

A Guide for P A R E N T S

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This guide includes information for parents about accessibility and integration in an interpreted educational setting.



An educational interpreter enables a student who is deaf or hard of hearing to access the regular education class. However, it is more complicated than simply placing an interpreter in the classroom. Real integration requires all members of the educational team to work together.

A Student's Need for an Educational Interpreter

The classroom is a complex communication environment with a variety of speakers. For a student who is deaf or hard of hearing, a typical classroom environment can be quite challenging. He or she may need a sign language interpreter in order to access classroom communication and peer interaction.

Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing May Have a Range of Abilities to Communicate in Spoken Language

Many students who are deaf or hard of hearing have some ability to use and to hear spoken English. However, their communication abilities can vary widely depending on the situation. For most students who have spoken language skills, spoken communication is best when only one or two people are talking and the environment is quiet. Noisy classrooms and multiple speak-

ers—a typical classroom—make listening very challenging. The need for an interpreter should not be based on a student's audiogram or whether he or she has a cochlear implant. Rather it should be based on the student's ability and success in learning and communication.

Even students with strong auditory skills may miss essential information when:

- new concepts and vocabulary are introduced,
- lecture and group discussion become fast-paced,
- the classroom is noisy,
- the teacher's style of instruction makes lipreading and listening challenging, and/or
- there is visual information to process in addition to spoken language.



What is the Educational Interpreter's Role?

Educational interpreters provide communication access by representing the classroom instruction, teacher and peer interactions, and other relevant sound information, such as school-wide announcements. They may provide access using some form of sign language interpreting, oral interpreting¹, or Cued Speech transliterating².

Educational interpreters are not personal disciplinarians; students who are deaf or hard of hearing do not “belong” to them. The regular classroom teacher is responsible for maintaining a safe and effective learning environment for all students, including the student who is deaf or hard of hearing. Expectations for all students should be consistent regardless of hearing status. The educational interpreter facilitates communication so the student who is deaf or hard of hearing is able to be a contributing member of the classroom, interacting with teachers and peers.

Advantages to an Interpreted Educational Setting

Educational interpreters make inclusion in a regular educational setting possible for many students who are deaf or hard of hearing. For some students, this makes attending a local public school possible. Educational interpreters can provide the student with access to the general curriculum in the regular education classroom. They can also facilitate the student's social interaction with peers during class and extracurricular activities.

As determined by the IEP team, educational interpreters may take on additional responsibilities for the student who is deaf or hard of hearing. They can pre-teach and review vocabulary as well as serve in a tutorial role if the educational interpreter has those skills.

Your Child's Rights Regarding Educational Interpreters

Your child has the right to:

- communicate in his or her own language and have the interpreter communicate in his or her language;
- utilize an educational interpreter who is highly qualified;
- utilize an educational interpreter in the classroom, during school meetings and assemblies, and during after-school groups, sports activities, and events;
- be treated with respect and encouraged to become independent like his or her classmates who can hear;
- opportunities to learn how to work with and schedule interpreters;
- opportunities to learn how to use Internet interpreters;
- be included in discussions concerning interpreting and his or her interpreter, such as in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings or teacher meetings (if he or she is 14 years old or older); and
- have his or her family know about his or her interpreter and how the accommodation is working.

¹ Oral interpreting is done by a skilled professional who facilitates communication between individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and those who are hearing. Oral interpreters work within a continuum of service provision from solely using mouth movements to the inclusion of natural gestures, fingerspelling, or writing key terms.

² Cued Speech transliterating is done by a professional, often certified, who uses a cueing system to facilitate communication between individuals who use spoken language and those who use Cued Speech (which is composed of eight handshapes with four different placements near the face which, when combined with movements of the mouth, make the sounds of spoken language look different from each other).

Disadvantages to an Interpreted Educational Setting

Accessing the regular educational classroom through a single interpreter is not the same as having direct access to all the teachers and peers in the classroom. Some professionals and some adults who are deaf believe that an interpreted education is a compromised education. Their concern is that essential information can be lost in translation and the message may be altered.

Interpreting is a complex and challenging skill and requires a great deal of training and experience. However, qualified educational interpreters may be difficult to find, especially in rural areas. Educational interpreters vary in their skills, and one who is not highly qualified can greatly alter and reduce the quality of the information that the student who is deaf or hard of hearing receives. As a result, the student may not receive the same information and instruction as his or her peers.

A student who is deaf or hard of hearing may not have opportunities for direct communication with peers, which may impact his or her social development and ability to have friends. Also, a student who is constantly accompanied by an interpreter may experience difficulty fitting into social groups. Sometimes this leads to inappropriate situations in which the student views the interpreter as a friend.

States and school districts vary in terms of the requirements for qualifications for educational interpreters. Many states with requirements have provisions that allow a school to hire an educational interpreter who is not qualified, sometimes with no time limit. A student who is deaf or hard of hearing may have the same unqualified interpreter for multiple years, seriously compromising the quality of his or her education as well as his or her ability to meet educational standards.

What Does Special Education Law Say About Educational Interpreters?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that mandates special education services for qualified students with disabilities. According to the IDEA, educational interpreting is a “related service.” This means it is a support required to assist a student with a disability in accessing education.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes the student’s parents, determines the need for an educational interpreter. This accommodation will be recorded in the IEP as a related service, and the number of interpreting hours per day will be specified in writing.

Since the educational interpreter is a related service provider, he or she is a member of the IEP team. The educational interpreter can provide the IEP team with important information about the student’s ability to access information using an educational interpreter and assist in identifying factors that help or hinder learning. The educational interpreter can also provide information about how well the student is able to interact with teachers and peers who are hearing.

For students who are deaf or hard of hearing who need communication access accommodations but not special education services, a 504 plan can outline the accommodations needed. The law that provides a 504 plan does not require parent participation and approval, allow due process, or provide special education funding.

Parents should ask about the educational interpreter’s certification/licensure, qualifications, and proficiency. They should know the state’s standards regarding interpreter qualifications, typically available from the state’s department of education. The lack of state standards does not mean the school does not need to provide a highly qualified educational interpreter.

Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Need to Learn How to Manage an Interpreted Education

Many adults who are deaf or hard of hearing manage communication when they use an interpreter. They have learned to help the interpreter understand their sign language and spoken language preferences. They have learned to be proactive about interpreted settings. These skills are essential to being an adult who also uses an interpreter.

Young students who are deaf or hard of hearing typically need to learn how to become consumers of interpreting services. Schools often provide students with information and training to help them develop these skills beginning in middle school and high school. In high school, students who are deaf or hard of hearing should participate in decision making related to interpreting services.



If there are problems that consistently interfere with the ability of the student to access instruction, communication, and/or social interaction, he or she may need support in advocating appropriately toward resolution. Formal policies can provide the necessary structure for students to take their concerns to the designated authority.

For students to become effective users of interpreting services, schools must provide age-appropriate training.

Parents' Role Related to Educational Interpreters

When a school system fails to provide a qualified educational interpreter, it may be because the administrators lack knowledge and/or expertise in the complexities involved in interpreting and in working with students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Many professionals who are hearing can underestimate the skills and expertise required to interpret. Parents may need to advocate effectively in order to ensure that the educational interpreter is qualified.

Some school systems may fail to provide a qualified educational interpreter because the administrators view the costs of these services as unnecessary, typically because they do not understand that the services are essential for the student to achieve educational standards.

At each IEP meeting, time should be taken to discuss how the student will utilize his or her educational interpreter. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing have different needs, and the team should discuss how your child's interpreter needs will be addressed.

Interpreters for Extracurricular Activities

Any school-sponsored activities, including lunchtime, recess, before- and after-school programs, athletic practices and games, field trips, school assemblies, and other events offered by the school or district, are subject to the student's IEP accommodations. The student's IEP can specify that interpreters be provided for these events.

Some students who are deaf or hard of hearing may prefer not to have an interpreter in some situations, sometimes for social reasons. For those students, their ability to communicate with peers and adults who are hearing may be adequate in social situations, and they may not need interpreter support.

Many schools have policies that require older students to formally request an interpreter for extracurricular activities. This is good training for life beyond high school where self-advocacy and planning are required for communication access.

You can find more information about classroom interpreting at www.classroominterpreting.org. For more information and resources about the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, visit www.clerccenter.gallaudet.edu. You will also find all the guides in our Classroom Interpreting series on our website.

About the Author: Brenda Schick, PhD, a professor at the University of Colorado-Boulder, studies the development of spoken and sign language and its relationship to cognition in children who are deaf or hard of hearing. She has had three National Institutes of Health grants investigating language and/or cognitive development in children who are deaf or hard of hearing, including Theory of Mind. Each grant required data collection across the nation and the development of language assessment tools for American Sign Language (ASL). Schick is currently a member of a research center that focuses on literacy and young deaf and hard of hearing children. She has also served as the school board president for an ASL/English school for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and is a former teacher of the deaf. She developed a videotaped curriculum for hearing parents learning sign language and translated a series of classic children's storybooks into sign language. Schick grew up in a culturally deaf family, is fluent in ASL, and is a former certified interpreter of the deaf.

This guide was developed in collaboration with staff in the Center for Childhood Deafness at Boys Town National Research Hospital.



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