



Can your baby hear the birds?

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Does your baby hear the same sounds you do? Does she hear the birds chirping and the breeze rustling the leaves in the trees? How do you know? Knowing that your baby has good hearing is important; knowing that he doesn't is even more important.

Babies start to learn speech and language from the time they are born, and hearing plays a crucial role in that development. A baby that does not hear well may have problems learning to talk and developing language skills. And like most other health issues, early detection means early intervention, and increased likelihood of success. That means it is never too soon to check a baby's hearing — and that is where the BC Early Hearing Program (BCEHP) comes in.

The BCEHP is a province-wide program for early hearing screening and intervention. Shortly after birth, every baby will have their hearing tested either at the hospital before they leave, or in the community by public health hearing specialists.

We have all had hearing tests: raise a finger or push a button if you hear a sound... but how can we test the hearing of a days-old infant? Actually, it is even simpler. The testing is safe, simple and will absolutely not hurt your baby. Indeed, screening works best with a resting or sleeping baby. All that is involved is playing soft sounds in the baby's ears while a computer measures the responses from the baby.

Identifying hearing loss or problems without screening is not easy as only about half of those with hearing problems have an identified risk factor. Approximately

one in 300 babies will have some hearing difficulties; more for babies needing special care at birth. Intervention before age of six months is critical for improved communication outcomes.

So your baby has had her test but there was not a clear "pass" result. Does that mean she has hearing problems? No, as not all babies pass the first screening. About a quarter of all babies need to have a second screening test. The reasons for this vary, but sometimes it is difficult to get clear readings on young babies. There may be temporary fluid in the baby's ear that can make it difficult to get an accurate result. Most babies will pass the second hearing screening.

The BCEHP rolled out across British Columbia over an 18 months period. At first, it was targeted at babies with high risk factors in 13 Neonatal Intensive Care Units in the province. By the end of 2008, the program was in place for all babies to age five — but prior to six months is always the preferred time to screen.

Without early screening, a hearing problem can go undetected until they are young children of school age, at which time "early" intervention is not an option. But

if caught early on, and barring other complications, early intervention and support can help a child with hearing loss to have skills similar to their peers by the time they start kindergarten. Have your child screened, for their sake.

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