

A Closer Look at Hearing and Vision Loss

Caitlin was diagnosed as hard-of-hearing shortly after birth and with low vision when she was five years old.

Despite vision and hearing difficulties, Caitlin, now eight, (and shown in the photos in this article), does quite well at home, according to her mom, Sara. “Over time her familiarity with home and other settings compensates for her visual and hearing deficits,” says Sara. “She immediately recognizes when furniture is moved or new objects are introduced into our living areas.” Sara says that one of the signs that Caitlin is not feeling well or is becoming ill is that she has difficulty navigating familiar settings and bumps into things.

While she is comfortable at home, Caitlin’s limited vision and hearing becomes apparent when she changes schools or classrooms. A new classroom presents significant challenges. “It takes time for her to become familiar with the new surroundings, and until she has time to explore and get acclimated, it’s challenging to have her focus on anything else,” says Sara. “Before the beginning of each school year, we schedule multiple visits to her classroom so she can explore the new surroundings.”

To help with her hearing difficulties, Caitlin’s teacher uses an FM system, which enhances the teacher’s voice relative to background noise in the classroom. “In the past, Caitlin has not consistently tolerated her hearing aides, but we’ve noticed great improvement in her keeping them in since the introduction of the FM system,” Sara says.

When in group settings, Caitlin is usually seated closest to the teacher so she is able to see and hear what is happening. Her paraprofessional may also be supporting Caitlin one-on-one using materials related to what the teacher is presenting. All activities are presented to Caitlin within 18 to 24 inches, which seems to be the appropriate distance given her limited vision at 20/360. To accommodate Caitlin’s Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI), her teachers, aides and therapists use a “total communication” approach; this involves speaking, signing, use of pictures, buttons, switches, and tactile objects for communication.

Besides receiving support from the CdLS Foundation, Caitlin’s family is part of their state’s Deaf-Blind Project, which guided the family to available resources for deaf-blind individuals. The

Deaf-Blind Project also offers training classes and seminars, information on available assistive technology to support Caitlin, and above all, says Sara: “Support for us to become her best advocates.”

