

Navigating the Educational System With a Hearing Loss: A Journey From Early Childhood to High School

Alexis Brown
Senior
Student Ambassador
Linfield Christian School
Temecula, CA

Abstract

This reflective article documents my journey as a moderately severe hearing impaired student from early childhood through high school. It will highlight the unique challenges I faced navigating the educational system and the strategies I used to overcome them. I was diagnosed with a bilateral hearing loss at the age of three. Growing up with a hearing loss was not easy. Over the years, I learned that having caring teachers, support services, my parents and deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) itinerant as my advocates, and perseverance were vital throughout my educational journey.

Keywords: moderately severe hearing loss, bilateral, IEP, FM system

My hearing loss was not diagnosed at birth. Due to having delayed speech and language, my hearing was tested at the age of three. The silent booth hearing tests were unreliable because of my young age. I underwent numerous sleep study hearing tests for the purpose of getting reliable results. At three years old, I was diagnosed with a bilateral moderately severe hearing loss. This means I have a hearing loss in both ears. My degree of hearing loss is moderately severe which causes speech to be difficult to hear without hearing aids. In order for me to hear speech, sounds have to be amplified 56-70 decibels (Hearing Health Foundation, 2024). I was fitted with my first behind the ear set of hearing aids immediately. I called them my “earrings.”

Early Childhood (Age Three to Five)

Fortunately, early intervention began at this time. This time period was filled with speech therapy sessions, often three to four times a week. It consisted of articulation and language activities. Therapy was necessary due to missing the major early milestones of speech and language. From one to three years of age, normal development of speech and language for toddlers include making speech-like babbling sounds, understanding words for common objects and people, using three word sentences, asking simple questions, and a large vocabulary that enables them to express their feelings and thoughts, and speech improves (ASHA, n.d.). My hearing loss had a profound effect on my speech and language causing it to be significantly delayed. When I

would speak, I could tell people found it difficult to understand me. Speech therapists played a huge role in teaching me how to communicate effectively.

I attended a private preschool from age three to five. The class size was small. My parents made sure the teachers and staff understood my hearing loss. My preschool teachers focused on activities that encouraged inclusive play. At this early stage, my preschool classmates were curious of my hearing aids. They were accepting of my “special earrings.” Making friends was easy at this age, although I knew that the other children didn’t always understand me due to my speech distortion.

Elementary School (Age Six to Eleven)

Elementary school brought about many new challenges. It seemed like I was the “only” hearing impaired student at my elementary school. Creating awareness and understanding was a major hurdle to overcome. My teachers were not familiar with accommodating a student with hearing loss.

Prior to my first day of kindergarten, my parents, DHH itinerant, and myself met with my teacher. We went over my Individualized Education Program (IEP) that detailed my “present levels of performance, learning goals, school placement, and services” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 2004). We showed her the speech tree to give her a visual of which sounds were difficult for me to hear. My DHH itinerant pointed out the challenge of moving from a small preschool setting to a large noisy classroom. I was provided an FM system. I used the FM (frequency modulated) system to help me hear my teacher more clearly as it isolated her voice from background noise. She used a microphone transmitter that sent her voice directly to the receiver I wore (Bozarth, 2021). If my classroom got noisy, I could still hear my teacher. My teacher was trained on how to use the FM system. There was definitely a learning curve for my teacher. Oftentimes, she would forget to turn it off when working with other groups or individuals, at recess, or even in the teachers’ lounge. During these times, this would be extremely distracting as I could hear all the other conversations around me. Anytime we had a substitute teacher, there would usually be issues because they wouldn’t know how to properly wear and operate the FM microphone.

This cycle of meeting my new teachers, creating awareness of my hearing loss, and my teachers struggling to use the FM system continued throughout my elementary years. They also did not know how to teach me using the accommodations listed on my IEP. Each year of elementary school felt like we started at ground zero again. Thankfully, my parents along with my incredible DHH itinerant were my biggest support. They were always prepared to discuss my IEP, accommodations, answer any questions, and be an advocate for me.

Middle School (Age Twelve to Fourteen)

My middle school years proved to be the most challenging. My school had seven periods, one for each subject matter daily. Therefore, we rotated classrooms throughout the day. This was a big obstacle to overcome because I had seven teachers instead of one. Similar to elementary school, my teachers were not knowledgeable about teaching and accommodating a hearing impaired student. It became clear that I needed to learn how to advocate for myself. This marked

the beginning of the transition from my parents advocating on my behalf to me learning how to speak up about my needs.

Developing self advocacy skills was a critical component of navigating through middle school. I set up meetings with each one of my teachers to review my accommodations and explain my hearing loss throughout the year. The key component of self advocacy was simply “asking for help” when needed. I took it upon myself to always look for a seat closest to my teacher. If I thought I missed some piece of information in class, I would meet my teacher at lunch, after school, or send my teacher an email. This extra step of establishing effective communication to ask for help was an important part of my academic success in middle school.

High School (Age Fourteen to Eighteen)

I was well prepared for high school after self advocating for myself in middle school. Similar to middle school, I had different teachers for each subject. Many teachers had little to no experience instructing a student with a hearing loss. I took the initiative to meet with each of my teachers throughout the year to explain my hearing loss and accommodations, and to ultimately build a strong relationship with them. There was also a noticeable change in the use of technology in the classroom. Textbooks, coursework, and tests were online. I began using speech to text and captioning as a daily useful accommodation.

In high school, my focus shifted to planning and preparing for life after graduation. I met with my high school counselors to discuss my career path and future goals. Together, my counselors and I selected classes that academically would improve my chances of being accepted into a highly rated university. I took several AP, honors, and medical classes that would lay a foundation for my future studies as I want to be a nurse. At the beginning of my senior year, I attended a college readiness workshop for students with disabilities. At this workshop, I was taught how to access support services and advocate for accommodations at the college level.

Conclusion

My journey navigating the educational system with a hearing loss from early childhood to my senior year was marked with many challenges. However, each obstacle presented an opportunity for growth. I look back at my journey with pride. I have grown from a shy, young toddler with a dramatic speech delay to a confident, well-spoken young adult. Early intervention, consistent advocacy, and support from my parents and my DHH itinerant played a key role in my academic success. During my educational journey, I learned the valuable skill of being a self advocate, the importance of resilience, and adapting to my changing classroom environments. I know these skills will further my success in college and my career. My experience navigating the educational system from early childhood to high school sheds light on how students with a hearing loss can thrive in school utilizing their support system, accommodations, perseverance, and having caring teachers.

References

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA]. (n.d.). *Communication milestones: Age ranges*. <https://www.asha.org/public/developmental-milestones/communication-milestones/>
- Bozarth, J. (2021). *FM system for hearing impaired students in the classroom*. <https://www.vocovision.com/blog/fm-system-for-hearing-impaired/>
- Hearing Health Foundation. (2024). *Degrees of hearing loss*. hearinghealthfoundation.org
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq. (2004). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>