

POLICY STATEMENT

Residual Hearing

Hearing loss is not an all or nothing phenomenon: People with hearing losses are not usually completely deaf, but ordinarily, show varying degrees of hearing loss at different frequencies in one or both ears. Although this fact is obvious, its implications are often overlooked.

The unique needs of hard of hearing people, and those children who are potentially hard of hearing, can hardly be realized when the fact that hearing loss exists on a continuum is ignored or its impact minimized. Perhaps this occurs because of the human tendency to polarize issues and judgments (i.e. "deaf or hearing"), because hearing loss is an "invisible" and so often denied disability, because the potential of modern amplification technology is not fully understood, or because the optimum use of residual hearing is seen by some members of the Deaf community as a threat to their cohesion and future. But whatever the reason or reasons, the practical result is that when residual hearing is ignored or its potential minimized, it cannot serve any of its inherent purposes.

As one of the five senses that human beings are normally born with, nature has endowed the sense of hearing with significant social and biological functions. These range from the reflex alerting to the sounds around us, to the relatively effortless development of speech and language skills. Though these skills will be affected by the presence of a hearing loss, they do not disappear as long as some residual hearing remains and is fully utilized.

At its most basic, sound is produced by a force (for example, wind) acting on some object (for example, trees, the ocean). The awareness of sound (consciously or unconsciously) is a way that human beings adapt to, and feel part of, their immediate environment (for example, the sounds of nature, traffic, and home appliances). The sense of hearing, the perception of sound and its biological purposes, is not, therefore, a trivial consideration that can be lightly dismissed. On the contrary, it is a human birthright that must be respected and utilized to the fullest extent possible. It is on this premise that the Hearing Loss Association of America was founded and continues to operate.

Perhaps even more than those with normal hearing, hard of hearing people value what hearing can offer, precisely because they are better able to recognize what they are missing or what they have lost. One of the primary desires of hard of hearing people is to increase our auditory perceptual capabilities, by encouraging the development of new technology and the better utilization of existing technology.

We do not respond to our hearing difficulties by denying the value of the sense of hearing itself, for ourselves or for other people with hearing loss. We regard the sense of hearing as a gift,

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from our evolutionary forebears and/or from the Creator depending how we view the world. And it is not for us who possess some measure of this gift to disregard its presence, to whatever degree it is present.

Adults who do not hear, or choose not to hear, have the power and authority to make their own decisions regarding the use, or non-use, of their own (and their children's) residual hearing. Having never experienced auditory sensations, or having them but finding the occasions unpleasant or irrelevant, these adults are free to ignore any residual hearing they possess. They do not have the right to make this decision for others, particularly for children who cannot make their own informed judgments regarding the potential value of hearing in their lives. Note that this is not an argument for or against any communication mode for children; it is an assertion that no professional or educator or caregiver has the right to deny young children a reasonable opportunity to use their residual hearing. To do that is to impose one's personal values on a very fundamental sensory inheritance of other human beings.

It would be less than honest to deny that the early and proper use of residual hearing may very well affect the life course and self-identity of an individual. But, what is the alternative? Are we to assume that we must restrict a person's sensory experiences of the world in order to pre-ordain educational placement and communication mode choices? The point here is that we cannot dismiss as an irrelevancy a part of our biological heritage because it may be viewed by some members in the Deaf community as a threat to their future viability.

Our stance, however, is not negative but positive: we are for the full utilization of residual hearing and not against any group or individual. HLAA recognizes a number of common concerns with those who define themselves as culturally Deaf, but we insist that the power and potential of residual hearing not be overlooked, minimized, or disparaged as a consequence of any collaborative efforts.

To recap, it is the position of HLAA that every effort be made to fully utilize the power and potential of the residual hearing of all people with hearing losses. While our hearing loss is undoubtedly a burden that we would gladly forgo if we could, we view the hearing that remains as an opportunity that can help us lessen the impact of that burden. To this end, we welcome all scientific advances in medicine and technology that can help eliminate and reduce the effects of a hearing loss. The intent is to foster the capability of people with hearing losses to more effectively participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, and vocational opportunities of our society.