



Tips for the holidays when children are deaf or hard-of-hearing!

Holidays are family times. As parents, we want all our children to have fond memories of these bonding times. Here are ideas that might be useful.

1. If your child is old enough to understand, ask him or her about his or her ideas on this topic.
2. Make sure that your child has the best chance to hear during these special days. Check that batteries are fresh and turn off background music while he or she is trying to listen to conversation. If your child uses an FM system at school, it might be possible to borrow it (depending on the rules of your school district) for use during a holiday gathering. If your child is old enough, discuss how it might be used before the guests arrive.
3. Plan opportunities throughout a gathering where the child with a hearing loss can talk, play a game, prepare part of the meal, or set the table with only one other person. Try to orchestrate this kind of an activity so that both the hearing person and the deaf child have the maximum opportunity to interact (for example, have the child with a hearing loss be in charge of getting the ingredients for a dish, so that he or she is actively involved and communicating about what is happening around him or her). Another idea along these same lines is to give the child a plate of food to offer before the meal begins, so that he or she can walk from person to person with a purpose. This might be a good way for your child to be a part of the festivities and yet not involved in extended conversation.
4. If your child is old enough, tell him or her about the people that will be at the gathering so that he or she has background information and is more able to start or participate in a conversation. It makes it easier for everyone to communicate when they know something about the interests, hobbies, passions, and dislikes of others with whom they are trying to communicate.
5. If possible, have the guests sit at a round table where it is easier for the child with a hearing loss to see the faces of those in attendance.

6. Remember that lighting is an important factor. There should not be bright lighting or the sun shining in the eyes of the child with a hearing loss. Room lighting should be bright enough so that the child with a hearing loss can see the speech and gestures of those in attendance.
7. Take responsibility as adults for asking those who are talking to get the attention of the child with a hearing loss before they make a comment. Consider using a “talking stick” for part of the meal—pass an object around the table and a person only speaks when he or she is holding it. In this way, the child with a hearing loss can predict who will be talking, can focus his or her attention on the one who is speaking, and can comment appropriately. That adult also can ask if he or she was understood, and then restate aspects of what he or she said that were not comprehended by the child with a hearing loss.
8. If your family uses signed, as well as spoken communication, sit family members who are the most skilled signers across from the child who has a hearing loss. This way the child with a hearing loss can look across the table for interpretation.
9. Many times, families discuss what they are thankful for during the Thanksgiving meal. What a gift to a child who has a hearing loss, and uses sign in conjunction with speech, if a knowledgeable adult taught each guest to say and sign the phrase, “I am thankful for....” Fingerspelling cards could be available at each place setting and the guests could spell the words needed to complete this sentence.
10. Make sure the captioner on the television is on if you will be watching sports or movies. Have a captioned DVD movie available, should your child be uninterested in what others are watching on T.V. and decides to go to a different room to watch something. It might be that others who are about the same age as your child will appreciate this idea as well.
11. Technology has opened many doors for people who are deaf. When the meal is over and guests are socializing, it might be a good time for your child to show relatives how the captioner works, how he or she uses the videophone to talk with friends, and how she or he uses text messaging.
12. Most hearing people associate songs with the holidays. If your child can’t hear the lyrics in music, think about special ways you might heighten other senses. Have cider warming on the stove or light a particular scent of candles only during the holiday season. Hang decorations that are visually-appealing in a special way and only use them for the holidays. Bake something together only at this special time.
13. If your family uses sign in addition to speech to communicate, you could make copies of the signs associated with the holiday meal. These, as well as needed “carrier phrases” (e.g., “Please pass the ____”) could be available at each place setting.

14. If you're going to play games, you might make sets of cards for traditional games that include signs on them. This can be done by using a sign dictionary and copying the desired signs, or by using one of the many sign DVDs that are available commercially. Game ideas include Concentration, Old Maid, and Memory. Once made, these games can be used year after year. Dr. Gerilee Gustason, one of the authors of Signing Exact English, emailed this comment: *Another game that can be made easily is an Old Maid/Go Fish combo game. I use 1/2 index cards to make the cards; two cards per word/sign. Battleship and Pictionary work well, too. One year I used the S.E.E. CD (available from Modern Signs Press) to make signed instructions and needed vocabulary for playing the game, Clue. My whole family signed everything (e.g., "I suspect Professor Plum in the library with the knife," etc.). We had a lot of fun!!*
15. Sometimes it is difficult for the child with a hearing loss to get involved in conversation because the turn-taking happens so quickly. One mother told me that she thought to get a little flashing light to set in front of her son, who did not hear well and had difficulty having a chance to initiate a topic at holiday meals. The idea being when he wanted to comment or start a new topic, he could turn on the flashing light and others would stop and pay attention to what he was trying to contribute.
16. If your child signs, in addition to using spoken language, you might organize an additional meal for a group of those who know how to sign. This might occur at your child's school, church/temple, or play group. The teachers, teaching assistants, and parents of the middle school students at Northwest School for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children, in Shoreline, Washington, work together to provide a Thanksgiving meal annually at school.



17. One website that sells useful materials for families with children who have hearing loss is "Say It With Sign." Booklets of holiday signs might be of interest to you.
18. Send other ideas to b.luetke@northwestschool.com