

Is Your Child Safe When Grandpa Can't Hear?

Sergei Kochkin, Ph.D.

Executive Director

Better Hearing Institute

Finally! Your long-awaited romantic weekend getaway with your spouse is near. Reservations confirmed? Check. Dancing shoes packed? Check. Babysitter lined up? Check. Grandma and Grandpa, who better?

Better recheck that babysitter before you head out the door. Before you hire a stranger, you are going to investigate them pretty carefully, aren't you? But your folks usually get a pass, even if they don't hear so well. After all, they love your kids and whose hearing isn't going downhill?

The current statistics from the Better Hearing Institute are that one in six baby-boomers have hearing loss and 3 in 10 of people over 65 have hearing loss; seniors in their 80's have greater than a 50% incidence of hearing loss. However, keep in mind that these statistics don't tell the whole story. Almost everyone knows at least one person who has a hearing loss that is affecting communications but resolutely refuses to acknowledge or do anything about it.

If your child's babysitter is one of the 24 million people who need hearing aids and don't have them, there could be serious problems. Effective caregivers need to be environmentally vigilant to assure the safety of your child; the ability to hear is a key component in assuring the safety of your child. The risks of not hearing a smoke or carbon monoxide detector, an intruder, or a child crying in the backyard could be fatal or result in injury. Spending too much time speech reading while driving can cause a crash, as can failing to hear a siren. Older children have been known to take advantage of an adult's hearing loss and get "permission" to do something the adult wouldn't agree to if they understood what the child said.

Before heading out for that weekend, consider these issues.

General Child Care

A 66-year-old man was aggravated that his wife dragged him in to a hearing evaluation, and decided that he did not need the amplification the audiologist recommended. (His wife just didn't talk right.) 18 months later he was back. While watching his three-year-old grandson, the child had opened the screen door of the living room while his grandfather was there and wandered down the street. A neighbor found and returned him, and the family forced him to get his hearing checked and get amplification if he was ever again to sit with his beloved grandson. After reluctantly getting his hearing aids, he returned two days later, laughing and shaking his head. "What a fool I have been. This is not bad at all."

Children, especially very young ones, will do the darndest things. If the grandparent can't hear what they are up to, the potential for tragedy is high, particularly if there is a swimming pool or other body of water nearby.

Children are unpredictable, but one thing that we can predict with absolute confidence is that sooner or later, they will get hurt. Heather Whitestone McCallum, Miss America 1995, was content to struggle along with her deafness using hearing aids and speech reading until one day when her son, John, fell down in the back yard and cried. "Unfortunately, I did not hear the sounds coming from the backyard. I was not there to comfort John when he cried. It bothered me tremendously so I prayed to God to give me more hearing."

With the activation of a cochlear implant, McCallum is now able to hear much more. "I hear more fussing from my boys, but it helps me to be a better mom," she adds. "For example, I was in my bedroom for a minute. I heard fast running water. I immediately checked the bathroom down the hall and noticed that my two boys climbed into the bathtub. I was able to catch them before anything happened to them. A year ago, I would not have heard the running water from the bathtub even when I wore my hearing aid."

Knowing that they don't hear as well, even if they have amplification, will let them reconsider how they do things when your parents are sitting with your children. For instance, knowing that they may not hear the child leave the room, they can lock doors to keep in very young kids and/or decide that they need to focus on the child and not read or watch TV while they are with them. There are also other products that will alert a hearing-impaired adult to noises. These can be explored with your hearing healthcare professional.

Fire Safety

"Older adults are also at increased risk of dying in a home fire, and the risk increases with age. In 2002, adults 65 years and older had a fire death rate (2.4 per 100,000 population) 2.5 times that of the general population. Those 75 years and older had a fire death rate (3.1 per 100,000 population) three times the national average. Increased risk for older adults may arise in part from decreased mobility, hearing loss, and resistance to new technologies." Public/Private Fire Safety Council, White Paper on Home Smoke Alarms and Other Detection Equipment, April 2006

The biggest concern is failing to hear smoke detectors. The vast majority of people with hearing loss hear the low pitches but not the high ones common in smoke detectors. Additionally, studies have shown that young children do not respond to smoke detectors. They need to hear a familiar voice calling to them by name to wake up and get out of the house. Vocal smoke detectors are available at many hardware stores and allow you to record a short message for your family. Be sure that they are at Grandpa's house, too, if your children will be spending the night.

Since hearing loss is generally progressive, even if your parents can hear the smoke detector today, it doesn't mean that they will be able to next year. Also, it is important to remember that virtually nobody sleeps with their hearing aids in. One solution is a system with a very bright strobe light in the bedroom to wake them up, but these don't work for everyone. If the hearing loss is severe, there are devices that will vibrate on the bed and awaken them. They are almost 100% effective.

Carbon Monoxide

In March 2005 in Queens, NY a baby boomer couple with hearing loss died because they were unable to hear the carbon-monoxide alarm. They had apparently left their car running in the garage.

There are ways to make sure that you can hear carbon monoxide detectors, doorbells, telephones, etc., even if you are deaf or experiencing some degree of hearing loss. People with hearing loss need to explore these options with audiologists and assistive listening device specialists. Also, they need to alert the fire department that they have a hearing loss.

Driving

Hearing-impaired drivers also often have a very bad habit of speech reading while they drive. Often, they are completely unaware of how much time they are spending with their eyes off the road and on someone's face. The use of hearing aids and assistive listening devices to improve their ability to understand their passengers can be life-saving.

It is a good idea to ride along with a senior driver, both during the day and at night. You can get an idea of if hearing loss, vision impairment and other issues are affecting their ability to drive safely. For their sake, and your children's, promptly deal with issues that arise.

On foot or bicycle

"For years I struggled with hearing impairment! At first I did not recognize my problem because I heard everything... or so I thought! Then one day, I failed to hear an oncoming vehicle as I started crossing a road. My husband's fear ridden face shocked me into realizing my danger and stopped me just in time. That did it! I definitely had a hearing problem!"

Traffic noises are important. Cyclists riding along are prone to shouting "On your (left or right!)" and flying past pedestrians. One suggestion is that you go along on the routine and figure out what the problems are and how the grandparent can use their eyes to do what their ears won't. Older children can be part of the solution once the problems are identified.

Weather emergencies

Orange County (TX) Judge Carl Thibodeaux was shocked to discover a man working out in his yard on Friday, September 23, 2005, as Hurricane Rita was bearing down. "We found out the

man was deaf and just had no warning that he needed to evacuate. We finally got someone to translate the message to him that a hurricane was approaching and got him out of the area safely."

No matter where you live, there are weather emergencies and you need to know that your children's caregivers can understand and respond correctly to warnings.

Insist on the captioning being turned on when your children are there, and if emergency information is not being captioned confront the broadcasting stations with the need to do that. An additional benefit to having the captioning turned on is that the volume will be turned down. Some people have their TV on so loud that they are actually damaging the hearing of those with them.

There is a special NOAA weather radio available for people who cannot hear well that provides visual and vibrating alarms and simple text readouts. Timely warnings save lives. Of course, a plan to deal with the emergencies is essential as well.

Perhaps the best warning system is a few neighbors who are alerted that they need to make sure that your parents know of an impending problem.

Can they call for help effectively?

One woman was forced to call for help with a voice phone and couldn't understand what the 911 operator was saying. Her strategy was to tell the operator that she couldn't hear any response, but that she would repeat the location and nature of the emergency three times for the operator. Help arrived in time.

This was before most 911 operations centers were able to respond to TTY (text phone) calls, and most can now.

Many people will acknowledge that their hearing isn't what it once was, but are unwilling to admit when the time has come when they cannot effectively use their telephone any more. If your child has an emergency and your parent can't understand what the 911 operator is saying, the consequences could be dire. You might want to make sure that your children know how to make a 911 call in case the parent is the one needing help.

Hearing poorly doesn't necessarily mean your child will not be safe

People with hearing loss who wear hearing aids, use assistive devices and the many communication coping strategies can be safe caregivers for your children. These people are aware of their limitations and take steps to ensure that your children aren't in a situation where their hearing loss will endanger them. Instead of leaving them in the yard to play, the hearing-impaired grandparent will stay with them. They will have the smoke detectors they can perceive, telephones they can use and will drive with awareness and devices that will let them communicate while keeping their eyes on the

road. They will have notified local emergency personnel that they have special problems, and have a plan for dealing with emergencies that are likely to crop up in your area.

Parents, who are denying their hearing loss, or the extent of their hearing loss, are another story entirely. Before you head off on that long-awaited romantic weekend getaway, make sure that your parents are capable of giving your children the care they need and deserve.

###

Founded in 1973, the Better Hearing Institute is a not-for-profit educational organization whose mission is to educate the public about hearing loss, its treatment and prevention. To receive a free copy of BHI's booklet "Your Guide to Better Hearing," visit its website at www.betterhearing.org or call the Better Hearing Institute hotline at 1-800-EAR-WELL. The BHI also offers for parents a downloadable "Guide to Your Child's Hearing".