Guidelines for Working with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children in Sunday School with Other Hearing Children

The Reverend Peggy Johnson, Christ Church of the Deaf, Baltimore, Maryland

- Pray for the unique and precious ministry you have with a deaf/hard-ofhearing child. He or she is a gift sent to your church, not a handicapped person. Each child has gifts to share and should not be treated as an object of service.
- Involve the parents of the deaf/hard-of-hearing child. Ask them to explain to you exactly what kind of communication needs the child has. Learn as much as you can from them and listen to what they have to say. Also, listen to the child. It sounds fundamental, but so often educators think they know what a child needs, even though they never ask or simply ignore what they are told. Each deaf/hard-of-hearing child, like every other child, is unique. One method does not work for all.
- Have an advocate in the classroom with the deaf/hard-of-hearing child. The advocate can be a sign language interpreter or just a helper who makes sure that the child understands directions and information. Interpreters, don't be surprised if the deaf/hard-of-hearing child will not look at you. Watching an interpreter is difficult, and children mature at different rates. Advocates can help with written English words. Children who use American Sign Language as their primary language have English as their second language, so English can be more of a challenge.
- Make things as visual as possible when teaching. This helps hearing students as well as deaf/hard-of-hearing students. Be intentional about using visual items from Sunday school curriculum, such as the charts, maps, teaching pictures, puppets, posters, game cards, and storytelling figures in the Rock Solid Resource Pak. Be certain each student has a student leaflet or Bible storybook to use in class and at home. Supplement your teaching with videos, CD-ROMs, banners, classroom decorations, and teaching objects. Hold an open Bible as you teach the Bible verse or tell a Bible story.
- Include drama, dance, crafts, and signed music. Make sure the deaf/hardof-hearing child is involved, not just watching the other children. When possible, empower the child to be the leader or a main character in a play. The Exploring Faith curriculum often includes words to be signed. Invite the deaf/hard-of-hearing student to teach the class how to sign the words.
- Provide whatever assistive devices that would be helpful. Some deaf/hardof-hearing students use a portable FM system, which is an Assistive Listening Device. The teacher would need to wear a special microphone. Videos that are used in the classroom should be captioned. Lighting needs to be bright, but be aware that if you stand with light behind you, it is hard to see your face. For more information about self-help for the hard of hearing, go to www.hearingloss.org.

- For deaf/hard-of-hearing children who are lip readers, be sure to face them when you speak; turning to write on the chalkboard while you talk cuts off communication. Do not cover your mouth or chew gum. Rephrase a sentence if the child cannot understand it; sometimes the rephrased version is more understandable on the lips. Speak clearly and distinctly, but do not overly mouth the words or shout.
- Be warm, genuine, and loving. Love communicates faith better than any lesson, and it transcends all language barriers.
- Handle questions from hearing students about the deaf/hard-of-hearing child directly and matter-of-factly. Encourage respect and kindness. Explain what a hearing aid or cochlear implant is simply and without making a big deal about it. (A cochlear implant is an electronic hearing aid that is a replacement of part or all of the function of the inner ear.) Don't ignore the questions, but move on without belaboring the issue.

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