Cochlear®
Hear now. And always

Small Talk

Package for families with a new deaf baby



Small Talk booklet

The Small Talk package has been designed for use with families of babies whose hearing loss is detected within the first few months of life, probably through newborn hearing screening.

The Small Talk package includes:

- Booklet
- Fridge-Notes
- Interaction Discussion Sheets

The overall purpose of this package is to inform and reassure families about communication at a time when they may be struggling to come to terms with the discovery that their baby is deaf whilst also having to adjust to the demands and rigours of parenthood.

Having a baby is supposed to be a joyful, exhilarating, exciting event in anyone's life.

At the best of times, it is also tiring and stressful. With the additional news that their baby may have a hearing loss and all of the subsequent professional contact and information, it is not surprising that parents could be left feeling that everyone else knows more about their baby and how to communicate with them than they do.

The process of finding out about a baby's hearing loss can seem to take a frustratingly long time.

Some parents may have many questions, for which there are no immediate answers and others may not even know what questions to ask. As well as the baby's hearing, parents may have other concerns about their baby's development particularly if they were born prematurely or have feeding issues. All of this focus on the baby's health could lead to uncertainty about what should be a really enjoyable part of parenthood; getting to know their baby through communication.

Parents will be experiencing many emotions caused by the diagnosis of deafness.

There will be questions still to be answered and parents will have choices to make about the baby's hearing and communication in the future. Despite this, parents need to know that communicating with their baby in a fun-filled way, today, will undoubtedly give him or her the best possible start.

The Small Talk package imparts key messages about how adults talk to small babies and illustrates the benefits of early playful talk. Small Talk demonstrates some of the steps that can be taken to ensure that talking and playing with their baby is a meaningful and fun part of their daily routine.

Small Talk highlights the fact that babies learn the foundations of communication from their parents.

It also encourages the wider family e.g. brothers and sisters, grandparents, friends and day care staff, to talk and have fun with the baby as this adds valuable and diverse spoken language interactions to the baby's day.



Everyday parent
Baby communication

Parents communicate with their baby from the minute they are born and babies are quite clever in the way they encourage people to talk to them.

Parents do not talk to babies in the same way as they would talk to an older child or adult. They change both the way they talk and what they talk about. These changes are carefully tuned to the baby's developing abilities and are important in helping babies learn about language and spoken communication.

Looking at faces

Parents and babies spend lots of time looking at each other's faces, which is good for eye contact and establishing a close bond between parent and baby. This happens naturally because parents hold their babies in their arms and look at them. Babies are particularly interested in looking at faces and expressions. Parents naturally vary their facial expressions frequently so that babies stay interested in their faces for longer. This provides an early lesson about communication, which is that talking and understanding involves looking at another person and getting information from them by reading their facial expressions.

Copying

Babies are able to copy facial expressions very soon after birth. Parents also copy babies' expressions and babies seem to recognise when this happens. However, it is not just expressions that parents copy.

As babies begin to make noises, parents copy their cooing and gurgling sounds and this encourages babies to use their voices even more.

Following baby's lead

Getting to know a new baby involves parents noticing what interests them and how they react. Parents watch to see what their baby looks at.

As soon as the parent has worked out what their baby is interested in, he or she generally comments on it. As these comments are linked to what the baby is looking at, this gradually helps the baby to make sense of the stream of words, and eventually, to understand how this language relates to the world around them.



Taking turns

A feature of early communication between parents and babies is that they take turns, as if they are having a conversation. Even though babies cannot speak, parents respond to their actions or expressions as if they were speaking. A parent will wait for their baby to do something and then interpret it as a contribution to a conversation to which they can respond. Taking turns in this way helps the baby to understand the way conversation works. One person communicates while the other waits and then the roles are reversed.

Using Baby Talk

Adults make changes to their speech when talking to babies. These include using a higher pitch, more varied intonation, a slower tempo and a singsong rhythm. These changes are referred to as baby talk or you may hear some people call them motherese or child directed speech. They make speech sound more interesting to the baby. Another feature of early conversations is their highly repetitive nature.

Parents talk about the same topics, all closely related to the baby's everyday needs and the routines of daily life, such as feeding or nappy changing, which dominate the baby's early months.

This repetition is extremely helpful to the baby who will soon be trying to make sense of spoken language.

Adapting communication with a baby who is deaf

Communicating with a baby who is deaf or hearing follows the same principles and uses the skills and styles that come naturally to parents as they get to know their new baby.

These principles are:

- Looking at faces
- Copying
- Following baby's lead
- Taking turns
- Using baby talk

Helping a baby who is deaf to develop language does require parents to make some adaptations.

Hearing aids and cochlear implants

With appropriate technology a baby should be able to hear all of the sounds of speech. It should be explained to parents that all babies are fitted with hearing aids and that the supporting professionals will closely monitor the usefulness of these devices.

If hearing aids prove to be of limited benefit then families should be given the opportunity to explore the option of a cochlear implant for their baby.

Parents should be encouraged to talk to the professionals who are involved with their baby so that they can build up a picture of what sounds their baby can and cannot hear.

It should be explained to parents that when a baby is fitted with hearing aids or receives a cochlear implant the aim is for these are be worn all the time their baby is awake.

Parents may initially feel swamped by the amount of information there is on using hearing aids or a cochlear implant. They should not hesitate to ask for information to be repeated or explained again as many times as they need it.

The most important thing is that families know how to help their baby use their hearing aids or cochlear implant and that they develop confidence in checking the equipment so that it is always in excellent working order.

Background noise

There is a lot of sound in this noisy busy world we live in. Some of these sounds are useful, such as the sounds of spoken language and certain sounds in and around the home.

It needs to be explained to parents that hearing aids and cochlear Implants both take in sound through a microphone and microphones work best at a short distance.

It is worth highlighting to parents that when they are playing close to their baby or holding their baby in their arms they are at the best distance for the baby to hear them.



Some of the sounds in a baby's world are not so useful. Constant back-ground noises can be a distraction and interfere with listening to speech.

When playing and talking with their baby, families should try to keep the level of back-ground noise is as low as possible. Most families enjoy watching TV or listening to the radio but they should avoid having these on constantly in the background.

When playing with their baby or communicating in everyday situations, turn off the TV and radio and avoid other loud sounds e.g. the washing machine that will make listening difficult. Carpets and curtains help because they absorb some background noise and echo.

Directing attention to sounds

Families can also help their baby by drawing their attention to sound and voices through play and everyday activities.

As babies grow older

As babies grow and start to explore the world more actively, parents' communication styles change to adapt to their babies' interests and communication needs.

While babies are small and helpless parents' language consists of relatively long sentences. As babies grow older they begin to take a more active interest in their surroundings.

This is a signal to parents that they are now ready to learn what words mean. Parents now make changes to their style of speaking to make speech easier to understand.

Copying babble and shaping babble into words

Older babies begin to produce sequences of speech like sounds. Sounds like "dada", "mama", "gaga" will eventually form the basis of first words. Parents copy their babies by babbling back to them or reshaping babble sequences into words. This copying lets the baby know that the parents are interested in what he or she has to say and gives him or her the opportunity to practice new sounds and to match these new sounds with those produced by the adult.

Sharing attention

An important behaviour to emerge at this time is joint attention. This is a natural development from the parent following the baby's lead and talking about the baby's focus of attention.

As babies grow older they begin to be more aware of when they and their parents are focusing on the same object or activity. They are able to follow their parent's line of vision and make use of pointing gestures. This helps them to begin to match the language they hear with the shared focus of attention, which in turn helps them to attach meaning to sounds.

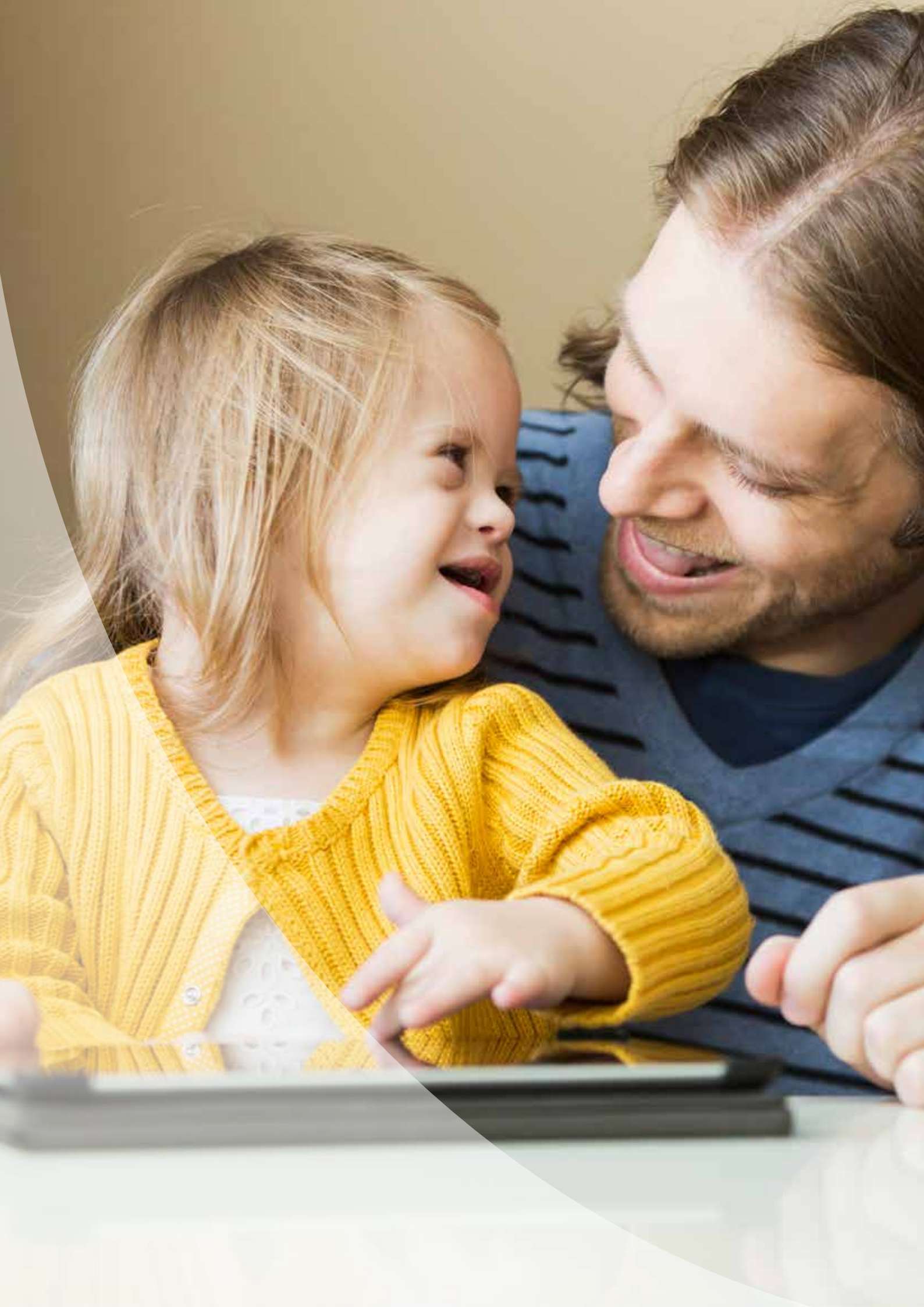
Keeping language simple

When talking to older babies parents now begin to use shorter sentences as if to simplify the task of learning words and language. The short sentence length is more manageable for the child's limited attention span. At this stage, nursery rhymes and action songs begin to be very popular.

The rhythm, tune, repetition and baby talk style become part of a familiar routine, which babies love, and soon begin to request by using their voices or trying to do some of the actions.

Games that are associated with particular phrases, actions or tickling are also highly enjoyable ways of communicating with babies in the early stages of learning spoken language.





Adapting for communication with an older baby who is deaf

Communicating with an older baby who is deaf or hearing follows the same principles and uses the skills and styles that come naturally to parents as they get to know their increasingly active and sociable baby.

These principles are:

- Copying babble
- Shaping babble into words
- Sharing attention
- Keeping language simple

Families of a baby who is deaf need to make a conscious effort to include these strategies in their everyday activities and games with their baby.

As the parent of a baby who is deaf there are many useful things that they can do to help communication with their baby.

Hearing aids and cochlear implants

Families need to try to ensure that their baby continues to wear his or her hearing aids or cochlear implant all day long – this can be a challenge with an inquisitive baby who is eager to explore every object they can get their hands on. The art of distraction is certainly a skill that parents will need to learn - persistence and a sense of humour are vital!

Encouraging attention and eye contact

Families can help to encourage their baby's attention and eye contact by using natural gesture to support their spoken language and by playing baby games and rhymes every day. Familiar and well-loved baby games are powerful tools that can help a baby to develop language.

Games can be those that everyone is familiar with, such as peek-a-boo or round and round the garden, or ones that families have made up themselves – every family seems to have their own particular favourites. Any game that includes an element of surprise or fun also works well.

With consistent use of hearing aids or a cochlear implant and by doing what parents do best - that is communicating in a fun way with their baby, they can ensure that their baby has the best possible start in life. Helping their baby to enjoy the pleasure of sounds through playing, talking, singing and laughing will reap the rewards of enjoyable communication for everyone.

Hear now. And always

Cochlear is dedicated to helping people with moderate to profound hearing loss experience a world full of hearing. As the global leader in implantable hearing solutions, we have provided more than 750,000 devices and helped people of all ages to hear and connect with life's opportunities.

We aim to give people the best lifelong hearing experience and access to next generation technologies. We collaborate with leading clinical, research and support networks to advance hearing science and improve care.

That’s why more people choose Cochlear than any other hearing implant company.

Cochlear Ltd (ABN 96 002 618 073) 1 University Avenue, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia T: +61 2 9428 6555 F: +61 2 9428 6352
CH REP Cochlear AG EMEA Headquarters, Peter Merian-Weg 4, 4052 Basel, Switzerland T: +41 61 205 8204 F: +41 61 205 8205
EC REP Cochlear Deutschland GmbH & Co. KG Mailänder Straße 4 a, 30539 Hannover, Germany T: +49 511 542 7750 F: +49 511 542 7770
Cochlear Europe Ltd 6 Dashwood Lang Road, Bourne Business Park, Addlestone, Surrey KT15 2HJ, United Kingdom T: +44 1932 26 3400 F: +44 1932 26 3426

www.cochlear.com

Please seek advice from your health professional about treatments for hearing loss. Outcomes may vary, and your health professional will advise you about the factors which could affect your outcome. Always follow the directions for use.
Not all products are available in all countries. Please contact your local Cochlear representative for product information.

© Cochlear Limited 2025. Cochlear, Hear now. And always, Nucleus, and the elliptical logo are either trademarks or registered trademarks of the Cochlear group of companies.

D2083721 V2 2025-02