

Language & Learning

Learning From My Family

Making the Most of Family Experiences

Major experiences may be familiar, like holidays, or new for everyone in the family, like a family vacation. Maybe you have relatives who only visit occasionally. Sometimes the family needs to move.

When your experience is familiar to you, but new to your baby or young child, you can watch carefully to see what draws your baby's attention. For example, every family has its own way of celebrating the holidays appropriate for its culture. You may decorate your house, wear special clothes, prepare special foods, sing special songs, or go special places. What does your baby or young child pay the most attention to? Are there bright colors and new faces to attract your baby's attention? Are there songs and sounds to catch your baby's ear? Are some of the traditional characters a little frightening?

Even though we know all about these things as adults, your baby is probably not ready to learn everything. All children learn more about family traditions each time they are experienced. This year, your baby looks and listens. Next year, your baby will be a toddler, and interested in things to touch and taste. As your baby grows up, the routines of the holiday, the details, the language, will become important. Follow your baby's lead for now, name the interesting things to look at, and the interesting sounds. Listen and look together. Include your baby in the celebration to lay a foundation for next year.

When relatives and good friends visit, you have the chance to introduce your baby to new people who will be important later on. You also have the chance to help these extended family members to become comfortable with your baby as a whole person, who happens to be deaf or hard of hearing. You can answer their questions and explain your communication, so that when they interact with the baby, both parties are comfortable.

Sometimes a major experience is a change for everyone. Moving, or going on a vacation to a new place, can be stressful as well as fun. Babies know when the adults around them are feeling hurried, stressed, or upset. When your voice is not accessible to soothe and reassure your deaf baby, you need to relax your body, and use your face to show excitement, anticipation, and calm. Because your hard of hearing baby has only partial access to the subtle messages in your voice, you want to use your face and body as well. Then both of you will be able to see and appreciate all the new sights. What catches your baby's attention? What can you communicate about?

Remember that minor experiences, like going to the grocery store, church or library, or having a baby-sitter, while they may happen fairly often, are still a change in routine. Changes are wonderful opportunities to engage in conversation, because your baby will find some way, with or without spoken or signed words, to let you know what is new and interesting. Don't forget to respond.