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**Back to School with Masks for Health and Safety Calls for Vigilance in Monitoring Auditory Accessibility for Children with Hearing Loss**

Academic decline and learning challenges may be a sign of hearing loss

**RESTON,** **Va., Aug. 12, 2021—**Across the U.S. many children are heading back to school and many school districts are mandating masks to protect from the Delta variant. The American Academy of Audiology encourages parents and teachers to pay close attention to children who are suddenly challenged with academic tasks, overwhelmed by assignments and/or not readily participating in classroom discussions.

“Because children often don’t realize they are missing information and may not communicate hearing difficulties, issues with auditory accessibility can go undetected,” warned Angela Shoup, Ph.D. president of the American Academy of Audiology. Shoup is also executive director of the Callier Center for Communication Disorders and a professor of Speech, Language and Hearing in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences at the University of Texas Dallas. Shoup continued, “Education is primarily delivered through auditory input and even mild hearing loss can impact a child’s success in school. Masks decrease visual cues that may be helpful in augmenting the auditory message and can also muffle or distort the speech signal.”

Children with untreated hearing loss use more cognitive energy to understand what is being said or may appear to not be paying attention because they are missing what was said. A drop in academic performance could be a sign of hearing loss. [According to the National Institutes of Health’s National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders](https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing), about two to three out of every 1,000 children in the United States are born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears. The total number of children with some type of hearing loss is unknown and many cases may go undiagnosed.

The American Academy of Audiology recommends that any parents concerned with an otherwise unexplained decline in their children’s academic performance or any sign of hearing loss should take them to an audiologist to have their hearing tested.

While most infants’ hearing is tested within hours of birth, hearing loss can be progressive and start in early childhood. In addition, ear infections and exposure to loud sounds as well as various illnesses can cause hearing loss.

“A child with minimal hearing loss may be missing a significant amount of the classroom discussion,” explained Shoup. “Unfortunately, we continue to see children identified as having a learning disability when they actually have untreated hearing loss. Hearing loss should always be ruled out when there are academic or speech and language issues. We want to treat the hearing loss first since untreated hearing loss can disrupt all aspects of educational success.” Shoup added, “Virtual education is also a new challenge. Parents and teachers will want to make sure that the auditory signal coming through the computer is good quality. The child’s audiologist can assist in connectivity from the computer audio signal directly to the hearing aids.

For some children with hearing loss, the virtual environment may be preferable at this time because the teacher and other students don’t wear masks when interacting virtually. Captioning can also be used to enhance access.” Masks block the visual signal that assists a person with hearing loss in understanding speech. In the in-person environment, it will be ideal if teachers wear masks with a clear piece that allows visualization of the mouth.

Lack of hearing can lead to behavioral issues, lack of focus, even depression in children. Children with hearing loss often don’t recognize that they can’t hear, and parents may not recognize the signs of hearing difficulty.

Here are some of the signs parents and teachers should look for:

* Child has difficulty following through with assignments and often doesn’t seem to

understand the task.

* Child often doesn’t understand questions and either does not respond or doesn’t respond appropriately.
* Child’s speech is different from other children the same age. He/she may struggle to pronounce simple words or is unable to repeat a phrase. May have problems articulating or may have language delays.
* Child often asks you to repeat things or watches your face intently trying to understand what you’re saying.
* Child has difficulty hearing on the phone.
* Child speaks loudly when not warranted.
* Child has chronic ear pain.
* Child often complains of noises he/she cannot identify.
* Child cannot keep up academically.
* Child appears exhausted at the end of the school day (more so than other children.)
* With distance learning, children with hearing loss may turn up the volume on the computer or headphones louder than expected for typical communication.

“Often parents and teachers don’t realize that a child’s behavior may be a sign of hearing loss,” Shoup said. “If parents suspect an issue, they should have their child evaluated by an audiologist. Audiologists have the tools and training to identify hearing loss, characterize the degree and type of hearing loss as well as it’s functional impact, and can recommend solutions for children of any age.”

# The American Academy of Audiology provides a list of licensed audiologists on its website: [www.audiology.org](http://www.audiology.org). Click on “Find an Audiologist.”

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The American Academy of Audiology is the world's largest professional organization of, by and for audiologists. Representing the interests of approximately 14,000 audiologists nationwide, the Academy is dedicated to providing quality hearing care services through professional development, education, research, and increased public awareness of hearing and balance disorders. For more information or to find an audiologist, go to [www.howsyourhearing.org](http://www.howsyourhearing.org).

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