



Hearing Impairment

- [Sensory Impairments](#) [1]

I truly believe that the only disability out there today is attitude.

Kathy Buckley (award-nominated, stand up comedienne who has a hearing impairment) in an article by D'Agostino, D. 'Laughing out loud: Turning a deaf ear to comedy', *Exceptional Parent*, vol. 27 Issue 3, March 1997

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993) described a person with a hearing impairment as one whose hearing is affected to an extent that renders the understanding of speech through the ear alone, with or without a hearing aid, difficult or impossible. Circulars issued by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) refer to hearing impairment as a hearing disability that is so serious as to impair significantly students' capacity to hear and understand human speech, thus preventing them from participating fully in classroom interaction and from benefiting adequately from school instruction. It is further stated that the great majority of these students will have been prescribed hearing aids and will be availing of the Visiting Teacher Service. The category does not include students with mild hearing loss.

It is to be noted that The Irish Deaf Society (IDS), representing members of the Deaf community, defines Deaf as a state of being that defines a group of people who share a perception of the world through an emphasis on visual and kinaesthetic input. This description of deaf is used most commonly for people who are deaf at birth or from very early childhood. Deaf here defines a cultural, social and linguistic group, and is often signified by the use of a capital 'D'. The term 'hearing impairment' is disliked by the Deaf community, who do not consider deafness to be an impairment but rather the mark of a distinct culture.

C A B H A I R





Hearing loss is usually expressed in terms of decibels (dB), the unit used to measure the intensity of sound. The degree of loss is measured by the number of decibels needed to amplify a sound above the normal hearing level before it is heard. Therefore, the larger the number of decibels needed the more severe the hearing loss. The SERC Report provides a useful summary (p. 105) that illustrates the levels of hearing impairment. (See table on below.)

Minimum Audible Intensity	Level of Impairment
20–30 Decibels Mildly Hard of Hearing	Mildly Hard of Hearing
30–60 Decibels Moderately Hard of Hearing	Moderately Hard of Hearing
60–89 Decibels Severely Hard of Hearing	Severely Hard of Hearing
90 Decibels or over Profoundly Deaf	Profoundly Deaf

Mildly Hard of Hearing: the student hears nearly all speech but may hear incorrectly if not looking at the speaker or if there is background noise. It can be very difficult to identify this condition. Students may have difficulties responding to conversational speech especially with background noise.

Moderately Hard of Hearing: the student will experience difficulty hearing others speaking who are close by. The student may subconsciously augment his/her understanding with lip-reading and visual cues. It is difficult to identify the student's hearing loss from his/her speaking voice, but on close examination the student misses word endings and omits definite and indefinite articles.

Severely Hard of Hearing: the student requires a hearing aid and needs to use lip-reading and body language to augment understanding. The student's speaking voice is characterised by shortened sentences.

Profoundly Deaf: the student may use a hearing aid but relies on visual cues and/or sign language to communicate. The student's speaking voice may seem incomprehensible but some students can achieve good oral skills. Radio aids may be used to transmit the speaker's voice to the listener.

The majority of students with hearing loss in mainstream schools will have mild to moderate hearing loss and use oral/aural methods as their main mode of communication. However, an increasing number of students with severe to profound loss are now entering mainstream education and some of these students choose to use sign language as their preferred mode of communication.

Indicators of a hearing loss may include difficulties pronouncing some words or speech sounds, failure to pay attention when spoken to, frequent observation of peers for a lead as to what to do, giving incorrect answers to simple questions, a high frequency in asking for repetition of words and sentences, intense face and/or lip watching, mispronunciation of some words/sounds, straining to watch a speaker, a tendency to speak loudly and to have difficulty monitoring voice level, and withdrawal.

The greatest difficulties faced by deaf students are in relation to language and communication. The acquisition of language and the development of a communication system are central to all aspects of learning and teaching for these students. The communication approach used by students is based on the student's own communication needs and parental preference.



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