

Friends with Hearing Loss

by Barbara Luetke-Stahlman

While there are relatively few congenitally deaf Friends, acquired hearing loss among Friends, as in the general population, is quite prevalent. This is especially true among older Friends who have lost some or all of their ability to hear. Friends who once could hear those moved to speak in meeting for worship or who were able to socialize, convene meetings, and assist with First-day school, now find that their inability to hear isolates them from the activities they once cherished. There are, however, many things that hearing Friends can do to assist those who cannot hear well. I hope the following suggestions will prove helpful in recognizing and dealing with these unique and often challenging needs.

For Large Group Sessions of More than a Dozen

1. When preparing registration materials, provide space to clarify if anyone has special needs. Provide a checklist of examples so those with hearing loss realize what accommodations are available. Communicate with Friends with hearing loss in writing to be sure that details as to both their needs and the provisions you are able to make are understood.

2. Provide a group FM system and a microphone for the main speaker(s) or performer(s). If you are unsure as to how to locate information about such equipment, contact your state department of education; a speech, audiology, or special education department in a college or university; or a school or private audiologist. This equipment will most likely need to be rented.

3. For those who use signed communication, provide certified interpreters. Oral interpreters also might be requested. These professionals need to be hired at least one month prior to the event. If you are unsure how to locate interpreters, contact the professionals listed above.

4. Create seating arrangements that ease visual communication (e.g., semicircle, horseshoe, etc.).

5. Monitor rooms to adjust for adequate lighting and to control glare. Friends with hearing loss should have sufficient lighting to make speech reading possible. If there is a bright light (e.g., window) behind a speaker, pull shades or rearrange seating so the bright light does not create a shadow on the face of the speaker(s).

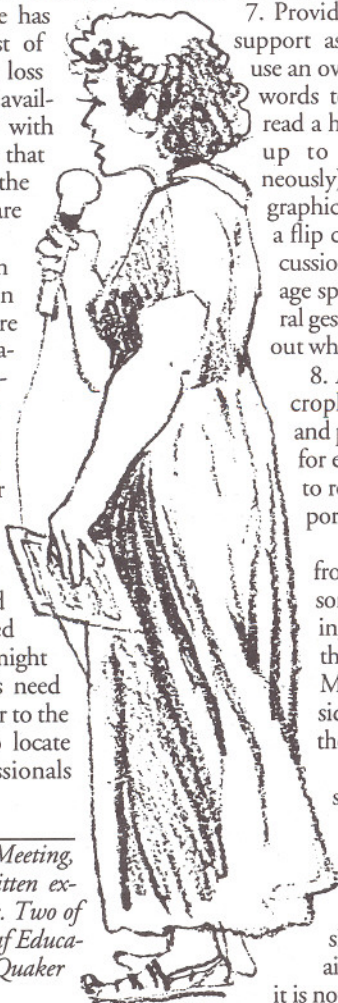
6. Provide a section in front for those with hearing loss to sit with their friends and family. These chairs should be roped or taped off or labeled "for those with hearing loss." When individuals continue to move back and forth in front of those with hearing loss, it causes visual distraction; key words or phrases can be missed. To solve this problem, a hearing Friend (*not* the interpreter or person with hearing loss) should be assigned to monitor the section.

7. Provide as much graphic/visual support as possible. For example: use an overhead projector with the words to songs (as it is hard to read a handout of lyrics and look up to read speech simultaneously), an outline of a lecture, graphics that illustrate key points, a flip chart for spontaneous discussion, or other aids. Encourage speakers to point, use natural gestures, and provide a handout when they are asked to share.

8. Ask speakers to use a microphone, articulate clearly, and pause or repeat main ideas for emphasis. It is also helpful to rephrase or summarize important terms or messages.

9. Ask singers to face front, state the title of each song before they begin singing, and rehearse lyrics with the group before each song. Musicians might also consider using more bass on their instruments.

10. Ask presenters and singers to face front and keep their hair back from their face so as not to interfere with speech reading. If female, consider wearing lipstick (to aid speech reading) even if it is not typically your style. Men



A member of Penn Valley (Mo.) Meeting, Barbara Luetke-Stahlman has written extensively on issues related to deafness. Two of her books include a textbook on Deaf Education and Hannie, the story of a Quaker girl with two adopted, deaf sisters.

with mustaches and beards should be aware that it is difficult to read lips that are obscured by facial hair.

11. Although some Friends might not be comfortable asking someone to take notes during meeting for worship, it is an option utilized by some meetings. You can ask Friends with hearing loss if they would like to be tapped if someone has started to speak so they can look at the speaker.

For Small Group Sessions of Less than a Dozen

1. The suggestions made above for large group sessions should be considered when appropriate for small group sessions. The convener or facilitator of the small group should be informed prior to the session that a Friend with hearing loss is in attendance and where that Friend is seated.

2. The convener should ask when participants are introduced for clarity of needs and then assist in having those needs met throughout the session. This might occur in several ways: ask every 15–30 minutes if everyone can hear, model the requested behaviors (for example, to stand while speaking), and reinforce participants who practice the requested behaviors. If a Friend is monitoring group process, the accommodation requested by the Friend with hearing loss should be included in any reported feedback.

3. The convener should ask each person making a contribution to stand before speaking so the person with hearing loss can identify the source of the message. The convener also might point to this person, making sure the eyes of the Friend with hearing loss are on that speaker before he or she begins.

4. The convener should request that people take turns speaking and not interrupt each other. Comments made as asides should be discouraged. When interruptions and informal comments are made, the Friend with hearing loss cannot keep his or her eyes on the lips of all the different people speaking. In addition, an interpreter can translate only one person's contribution at a time.

5. The convener should ask people to stay on topic and inform the Friend with hearing loss when the topic has shifted (for example, the facilitator could say, "We were talking about Pendle Hill, but Susan was just explaining Pendle Hill On the Road").

For Social Times

1. A quiet area for socializing should be provided in addition to the large group area so Friends with hearing loss are not forced to stand amidst loud noise or leave because they don't feel included.

2. It might be suggested to Friends with hearing loss that they stand with their back to

a corner so that hearing Friends do not pass behind them, making remarks that cannot be understood without speech reading.

For Junior Gathering or First-day School

1. The suggestions made above should be considered where appropriate.

2. Interpreters should be hired who have experience working with young children. Public schools are usually a good place to locate such talent.

3. Interpreters should be asked to (and paid to) attend all team meetings and treated as members of the team.

4. Eye-level communication should be considered. Adults should stoop or kneel to talk with children and youth who are deaf or hard of hearing so these young Friends are better able to speech read them.

5. Books on hearing loss, sign, and deaf culture should be read aloud to hearing children and youth during sessions together. One resource that carries many stories about deafness is the Gallaudet University Bookstore in Washington, D.C. (See Resources, below).

Resources

Your meeting or Quaker event may benefit from the information available from the following groups:

1. SHHH:
Self Help for the Hard of Hearing
7910 Woodmont, Suite 1200
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 557-2248 (voice)
(301) 567-2249 (TDD)
2. Gallaudet University Bookstore
7th and Florida NE
Washington, DC 20002
3. Your State Department of Education—ask about services for those who are deaf or hard of hearing.
4. Your State Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.
5. The National Association of the Deaf (and publishers of the *Broadcaster*)
814 Thayer Ave.
Silver Springs, MD 20910-4500
(301) 587-1788 (voice and TDD)

The above suggestions are provided in the hope that hearing Friends might better consider and problem-solve the unique needs of Friends with hearing loss. If you would like additional assistance, please contact the author directly:

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