

Playgroup Set Up Guide

FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Purpose: This checklist supports providers in designing a playgroup environment that promotes accessible communication, visual engagement, language development, and family connection for deaf and hard of hearing children in birth to three programs.

1. Visual Access and Room Layout

Ensure children can easily see people, materials, and communication from anywhere in the space.

- Arrange formal seating in a circle or U-shape so all faces are visible
- Keep sightlines clear (avoid tall shelves or visual barriers)
- Provide soft, even lighting without glare or backlighting (be mindful of where windows are in relation to activities in the room, consider blinds or curtains)
- Ensure faces are well lit for visual communication
- Use contrasting wall and floor colors to support visual focus
- Create defined play zones (gross motor, quiet play, sensory, books)
- Include mirrors at child height (on walls, on bookshelves, or facing the floor for infants when laying on back) for visual attention and imitation

Why this matters: Visual access is foundational for language, attention, and social engagement in deaf and hard of hearing children.

2. Communication-Rich Materials

Prioritize materials that support shared attention, turn-taking, and visual language.

- Board books with clear pictures and real-life images
- Routine-based play sets (food, animals, vehicles, people) for labeling and storytelling
- Cause-and-effect toys that invite interaction and anticipation
- Open-ended toys (blocks, scarves, nesting cups) to expand language
- Puppets or dolls for modeling conversation and routines
- Visual schedules with photos of staff modeling signs
- Emotion cards or mirrors to support social-emotional language
- Name/photo cards for children and family members with sign visible

Why this matters: Language strategies can be utilized to create natural opportunities to follow the child's lead, share visual attention, model language, take turns, wait for responses and expand language during play and daily routines.

3. Auditory and Sensory Considerations

Support children who use hearing technology, vibration, or visual cues.

- Reduce background noise (use soft materials, rugs, wall panels to block or soften noises)
- Provide quiet listening corner for children with hearing devices
- Include vibrating or light-up toys for multimodal access
- Offer sensory materials (bins, textures, water play) that invite interaction
- Include musical toys in activity centers and during routines (drums, piano, tambourine, etc.)

Why this matters: Deaf and hard of hearing children access information in different ways. A thoughtfully designed sensory and listening environment helps children use hearing technology effectively, notice visual or vibration cues, stay regulated, and fully participate in play and communication.

4. Family Engagement and Comfort

Design the space so families feel welcomed, informed, and included.

- Comfortable adult seating within the play space
- Visual information board with resources and upcoming events
- Space for strollers, diaper bags, and feeding needs
- Materials labeled in family-friendly language
- Opportunities for parent-to-parent conversation
- Take-home language or play ideas connected to the session
- Infographics throughout the room describing various materials, communication strategies, and tips at eye level of adult

Why this matters: Families are central to early language development. When caregivers feel welcomed, informed, and comfortable participating, they are more likely to interact, observe strategies, connect with other families, and continue language-rich play beyond the playgroup setting.

5. Cultural and Language Inclusion

Reflect the diversity of families, communication approaches, and identities.

- Books and visuals showing deaf children and adults
- Materials representing multiple languages and cultures
- Access to ASL models or visual language supports
- Respect for family communication choices and goals
- Inclusive imagery of different family structures and abilities
- Consideration of interpreting needs

Why this matters: Children and families benefit from seeing their identities, languages, and experiences reflected in the environment. Inclusive materials support belonging, respect family communication choices, and promote positive connections to deaf identity, culture, and community.

6. Provider Planning Supports

Ensure facilitators create intentional, language-focused play experiences.

- Posted visual routine for the playgroup including both group and individual activities
- Prepared song, book, and play themes with language targets
- Materials ready for small-group and whole-group interaction
- Plan for coaching families during play (not just directing children)
- Simple system for observing and noting child communication

Why this matters: Intentional planning helps playgroups move beyond unstructured play toward meaningful language learning. Clear routines, prepared materials, and family coaching strategies ensure that everyday play becomes an opportunity to build communication, relationships, and developmental progress.

Quick Room Readiness Check (At-a-Glance)

Before families arrive, ask:

- ☐ Can every child see faces and communication clearly?
- ☐ Are materials inviting interaction and shared attention?
- ☐ Does the room support access to communication?
- ☐ Do families feel comfortable, welcomed, and included?
- ☐ Is today's playgroup designed to grow language through play?