

Deaf children enjoy making music too

Bryony Parkes of the National Deaf Children's Society suggests ways of making musical activities accessible for deaf children

Musical activities provide rich learning opportunities for all children, and deaf children are no exception. Besides the immense enjoyment they bring, they can boost children's confidence, put them in touch with their emotions, enhance their powers of self-expression and help to develop their fine motor skills.

Each deaf child's experience of music is unique, however, and depends on the type and level of deafness, the technology used, and their previous exposure to music. A child who has lost their hearing may have a memory of music and therefore a very different experience from a child who was born deaf.

Moreover, some deaf children can use a lot of their residual hearing with the support of hearing devices, while others may be deaf in just one ear. This means that as well as enjoying the vibrations and visual aspect of music, they will be able to hear it too, if not in quite the same way as their hearing peers.

Top tips for communication

DO

- Ask the child how you should communicate with them.
- Use your arms and facial expressions to be as visual as possible.
- Establish the beat and give instructions before music is played.
- Teach or practise in rooms that have no background noise.
- Teach in small groups.
- Be aware that hearing aids and cochlear implants vary in how they process different frequencies.
- Take the student's lead on which instrument they would like to learn.

DON'T

- Work in a room that has an echo.
- Move around while you are talking or demonstrating.
- Talk while performing.
- Get frustrated if the child is repeating the same mistake.
- Give up. If the child is stuck, try explaining things in a different way, write them down or use pictures.

Hearing aids and cochlear implants

The majority of children with permanent deafness use either hearing aids or cochlear implants.

Hearing aids amplify sounds to make them more audible. They are programmed to amplify quieter sounds more than loud sounds so that what the wearer hears always remains within their comfortable range.

Children with severe to profound deafness may use cochlear implants. A cochlear implant includes an internal receiver and electrode package, which is surgically placed in the inner ear, and an external speech processor worn behind the ear. The speech processor converts sound into an electrical impulse which stimulates the nerves in the inner ear.

Points to consider when teaching these children

- Hearing aids and cochlear implants are programmed primarily to improve the clarity of speech. Speech and music have many differences, however, including intensity, energy at different frequencies, and frequency emphasis – musical instruments typically have a much greater dynamic range and frequency range than speech. This means that hearing devices do not reproduce music exactly, and that a deaf person may not experience music in the same way as a hearing person.
- People who use a hearing device find it much easier to follow a single talker, singer or instrument than sounds coming simultaneously from multiple sources.
- It is possible to add a program for music to modern hearing aids which alters the gain and output of the device, ensuring the volume remains comfortable and therefore improving the listener's experience of music.



Photo courtesy of the National Deaf Children's Society

You could suggest to parents that they contact their child's audiologist or teacher of the deaf for further information.

- Different types of assistive technology may help users of hearing devices to reduce problems caused by distance and background noise. Options include audio direct input leads as well as wireless devices (e.g. ear hooks, neckloops, Bluetooth streamers). Find out more at www.ndcs.org.uk/technology.

The word 'deaf' refers to all levels of hearing loss.

On page 26, Deaf with a capital D refers to people who see themselves as culturally Deaf; they actively use BSL and belong to the Deaf community

Pages 23-25 and the introduction to page 26 are adapted from *How to make music activities accessible for deaf children and young people*, created by the National Deaf Children's Society with the support of deaf musicians, researchers and teachers who have experience of supporting deaf children to connect with music. www.ndcs.org.uk/music

Instrumental tuition

'Rhythm can most definitely be taught using kinaesthetic exercises. Deaf people learn very visually, often by watching cues, following demonstrations and by imitation.' Rebecca Withey, deaf sign singer and workshop leader

Generally, the teaching and learning process during instrumental tuition does not need to differ for a deaf child.

Be guided by the student when it comes to choosing an instrument. Like hearing children, they may have strong ideas about what they want to do and it's important not to discourage them. Some deaf children may find it easier to hear lower or higher frequencies, so encourage them to explore and experiment with different instruments to see what suits them best.

Individual tuition

- Try and use rooms with minimal background noise so that sounds are clear.
- Face the student when you are teaching so that they can lip read and see your hand positions on the instrument you are using.
- Think about how a deaf child can see the music through finger positions, posture and mouth shapes.
- Be patient and give the student time to process what you are saying before you demonstrate or ask them to play.
- Establish the beat and rhythm of a piece before it is played, and maybe ask the child if they would like you to conduct throughout. Depending on their level of hearing, they may find it difficult to get the melody until

they understand the rhythm.

- If the child wears a hearing aid, check that the volume level is not too loud.
- Don't give instructions while the child is playing, as there is a chance they won't hear what you are saying. Likewise, avoid humming the rhythm, as it may make it harder for them to hear what they are doing.
- If they make a mistake, be aware that they may not hear it. Be clear afterwards on where the mistake was. Point to the score and make time for demonstration. Remember that a deaf child may take longer to learn new things in comparison to their hearing peers.
- Keep a music log so that progress can be tracked. It is also useful for letting parents know what their child needs to practise.

Group work

- Establish the rhythm and melody with the child before they join the group so they have the confidence to play along with their peers from the start.
- Agree communication rules from the outset; for example, no playing or tuning up while conversation is happening. Check the top tips for communication on page 23 or email helpline@ndcs.org.uk.
- Sit students in a semi-circle so that they can see everyone and

communicate clearly. Ask the child where they would prefer to sit within the group.

- Consider pointing at the score to support the student to keep rhythm if they are finding it hard playing along with another person or group.
- Be careful not to single them out if they make a mistake, as they may not be aware of it.

Playing in a brass band, string group, orchestra or pop band

Orchestras are set up so that every member can see the conductor, who uses clear visual signals to communicate. A deaf child can use this to their advantage.

- Make sure they have a chance to play on their own with a tutor and get used to the piece before playing it within a bigger group. The different instrumental groups could also meet regularly to run through their own parts before they are introduced to the full orchestra.
- Check if the child needs help to tune their instrument.
- Consider the child's positioning within their instrument group. Depending on their level of hearing, they may prefer to sit at one end of the group, closer or further away from neighbouring instrument groups. Ask them if they would like to have someone beside them to relay information and instructions. Try not to move instrumental positions as it can take the child time to get used to what they can hear in a new place.
- Ensure the conductor is on a raised platform so that they can be clearly seen. Check that there are no visual obstructions, such as soloists or stage props.
- Get the conductor to use a long baton to heighten the visual impact and help the child keep time with the rest of the orchestra.
- Make sure conducting is consistent. If there are to be any changes to the method or style, talk directly to the deaf child.
- The conductor may need to give a deaf soloist additional support with timing. Allow time for a clear discussion in advance to avoid miscommunication.



Photo courtesy of the National Deaf Children's Society

Learning to sing and singing in a choir

'In my own personal experience, when singing with grand piano accompaniment, it is important to have the lid down or there are too many overtones which confuse.' Janine Roebuck, deaf opera singer leader

Many deaf children enjoy singing and are able to sing in tune. There are many ways you can support them to take part, but be careful not to single them out.

Before you start

- Make sure the acoustics of the room are good. If the room has an echo, it will be more difficult to pitch the tune.
- Think about the way you communicate – don't forget that lip reading when someone is singing is much harder.
- Ask younger children who are learning about singing for the first time to feel their throat and diaphragm, so they can feel the vibration and get a sense of how it feels.
- Give the child a chance to sing on their own to get used to what they can hear and feel in their bodies before introducing them to a group or choir.

Performing with accompaniment

- Check which octave on a keyboard the child can hear most comfortably. The accompanying music may need to be altered depending on



A budding performer gets professional advice at a National Deaf Children's Society masterclass

whether they have better low or high frequency hearing.

- If the first beat of each bar is strong, this will aid timing. Try playing the whole chord as well as the single note – having the harmonics is a great help for pitch accuracy.
- Consider using a guitar or saxophone instead of a piano to accompany the singer because their clean and sharp sounds can help a deaf child to hear the tune. Percussive and staccato notes are also sometimes easier to hear.

Singing as part of a group

- Usually group members stand next

to others singing the same part. This makes it easier for deaf children to keep in tune and will give them extra confidence.

- Suggest that the child watches their co-singers' breathing patterns out of the corner of their eye to ensure they keep in time with everyone else.

Performing in front of an audience

- Consider using a microphone as a deaf child may struggle to know if the volume is right and adapt accordingly while keeping their voice steady.
- Consider asking somebody to stand opposite the child while they are singing to demonstrate the pitch with their hands and help them keep the rhythm by conducting throughout.
- If the child is self-conscious about their voice, assess their part in the group depending on their strengths. If they want the social benefits of being involved in a choir but prefer to lip synch rather than use their voice, consider allowing this, but don't draw attention to the fact.
- Some children's hearing aids shift or compress high frequency sounds into the child's lower frequency and more audible hearing range. If a child is unable to reproduce high frequencies accurately, consider whether they would be better suited to another vocal classification or whether a lower octave could be used.

DJ'ing and music technology

'Most of the young people I have worked with could hear to some degree, but the music technology side really opens up the possibility that those who are profoundly deaf could participate on an equal footing.' Alan Bryden, musician, DJ and music technology workshop teacher

DJ'ing and music technology are becoming increasingly popular. If a deaf child expresses an interest, here are a few things to consider.

- Give the child an opportunity to use headphones or adapters to connect their hearing aid or cochlear implant to the speakers, so that they can still be part of the group without

experiencing any background noise.

- Encourage the child to put their hands on the speakers to feel the vibrations from the beat of the music. Some children may be nervous about this in case they damage sensitive equipment, so clarify where it is safe to touch prior to the activity.
- Most deaf DJs prefer to use software

that is designed to be visual, such as Serato Scratch Live, rather than the old style mixers.

- Lots of music technology software has a visual element, particularly around programming rhythms, where the act of pressing the keys on a keyboard or drum machine creates a sound as well as a pattern on the screen, enabling the rhythm or musical sequence to be both seen and heard. You could also consider using music technology that incorporates visual feedback elements with lights on a grid, for example Novation's Launchpad or Yamaha's Tenori-on.

Sign song

Sign song is when someone uses sign language to interpret a song instead of singing the words. As it can be very visual, performances are often stunning to watch.

Sign song could add a whole new dimension to your class singing, or you could set up a sign song group to bring deaf and hearing children together, and give hearing children the opportunity to learn some signs.



Heathland's signing choir throw themselves into an award-winning performance

Top tips for creating sign songs

- Ensure the signing represents the meaning of the lyrics – you don't need to sign each word. You can find out more about the structure of British Sign Language by contacting www.signature.org.uk.
- Be careful to use signs that fit in time to the music and flow well together.
- Use facial expressions to mirror

what is being signed in place of tempo and tone.

- Look at alternative translations to suit the group you are working with; for example a more simplistic version for young children.
- Consider all suggestions and ideas for interpretation of the lyrics into sign. Everyone will have a different style and their own views on how the song should be translated.

Sources of support

- You can see examples of sign singing on YouTube.
- Music and the Deaf runs workshops all over the UK. www.matd.org.uk
- sign2sing week, 5-11 February 2018, is an opportunity to learn and perform a song written especially for the occasion and simultaneously raise money for vulnerable deaf children and adults. <http://bit.ly/sc239-19>

An all-deaf choir

Last year, Heathlands school for Deaf children, St Albans, won second place in the youth category of the national signing choir competition. Specialist teacher of the Deaf, Sarah Brinsden explains how it all came about

I loved singing as a child and belonged to the school choir. I wanted our children to have that experience too, so in 2013 I co-founded a signing choir. It also seemed a good way of helping the children improve both their English and their BSL translation.

At the start, I didn't really expect us to last beyond the first year, and here we are four years later getting stronger all the time. People expect to see us at school events, they want to see us there, sign singing has become part of school life.

Finding songs

YouTube is a great source of songs and you get the lyrics too, which is great. A word of warning, however. Hearing children pick up popular songs without really understanding what they are singing. Sign singing, by its very nature, involves looking at the meaning so you can interpret it. When you listen carefully, the words are not always very appropriate!

Preparing a song

I am a CODA (child of deaf adults) and my

fellow choir leader Lesley Reeves-Costi is deaf. Having a hearing and non-hearing person work together is important. I can help Mrs Reeves-Costi with the timing and together we can agree on the best signs. For example, a running tap and a running person are two very different things, so how do you capture that? Or if a song contains lots of similar words, we might decide to use a variety of signs to increase the visual impact, rather than having too much of the same.

Once we have agreed on the signs, we make a video and put it on the choir page of the school website so the children can practise at home.

Performing

Finding an audience is crucial. Besides our regular school performances, we have shared our sign singing with St John's Deaf Club in London and Luton Deaf Club, opening the door to other shared activities, which is brilliant and gives the children of hearing families a chance to feel part of the Deaf community.

Every year we sing in front of the Christmas tree at the Maltings shopping centre, a firm favourite with the children and an opportunity for the PTA to raise funds – we made £400 in two hours last year! We also make videos and in 2014 we marked the school's 40th birthday with a song about empowerment called *Deaf we can*.

Looking forward, we have been invited to help Hearing Dogs celebrate its 35th anniversary at St Albans Cathedral in February. Potentially, that could be a huge event and we are very excited.

What the children say

- 'I love sign singing – it's my hobby.'
- 'I like being involved.'
- 'I like going to all the different places we have been.'
- 'I like having new experiences.'
- 'When I am older, I want to do it with my own children.'
- 'I want to be a singer when I'm older.'
- 'I want to be famous!'

The deadline for the next national signing choir competition is 9 March 2018.
<https://nationalsigningchoircompetition.org>