Deafness, hearing loss and mental health

Demographics

Hearing loss occurs in 1.1 per 1000 infants at birth and up to 5 in 1000 school age children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the highest rates of middle ear disease in the world.

Middle ear disease is often accompanied by hearing loss which can last weeks or months. Severe untreated middle ear disease may result in permanent hearing loss.

Mental health

Anyone can experience a mental health problem regardless of the level of their hearing loss. Children who use Auslan, wear hearing aids or have cochlear implants can also develop mental health problems.

Hearing loss or deafness may put a child more at risk of developing mental health problems. This can be because of:

- Attachment difficulties
- Lack of shared language within the family
- Delayed communication (Auslan or oral)
- Difficulty with incidental learning
- Isolation
- Delayed theory of mind
- Psychosocial problems

It is normal for a child or young person to experience feeling down, tense, angry or anxious but if these feelings persist for a long time they may be part of a mental health problem. Mental health problems affect how someone thinks and the way they function.

It’s important to get help for these problems as early as possible. If a child or young person needs support for their mental health, a General Practitioner (GP) can help.

Warning signs of a mental health problem

- Loss of interest
- Extreme changes to feelings
- Withdrawal or feeling overwhelmed
- Outbursts of behaviour
- Day to day tasks get harder
- Changes in sleeping, eating, use of hearing device
- Using drugs/alcohol to escape
- Taking more dangerous risks
- Decline in grades at school
Tips for working with Deaf or hard of hearing children and young people:

Consider the communication needs of the child and family

Consider the acoustic environment (Is it too noisy? Should you move closer?)

Consider the social and emotional wellbeing of the child and family unit

When planning for NDIS consider psychosocial domains for children who are deaf or hard of hearing

Always request a professional level Auslan interpreter (if the child or family uses Auslan)

Integrate mental health and wellbeing into service planning and delivery (e.g. modification to policy, procedure, training)

A child is much more than their Deafness. Consider the child's wellbeing, identity, strengths and goals.