Building rapport with professionals will help them see your child as an individual, not a number.
- Connect with D/HH mentors and role models. With their lived experience, they are the opposite of the inexperienced expert or parent.

### With Extended Family and Community:

- Build a community around your child. Educate hearing children and extended family about your child's needs.
- Don't expect extended family to jump right in on learning how your child communicates. Many of them may not; that is their choice. Lead by example.
- Find D/HH adults and other families with D/HH children.
- Seek out formal parent to parent support to meet other parents, D/HH kids and their siblings.
- Be patient with people out in public. You will get some comments that may seem kind of inappropriate or even offensive. Many people you will encounter have never met a deaf person and really don't know much about it.

*"Don't underestimate the need for taking time to focus on your relationship and communication with your partner. With my child now a little bit older, I have noticed that separation and divorce seem more common in the special-needs parents, and the additional financial, physical and emotional stress on your relationship should not be neglected." Darren, Indiana*

### Action Steps:

- ✓ Look into family support programs.
- ✓ Attend Deaf community events.

## A Father's Well-Being:

- It is okay to show your emotions.
- Take a break/time out to recharge. Self-care is a thing, too.
- Seek out other experienced dads.

*"Many of us changed responsibilities or jobs to create a more supportive and flexible work environment. It is common to feel pressure to provide for the family." Will, California*

### **Action Steps:**

- ✓ Understand Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) eligibility and benefits.
- ✓ Ask about respite care or D/HH savvy childcare providers and babysitters.

## School:

- Know your child's rights; laws are in place to protect them. Learn the playbook and how the game works.
- Remember the school and district are working for you and your child.
- Stay on top of your child's changing needs and professionals involved.
- Assessments can be tough for your child. Be there to support them.

*"A school may respond with what is easiest, most economical or with what is readily available. Make sure your message is clear to the educational team, and don't be afraid to walk away from a meeting to have more time to research options. Don't feel pressured to accept anything that is not appropriate for your child." Darren, Indiana*

### **Action Steps:**

- ✓ Connect with your child every day about school by asking open-ended questions.
- ✓ Pay attention to changing behavior around school.
- ✓ Understand local, state and federal regulations (IDEA, 504, ADA).

## Child's Well-Being:

- Encourage your child's interests for greater self-esteem and identity.
- Advocate for your child; be their biggest fan.
- Your child's audiogram does not determine where they go to school or what they can do in life. They need access and inclusion.
- Make time for your child to share, listen to their concerns, and empower them. Prepare your child for new experiences and explain exactly what is going on.



- Resist “over-correcting” your child at the expense of your relationship.
- Encourage positive friendships. Being the only D/HH child can be isolating for your child.

### **Action Steps:**

- ✓ Seek out guidance as needed to understand your child’s perspective, such as D/HH role models, other parents, and professionals.
- ✓ Professional help is available if you have concerns.

*“Do the awesome dad things that you planned. You are still going to have your child sit on your shoulders and fly, ride bikes, build furniture, and play sports. Your child will remember these wonderful experiences. You might have to problem-solve team sports or community events. Your child will be looking at you, and you will build this unique experience with your child.” John, California*

## **High Expectations:**

Setting expectations high for your kid is part of being a good father. Your child will follow your example.

- Expose your child to lots of different people, events, and experiences.
- Don’t let others limit opportunities for your child.
- Don’t accept that your child is “doing great for a D/HH kid.” Your child doesn’t get a “pass”.
- If something is not accessible, speak up. Access means that your child knows what is going on.
- Set high standards that your child will be included like everyone else. Inclusion is the opportunity to be involved in what is going on.

*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*

### **Action Steps:**

- ✓ Keep your eye on where you want your child to be next year and build towards that.
- ✓ Trust your instincts about your child. Do what you can to empower them to overcome barriers.

## **Summary**

With family, friends and in their learning, provide your child with these three gifts:

- Access
- Inclusion
- High Expectations

## Pro Tips from Fathers to Professionals:

### Comments/Actions that may be Interpreted as Dismissive of Dads:

- Expressing surprise and thanking dads for coming to meetings.
- Dropping dads off email threads or not including us in the first place.
- Speaking to or asking questions of only the mom when dad is present.
- Qualifying a compliment with “for a dad.” “You sign well for a dad,” shows a lower expectation for fathers.



Darren Luddington with kids

### These habits will promote more positive relationships with fathers. Here are some more proactive suggestions:

- Intentionally invite fathers to participate, ask for their input, ask about their needs.
- Honor the commitment that fathers make to their families, which is sometimes less visible.
- Offer flexible scheduling for visits.
- Offer connections to other fathers.
- Give written summaries of visits, including homework.
- Make yourself available for questions.

*“Committing to your own challenges is a great way to motivate your child to strive for their own greatness.”*  
Damian, Colorado.

## References:

- Benefits of Fatherhood Article: <https://www.fatherly.com/health-science/science-benefits-of-fatherhood-dads-father-effect/>
- List of Family-Based Organizations: <https://handsandvoices.org/fl3/topics/fam-fam-support/need-support.html>
- Educational Advocacy Resources: <https://handsandvoices.org/astra/index.html>