FACT SHEET

Hearing Impairments

What is a hearing impairment?

Having a hearing loss (impairment) means that a child has lost some hearing in one or both ears. Hearing impairments are described according to how much hearing has been lost. Loss is usually explained as mild, moderate, moderate to severe, severe, or profound.

How is it manifested?

There are a few different types of hearing loss: conductive, sensory, mixed (conductive and sensory combined), and neural.

Conductive hearing loss: This happens when there is a problem with part of the outer or middle ear. Most children with conductive hearing loss have a mild hearing loss and it is usually temporary. In most cases, medical treatment helps.

Sensory hearing loss: This happens when the cochlea (the snail-shaped structure in the inner ear containing the organ of hearing) is not working correctly because the tiny hair cells are damaged or destroyed. Depending on the loss, a child may be able to hear most sounds (although they would be muffled); only some sounds, or no sounds at all. Sensory hearing impairment is almost always permanent and a child's ability to talk normally may be affected.

Neural hearing loss: This happens when there is a problem with the connection from the cochlea to the brain. Neural hearing loss means the nerve that carries the messages from the cochlea to the brain is damaged.

Mild impairment: The child hears and can understand normal conversational voice, but will not follow all quiet speech that others can hear and may often say, "What?"

Moderate impairment: The child does not hear all of normal conversational speech and requires louder, stronger, and aggressively toned responses. Some effect on the child's speech development is likely unless the child receives help.

Severe impairment: The child will not hear any normal conversation and only a few sounds of loud speech.

Profound impairment: The child will hear only the loudest noises and may not get sufficient help even from a hearing aid. Insertion of a cochlear implant ("bionic ear") may need to be considered.

Who is affected?

Approximately 20 in 10,000 children are born with a hearing loss. An additional 12 in 10,000 will acquire at least a moderate hearing loss by the age of 17.

How is it diagnosed or detected?

The type of tests used to diagnose hearing loss depend on the age of the child, but can include:

- Simple tests, such as shaking a rattle nearby and observing the response (behavioural observation audiometry).
- Tests such as auditory brainstem response testing, which measure the electrical activity in the brain in response to a sound.
- Tests with an audiometer - a machine that produces sounds such as beeps and whistles. Whether or not the child can hear certain sounds helps to pinpoint his degree of hearing loss.

Additional Resources:

BOB RUMBALL ASSOCIATION FOR THE DEAF (ONTARIO MISSION OF THE DEAF)
– www.bobrumball.org
The Bob Rumball Foundation for the Deaf supports the deaf by providing funding for activities, services and support to further the quality of life of deaf people in Ontario.

CANADIAN HEARING SOCIETY - www.chs.ca
The Canadian Hearing Society provides services that enhance the independence of deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people, and that encourage prevention of hearing loss. They provide a range of services including, support of consumer groups in advocacy, consultation and training, mail order assistive devices and educational materials, and public education.