NORTHWEST SCHOOL
for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children

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

Holidays are family times. As guardians, 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 them about their 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 they are trying to listen to conversation.
3. Plan opportunities throughout a gathering where your child 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 D/HH child have the maximum opportunity to interact (for example, have the D/HH child be in charge of getting the ingredients for a dish, so that they are actively involved and communicating about what is happening around them). Another idea along these same lines is to give the child a plate of food to offer before the meal begins, so that they 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 them about the people that will be at the gathering so that they have background information and are 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 your child 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 your child(ren). Room lighting should be bright enough so that your child 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 your child(ren) 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 they are holding it. In this way, your child(re) can predict who will be talking, can focus their attention on the one who is speaking, and can comment appropriately. That adult also can ask if they were understood, and then restate aspects of what they said that were not comprehended by your child(ren).

8. If your family uses sign, as well as spoken communication, sit family members who are the most skilled signers across from your child(ren). This way your child(re) 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 your child who 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 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 D/HH. 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 they use the video to talk with friends, and how they use 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 D/HH children 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, paraeducators/interpreters, and families 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 D/HH children is "Say It With Sign." Booklets of holiday signs might be of interest to you.