The Ling Six-Sound Test

The Ling Six-Sound Test is a valuable at-home test which can be used to determine that your child is responding to sound consistently every day. This test is also useful when aided audiologic evaluations are not available for your child. It is designed to provide information about your child's ability to detect speech sounds in low, mid and high frequencies (pitch). If your child can detect (hear) these sounds, he should be able to discriminate (understand) the sounds in spoken language.

It is important that you use the Ling Six-Sound Test every time your child puts on hearing aids. If you do it each day, you will immediately be aware of any change in hearing levels due to distortion within the hearing aid or possible middle ear fluid or infection.

How to do this test: Sit down so that you are on the same level as your child. Put your hand in front of your mouth so that he cannot lip-read, and say the following sounds in a normal tone of voice.

In parentheses are sample words containing the sounds you will be using.

ah (as in father)
oo (as in moon)
ee (as in key)
sh (as in shoe)
s (as in sock)
m (as in mommy)

If your child is two and a half years or older, you can teach him to respond each time he hears the sound by dropping a block (or other object) into a bucket or by raising his hand. As you teach him this response, he might need to see you make the sounds the first few times, and also watch you demonstrate how to drop the block into the bucket. Remember to give him a hug or pat of encouragement, whether he hears the sound or not. All children need to know that they are doing a good job listening.

If your little one is between twelve months and two and a half years old, he can respond to the sounds by turning to you or (when a little older) by pointing to his ear. Again, you will need to teach him how to respond by demonstrating. At this age, your child will become disinterested quickly, so your speed is important. A hug will help your child know that he is doing a great job, no matter what he hears.

Even if your baby is under twelve months of age, you can do this test and see responses. A baby might widen his eyes, scrunch his eyebrows, suck faster or stop sucking on a pacifier or bottle. Once you know how your baby will respond, you will see these same reactions each time you say these sounds. However, very small babies will tire of responding very, very quickly and you might not be able to do all the Ling Sounds at one time.

It is important to note that your child may not make responses based on these age ranges: all children develop response skills at different ages. What is most important is that he does respond to the sounds, not necessarily how those responses are made. In other words, he does not have to imitate the sounds. He just needs to let you know that he heard them.

As your child develops his ability to respond to these sounds, increase your distance by moving three feet behind him. Be sure not to get into a rhythm as you say these sounds. Instead say one and wait one or
two seconds, Then say another and wait a different (but very short) amount of time. It is very easy for a child to pick up a pattern or rhythm and just automatically respond even if he does not hear you. After your child has become comfortable letting you know that he hears the sounds, he can be taught to imitate them. Then you know that not only is he aware of the sounds, but that he can also discriminate between them.

It is important to know that many children will not be able to hear all of these sounds. The “s” and “sh” sounds can be especially difficult for a child to hear if he has a severe or profound hearing loss. And, some children who have a very profound loss might not hear any of the sounds at all. As soon as it is possible to have an aided audiologic evaluation (a hearing test done while your child is wearing his hearing aids), you and your audiologist can plot those test results on the following chart. Ask your audiologist exactly which of these speech sounds your child should detect. If his aided hearing levels fall above the speech sound, he will be able to hear it. You will probably find that he is able to hear the sounds in the low frequencies (“m” “ee” “o” and “a”) more easily that he can hear the high frequency sounds (“sh” and “s”).

No matter what sounds your child hears, you will want to keep a list of each sound to which he responds each day so that you are aware if there is any change in response. Having this information will guide you in maintaining your child’s hearing aids and assist you in observing his listening ability.