South African Association of Audiologists

Guidelines for the provision of Hearing Screening Services in Schools

This document serves to function as a guideline for Audiologists who provide hearing screening services at schools. Its purpose is to attempt to regulate professional behaviour, and govern the way in which audiologists practice. These standards ensure that all clients’ rights are protected and that a high standard of practice is maintained.

Audiologists may not indicate to teachers or parents, either in writing or verbally, that they are “more experienced”, “better than”, “more professional”, “better trained” or “cheaper than” other audiologists. To do so constitutes touting, a behaviour which is unethical and subject to disciplinary measures.

Service delivery by Audiologists in schools
An Audiologist may provide a service to schools in their private capacity in the following ways:

- Heads of schools may approach the Audiologist to provide a hearing screening service to the school
- An Audiologist may approach a school directly to offer hearing screening as a private service.
- A school may choose to do the screening once off or on a regular, agreed upon basis, given that the regularity of the screening is reasonable and ethical.
- Screening is not effective if it is done more than twice a year on the same learner and constitutes unethical behaviour.
- The school may choose to change Audiologists at any time at their own discretion unless they have entered into a contract with the Audiologist. Such contract has to be reasonable and ethical in nature.
- The school may have a number of Audiologists offering the same service to the learners of the school. Thus Audiologists may not “monopolize” a particular school or area or prevent another therapist from practicing at the school.

Contract

- It is recommended that a contract be drawn up between the Audiologist and the school detailing the conditions of service, especially when an ongoing relationship is likely. All fees that are charged should be agreed upon before commencement of such services and detailed in the contract.
- All screening tests has to bear the consent of the learners’ parents and should be obtained prior to the commencement of the services by the school.
- The school may choose not to enter into a contract with the Audiologist, under which circumstances all services and costs must be agreed upon with the parents of the learner prior to commencement of the screening services.
- A contact may not include a clause stating that all children will be screened, with or without the consent of their parents and that the school will be held responsible for particular parent’s failure to pay for services rendered.
Use of premises

- It is strongly recommended for fair professional practice that an Audiologist pay a market-related rental to the school for the space utilized for screening purposes, especially where there is an agreement in place with the school for regular screenings.
- This space should be a suitable room for hearing screening purposes in order for the Audiologist to render a service of the highest professional standard.
- “A Suitable Room” is described as an office or classroom removed from all or most background noise such as playgrounds, lunch halls or regularly used corridors.

The referral process

- If a parent or teacher of a learner in a school requests a hearing test, the parents must be provided with the names of at least three Audiologists or institutions that could provide this service.
- This list may include the referring Audiologist’s name should that Audiologist have the facilities to supply Diagnostic Audiological Testing. Such facilities need to comply with the guidelines for Diagnostic Audiological Testing.
- A screening test does not serve as a substitution for a diagnostic test and the Audiologist is obliged to refer all learners who do not pass the screening protocols and norms.
- If a choice of Audiologist or place of service is not provided, this constitutes a violation of the right of choice and thus compromises the client’s autonomy. It also constitutes as touting which is considered unethical practice.
- A list of practicing Audiologists is available from the South African Association of Audiologists (SAAA).

Screening

- Screening for case finding purposes as to benefit or build up a particular practice lends itself to unprofessional and unethical behaviour.
- Screening as a secondary prevention/early identification activity is acceptable and considered as the main purpose for hearing screening services. A notice to the effect that an Audiologist will be providing a screening service must be sent from the school to all parents and should include a clarification of the purpose of hearing screening tests.
- The notice must include the information that the cost of a screening service is not covered by medical schemes, or as agreed upon, by the school.
- Only learners whose parents respond to such a letter may be screened.
- Payment may not be made in advance of the screening and should be paid by the school to the Audiologist on completion of the screening service.
- Any learners identified as having communication difficulties should be referred for diagnostic testing in accordance with the referral procedures as detailed above. What protocol would be used if medical problems are identified such as wax, OME, etc.

Procedures
• The Audiologist must obtain written permission from the learner’s parents prior to the commencement of the hearing screening. It is also recommended that parental consent be obtained for teacher-therapist consultations.

• Any screening services that may be conducted should be clearly stated, described and explained in correspondence with the school and the parents.

• Once consent for has been obtained, and the parent has been informed as to the costs involved, the screening may be conducted.

• Screening procedures may involve one or more of the following:
  ▪ OAE Screening
  ▪ Tympanometry Screening
  ▪ Pure Tone Threshold Screening
  ▪ Speech Reception Screening
  ▪ Otoscopy

• Equipment used for screening tests must comply with all guidelines for testing equipment and must be calibrated 6 monthly if the equipment is being transported regularly.

• Screening procedures stipulate that each learner should be tested individually and conditioned appropriately.

• In order to set realistic norms for the setting in which the testing would be conducted, the Audiologist should perform an individual screening test on themselves prior to commencing the screening and set norms based on their own, normal, hearing. They should ideally then test these norms against a second adult party with normal hearing.

**Record keeping**

• Records of screening results stating whether a particular learner might have passed or failed a test should be kept for the duration of one year by the attending audiologist. Are copies of results made available to schools/parents??

**Supersession**

• It is the parents’ choice to determine where and from whom services for their child is received.

• It is not ethical for an Audiologist to supersede another Audiologist who is currently providing screening services to the school without prior consent from the parents.

**Fees**

• Therapists have the right to determine their own fee structure. These should however be guided by the National Reference Price List (NRPL) guidelines and should be considered reasonable, acceptable and market related.

• Screening services may not be provided free of charge as it will constitute touting and unethical behaviour.

• Accounts are the responsibility of the therapist and not the school.

• Payment in full or part may not be accepted in advance.

Further information and assistance may be obtained from:
The South African Association of Audiologists
Tracey Cupido’s comments

Read through the document as requested and it seems quite comprehensive. Most relevant issues are considered so just raised two small queries in the document (please see attached).

My only real concern is that the document does not consider local school health services at the schools. Some of the schools may have school nurses visiting the schools regularly for basic assessments & health services. Hearing screening is also their responsibility but due to various constraints most school nurses in the metro do not conduct the hearing screening routine— they do however do regular ear exams; provide basic services e.g. wax removal; treatment of ear infections etc.

So if the Audiologist is hired for screening purposes, what degree of collaboration should exist between the 2 professionals. In my experience, service provision at schools is most effective when collaborating with school nurses— referral pathway could then also be established i.e. if basic medical conditions such as ear infections are identified whilst Audiologist is screening child, this child can be referred to school nurses for management. Parent will still be notified of it but management is taken care of at school; if condition is more complicated or parents prefer management at private professional, this referral can then be arranged by Audiologist.

As you know, my experience mostly relates to public health sector/district health services, etc; so not sure if the issues raised are applicable in this “more private” context but thought it may be useful to mention it regardless.