The Peer Notetaker

The Problem: No hearing device restores normal hearing. To benefit from classes, the student with hearing loss needs to keep his or her eyes on the teacher to augment the information that is received through fragmented hearing. Each time the student glances down to write notes from a lecture or discussion, the ongoing portion of speech is missed. In addition, teachers do not always face the class when they speak and the comments of students who are more than arm’s reach will only be partially received and are often not understood. Over a period of time, the information the students miss will accumulate and contribute to a growing gap in academic skills. The student is likely to experience stress over not being able to keep up, sometimes resulting in issues with work completion, behavior, depression and academic grades.

The Accommodation: One accommodation that can be made for students with hearing loss is to provide notes of the key elements of lecture and class discussion that are taken by one or two classmates or by a hired paraprofessional notetaker. This accommodation does NOT replace the need for the teacher to provide key vocabulary and an outline ahead of time as this information allows the student with hearing loss to prepare to receive the information. Unlike students with typical hearing, students with hearing loss are unable to overhear much of the speech that surrounds them, which results in gaps in their number of vocabulary words, and depth of understanding different meanings of age-appropriate vocabulary.

Students often borrow the notes of their classmates when they have been absent or there has been an especially challenging lesson. Borrowed notes augment what the student is able to access from the text book. Arranging to borrow the notes of a classmate is the responsibility the typical student. Even though the student with hearing loss is missing information and needs augmentation from class notes, as a legal accommodation it is up to school staff to determine how the accommodation will be provided, and not the responsibility of the student. The goal is to allow the student with hearing loss to access classroom instruction as fully as peers. Not doing so, or only providing haphazard accommodations discriminates against equal access and can contribute greatly to diminished school outcomes.

Selecting a Peer Notetaker: It is not appropriate to assume that the friends of the student with hearing loss are appropriate peer notetakers. Handwriting may be illegible, notes may be inadequate, or the content of the notes may not make sense to the student with hearing loss. If this occurs it places the student in a position of offending his or her friends or just doing without an effective accommodation. Clearly, it is school staff who needs to evaluate likely peer notetakers and not relegate this responsibility to the student with hearing loss. Some students prefer two notetakers in each class as it often results in more complete notes and eliminates the problem of what to do if the notetaker is absent.

Peer notetaker should be a student who:

- Is conscientious about being in class on time
- Is capable of handling the new material in the course
- Has shown himself to be an above-average learner
- Takes complete notes, using legible handwriting and capturing complete concepts
- Is able to organize lecture material in written form

The teacher needs to be involved in the notetaking process by:

- Meeting with the student and the notetaker(s) to clarify duties and expectations
- Ensure notes are clearly marked with class and date at the top of each page
- Use underlines, boxes, etc. as a means to highlight the most important points
- Arrange to receive a copy of the notes, daily at first and then periodically, to spot check quality
- Give feedback on the quality of notes to the notetaker(s) as needed
- Making sure that the notetaker(s) have needed supplies to facilitate notetaking (carbonized paper, ability to upload notes to school internet site, email address of student with hearing loss, etc.)