

The Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing

Background

The Visiting Teacher Service for children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing is commonly known as the VTHI service. It consists of teachers who have specialist qualifications as teachers of deaf students, quality skills and knowledge in relation to the development and education of deaf children. Some visiting teachers have further qualifications and expertise in areas such as audiology and psychology. There are currently 32 VTHI working in 29 full-time posts allocated to the service. They support around 2,300 deaf and hard of hearing pupils throughout the Republic of Ireland.

Aims of the Service

The aim of the service is to support deaf children, their parents/guardians and teachers so that the deaf child can achieve his/her linguistic, educational, social and personal potential, and can become an independent learner and member of society. This broad aim translates into different types of support depending on the needs of the child, the family and later, the school and staff at college or in further education.

Like hearing children, deaf children are individuals and their needs vary, so the support offered by the visiting teacher will reflect this. It can vary from occasional information and guidance to parents, the child and school teacher to regular visits involving tuition, assessment and ongoing guidance. In addition the amount and type of support a deaf child needs varies at different stages of their development and education. The work of the visiting teacher involves liaising with other professionals and agencies such as audiological scientists, speech and language therapists, psychologists, early intervention teams and school staff. The VTHI works with babies as young as a few weeks or months old and in some instances, with children until third level education commences.

Pre-School

Visiting teachers work with deaf and hard of hearing children from the time they are diagnosed, and support parents at what is often a difficult time.

Typically, the visiting teacher will:

- Interact with the child directly and support parents to develop the child's communication, language and general progress
- Reinforce and model for parents good communication and language support for the child through everyday activities, interaction and play
- provide information and guidance to parents so that they can make informed choices regarding communication, language and education for their child
- support parents in the choices they have made
- make regular visits to the home to give ongoing information and guidance to parents on areas potentially affected by deafness: hearing and listening, use of hearing aids/cochlear implant, attention, the development of communication skills and language (spoken and/ or sign)

- help parents to monitor and celebrate the child's progress in these areas,
- inform them of resources and other agencies that can provide additional information and support for the deaf child and their family
- support deaf children in playschools and Montessori schools, and liaise with staff as necessary
- help to link parents with other parents of deaf children so that they can share experiences and information and can provide mutual support

Some deaf children may have an additional disability. If so, the Visiting Teacher works collaboratively with other professionals and service providers on the child's behalf. As the deaf/hard of hearing child approaches school age, the VTHI provides detailed information and guidance for parents so that they can make an informed decision regarding choice of school for their child.

Primary School

Starting school can be a stressful time for all parents and more so for the parents of a deaf or hard of hearing child. The Visiting Teacher provides information, guidance and support to parents during this transition. The VTHI closely monitors the child's access to the curriculum and engagement in the social life of the school community. The service of the visiting teacher to a child in primary school includes:

- direct teaching to the child, in the areas of language and communication
- modelling for teachers good communication and ways of teaching that support the child's language through the curriculum and everyday activities, interaction and play
- empowering mainstream staff to deliver the curriculum by advising of the potential educational and social impact of deafness on a child's development
- setting appropriate expectations for the child's progression
- advising on assistive technology and the acoustics of classrooms
- recommending helpful teaching strategies
- providing specific information and guidance about a deaf child/student
- liaising regularly with mainstream teachers
- contributing to the individual education plan or learning targets developed for the child and monitoring progress

For some children, the VT may provide extra teaching in addition to that given by the resource teacher. The VT advises on and provides a report to support an application to the special educational needs organiser for resource teaching, access to a special needs assistant and assistive technology, if appropriate.

While parents have a direct relationship with their child's school, the VT continues to provide a link between home and school, and continues to support parents. As the child completes primary education, the VTHI works with the child, parents and teachers to support the child's successful transition to post-primary school.

Post-primary School

Before a child enrolls in a post-primary school, the VTHI prepares a report or information about the student's development in language, literacy and learning to support the application for continued resource support and technology, as appropriate. The service of a VT to children in post-primary schools includes:

- supporting students, parents and teachers while the student makes the transition and continuing to support them as appropriate
- providing information and guidance to school staff to advise on the student's deafness and possible implications, strengths and difficulties, strategies to support access to the curriculum and training on use of assistive technology
- direct teaching to the child in the areas of language and communication
- modelling for teachers good communication and language teaching strategies such as pre-tutoring
- making recommendations on Reasonable Accommodations to the State Examinations Commission and supporting schools' application as appropriate

VTHI Caseload and Level of Service

The VTHI is part of a team that includes parents, teachers and other professionals who support the child's development and access to the curriculum. Given the number and spread of deaf and hard of hearing pupils, their needs and those of their families and teachers, the VTHI service prioritises the provision of services to deaf children according to their needs, within the resources available.

Factors in prioritisation are the child's degree of hearing loss, age of diagnosis, cognitive level, any additional disability, spoken language level, literacy level, resources within the home and school, ability to access the curriculum, personal and learner self-esteem, and overall functioning. The service seeks to respond to the specific needs of the child, and to provide a relevant level of support for his/her family and school on an ongoing basis. It is typical for the level and frequency of visits to reduce as the child's need for VTHI support diminishes, as he/she accesses the curriculum directly within his / her school, and gets on with learning and with life.

Contact Details

The Visiting Teacher Service can be contacted at the Department of Education and Skills, Special Education Section, Athlone, Co Westmeath. Tel: 090-64-74621.

<http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Visiting-Teacher-Service/Visiting-Teacher-Service.html>

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