

A Letter to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: The Hard-Won Wisdom We Earn

By Christy Barr

*“Pick up a pen, start writing. I wanna talk about what I have learned.
The hard-won wisdom I have earned.”*

~ “One Last Time” from *Hamilton*, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda

Dear students who are deaf or hard of hearing ...

I would like to share 10 lessons with you that surely apply to so many of us who are deaf or hard of hearing. These lessons, learned from my own experience as a person who is deaf, have made me a better person, and I am hoping you will find them useful in your own lives as well.

1. **You have been excluded from conversations.** You have been left wondering what is happening around you and had to work through your frustration. This may build you into a great leader. You will ensure everyone on your team has a voice and has the opportunity to be heard.
2. **You have been unfairly accused of not listening to or ignoring people.** This will make you more understanding of others. For example, if an employee shows up late for work, instead of labeling that person “lazy,” you will wonder what happened to delay his or her arrival. Further, if someone writes “I want publish book,” instead of branding that person “unintelligent,” you will wonder if the person uses English as a second language.
3. **You have followed others as a coping skill.** Your world is visual, and you watch what others do. For example, when other students are lining up for recess or for a fire alarm, or when they are doing the gym class relay, you watch what everyone else does and you copy them. This will not set you up to be a follower. Instead, you will realize your own power of seeing everything from a unique perspective. You will notice body language, environmental clues, and when other people are excluded. You will notice things that other people won't. This will make you an asset and a leader.

Photos courtesy of Christy Barr

Christy Barr, MEd, BCBA, is a board-certified behavior analyst and teacher of the deaf. She began her career as an itinerant teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students in Illinois. In 2014, she earned her BCBA and served as a clinician with Trumpet Behavioral Health providing Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) services to children with autism, increasing their language and independence skills. Barr has since returned to the field of deaf education with the goal of bridging research from the fields of ABA and deaf education. She also serves on the board committee for Deaf Education Ohio. Barr welcomes questions and comments about this article at christy.barr@gmail.com.



Above: The experiences and challenges deaf and hard of hearing individuals face can teach them many important life lessons.

4. **You constantly have to explain what you need and to fight for it.** This can be exhausting. You struggle with having to work so hard. You find yourself asking, “Why? Why do I have to go through all this effort? Always ask for accommodations in advance? Always ask for interpreters a month before a conference? Why do I have to search for special dates and times for interpreted plays? And why do I always have to educate an uninformed and sometimes rude public?” These experiences will not defeat you. Instead, they will allow you to become an activist and an advocate—both for yourself and others.
5. **You deal constantly with the unfairness of it all—the struggle, the lack of access, the fighting for accommodations.** No, it is not fair, but when you work 10 times harder than other people, you develop grit. Instead of accepting the status quo, you will develop a strong work ethic, exceptional organizational skills, and perseverance. You may learn to fight for other people as well, perhaps leading to a career as a lawyer, a judge, or a lobbyist.

6. **You sometimes “miss the whistle.”** This may mean missing a soccer whistle during practice or a game, a lifeguard whistle at the pool, or the microwave timer when your food is done. Missing these and other sound-based alerts can be frustrating. However, being able to miss them can also be a benefit. When you are older and someone decides it’s a good idea to give your child a whistle, the sound won’t bother you a lick. Your daughter in sixth grade bangs away as she learns to play the xylophone? Totally fine. Your son in fourth grade brings home a school recorder? No problem. A screeching smoke detector is hurting people’s ears during a drill? Not an issue for you. Each of these challenges can be met by taking out your hearing aid(s) or cochlear implant(s). Protected from the unwanted sounds, you’re good to go. Remember to enjoy “the deaf benefit.”

Right: As deaf adults, we have a responsibility to make education more accessible for the children coming up behind us.

7. **You may worry about not hearing your children cry.** Someday you may have children. Worrying about not hearing them when they need help may cause you to become a “helicopter parent”—to ensure they are always in your line of sight so you can see that they are okay, to hover over them. Alas, no matter how hard you try, you may miss their crying. Another parent may bring your hurt child over to you, and you may feel like the world’s worst parent. However, from this experience you will understand that it truly takes a village to raise a child; it’s not all on you. A relative may show your child how to play ball, a neighbor may teach your child about responsibility when raking leaves, and another parent may help you when your child is hurt. This builds a support system for you and your family. You will assist others, they will assist you, and you will work as a community, a team.



8. **You are hyperaware of different environments—their benefits and drawbacks.** This is a mark of success. If you are hard of hearing or a cochlear implant user, you have already experienced struggles with listening in various situations. You already know that talking with hearing friends in a small room is much better than trying to talk with hearing friends in a noisy, dark restaurant or outside on a windy day. You know the difference between



the listening environment during car rides and in the library as well as between lunchtime and study hall. You know that lighting is important—whether for conversations in speech or for conversations in sign. Signers especially know the frustration of intrusive pieces that block visual space and the difference in communicating in darkness, diffused light, or light that flickers or comes with a harsh glare. This knowledge will make you aware of how environments impact other people and how different environments can change their behaviors. You may notice how a friend on the autism spectrum becomes overwhelmed with lights, conversations, and music at a school dance but flourishes during small gatherings in family homes. In the workplace, a supportive supervisor can change an employee from feeling like a failure to seeing their skills. As a deaf or hard of hearing individual, you have unique insight into matching environments to people to bring out their best and support their success. You know that some people shine in the spotlight, some people communicate best through writing, and some people build amazing contraptions. This skill is an asset to you as a leader.

9. **You are used to mishearing/misunderstanding hearing people and reading body language and facial**

expressions. This is a complex issue and it has progressive steps, all of which lead to outstanding critical thinking skills:

- **Mishearing people 1.0.** This experience provides you with scientific skepticism. You learn sooner, faster, and more deeply than most people to investigate questions related to what you are told. You ask yourself, “Is what I heard or read really accurate? Is there data to support this claim? Is the measurement they cite accurate?” You already know that sometimes results don’t make sense, and you’ve learned to dig deeper. You already see the world like a scientist.
- **Mishearing people 2.0.** You are a “code breaker.” All your behind-the-scenes efforts (e.g., reading context clues, body language, knowing the history of the person and their claims) have made you automatically think, “What sounds similar to/rhymes with the sounds I just heard or saw on the person’s lips, and does it fit the context?” You fill in the gaps moment by moment, all while continuing to listen, pay attention, and adjust your understanding to what is being said. You are exceptionally good at figuring out what people are saying with limited information. You’re like a detective, a spy, or a researcher. Most people cannot do this; they’ve never needed to. It’s one of your strongest muscles to flex.
- **Mishearing people 3.0.** You can tell authentic people from fake people, truth from lies. You have the ability to tune out people’s words and look at their body language and actions instead. You know more deeply than most people how actions speak louder than words, and you are less vulnerable to advertising and its gimmicks. Often people are inclined to believe information—and misinformation—just because it has often been repeated. Easily remembered slogans are repeated so often that most of us know some of them by heart (e.g., “America runs on Dunkin’,” “You’re in good hands with Allstate,” and “Every kiss begins with Kay”). We are bombarded with advertising almost every moment,

even when we pump gas into our cars. With our ability as deaf and hard of hearing people to tune out unwanted noise, we can shelter ourselves from the claims of advertisers, and we may make more objective decisions.

10. **You will come to understand how the continuum of accessibility in society is similar to the continuum of credibility in research.** If you choose to go into the field of science or a similar field, you will learn through your courses how to analyze research articles and realize that there is a range in quality of research. This range of quality is much like the range of quality of accessibility. In one day, as a deaf or hard of hearing person, you move through environments that vary in accessibility. For example,

accessibility may be near total with a friend who signs well or when using an FM microphone at a restaurant with a family member. However, the same FM microphone at a rectangular table with a group of non-signers may yield only medium accessibility. Attending a conference with an interpreter and having closed captioning on video clips may result in strong accessibility. Road trips with friends who don’t sign, with the windows down, the music cranked up, and a profile view of the driver will yield very poor accessibility. Similarly, research, depending on how it’s done, can yield strong, medium, poor, or very poor results. If research design is poor and the procedural integrity is low, the results are essentially meaningless. You understand this because you experience it through the varying accessibility you have in your own life.

While we—when we become adults—have a responsibility to make education more accessible for the children coming up behind us, we also have a responsibility to acknowledge both the difficulties and the triumphs—

the pain and the gain—of being people who are deaf or hard of hearing. We live in a world in which accessibility is varied and sometimes poor. Still, the coping we do as deaf or hard of hearing children makes us strong, and figuring out meanings as we interact with people makes us caring and perceptive. Our experiences are valid and our emotions are raw. Sometimes life is hard and it hurts, but as adults we still do it. We do it because we want to be the person for other deaf and hard of hearing students that we wish had been there for us. **Thank goodness for us, and thank goodness for you!**

