

Working with Deaf Children

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When I was eight years old, my brother was born and a year later diagnosed as deaf. This continues to be an enlightening experience for me. I remember my brother at an early age telling us he was glad he was Deaf and if he had the choice to hear, he wouldn't. Gradually it has occurred to me that being Deaf is not a "hearing impairment" but a variation of being human.

A culture exists whose main identity is being Deaf. Because the word "Deaf" here represents a cultural identity, it is capitalized. It is not capitalized when it refers to a physical condition alone. American Sign Language (ASL) is the first language for Deaf people, and it differs from Signing Exact English (SEE). SEE is not a natural language; it is manually coded English, one sign for each English word. SEE and other manually coded language systems are not true languages because they attempt to represent a spoken language which is sound based and full of subtle meanings which are lost when signed as an exact translation of English. ASL has its own grammar and sentence structure which is different from English. It is a visual-spatial language. ASL is American.

There is not an international sign language because much like spoken languages, signed languages reflect the culture and the region where they evolve. A natural language is a language with native users, who learn it from birth and for whom it fulfills the diverse communicative needs of daily life. Infants exposed to ASL from birth go through all the sequential language learning phases experienced by any group of babies learning their first language, including hand movements equivalent to the babbling done by hearing babies before they speak their first words.

My own interest in ASL led me to bring aspects of it into my kindergarten and pre-school classes. I have incorporated gestures into circles, blessings, table conversations, etc. I have been amazed that children respond to ASL so quickly. Babies are always wide eyed and intent on watching signing around them. The truth of the language keeps revealing itself to me.

About three years ago an active Waldorf family in our community with a Deaf daughter approached me about having a Deaf pre-school. I was immediately interested. These two paths in my life (ASL and Waldorf) now had an opportunity to unite and integrate. The Deaf girl, Haley, entered my class as the only non-hearing child in the spring of 1998 (she was about to turn three) with an interpreter that accompanied her because my ASL skill level was not yet conversational. An interpreter's role is to sign exactly what she hears with no judgment or opinion, but we soon realized that in this case an interpreter was unnecessary, even inappropriate. The interpreter was a barrier to Haley's social interactions with me and her peers. Haley was coming into ASL as her language at that time. She was already playing imaginatively and was extremely social. Although it didn't occur to us initially, it should have been no surprise that Haley and her peers could play together just fine without an interpreter. Young children have that ability.

The next fall there were three Deaf children in my class, and I had a Deaf assistant, for I had learned the previous spring that hearing people cannot provide the language model Deaf children need. I did all my stories, circles, and everything I sang and said in ASL. We were a bi-lingual class. This was amazing! Initial bridging of the communication barrier came through physical contact — touching each other. The Deaf and hearing children started their relationship with tumbling, and it gradually evolved to one being an "owner" and the other a "pet" on a leash. This changed after many months to farmyard play, making trains and buses, and enacting fairs — the same imaginative play hearing children do together.

We started the playtime process last year with me interpreting the gist of what was going on, for example “She is a baby snake,” or “He is a cook in a restaurant.” The children would take it from there. The sign language was used around the table during meal times, and children soon imitated signs for the blessing just as they would other gestures and table talk: “more please” and “thank you” “rice” and “apple” They started asking for signs of other foods. The free play time has evolved such that now the Deaf children sign to the hearing children and I voice it for them. The hearing children are starting to understand more on their own as well. The hearing children who have been here since this started ask me many times each day how to say “Can I be your baby?” or “Make the fence bigger,” or “I want you to move this for me.” They watch me carefully, then imitate and sign directly with each other. Some of the children are now doing this on their own without asking me for help. The younger children who joined the class this year approach the Deaf children with sign babble as an attempt to say something. The Deaf children respond with signing and this goes on as an imaginative conversation. I’m sure these gestures are a part of the progression to more formed communication.

Circle time is the most fun! ASL has a natural movement to it. The Deaf and hearing children alike wholly participate in circle, whether we are horses galloping, trotting or sleeping, or bulbs growing from the earth to bloom in the sun. Holding hands in a circle is no longer appropriate, especially with singing or speaking. We need our hands for talking and expressing. For meal blessings the signing holds the group together. Early on, the Deaf children were reluctant to cover their eyes in the circle. But once they learned the routine and could trust that someone would nudge them “awake” at the appropriate time, they became content to hide their heads.

Social interactions are becoming natural in that the children treat each other the same whether Deaf or hearing. It is fun to have them ask me for a sign phrase and to watch their hands and body and facial expressions imitate the sign and use it. Using the communication the next day on their own has a powerful effect on the children’s self-esteem. They seem to glow with an inner strength of satisfaction. One mom told me when she went into her hearing son’s bedroom to check on him before she went to sleep, his hands were signing in his sleep. Most children have taught their families the meal blessing in ASL.

Eurythmy was a challenge at first because there were two teachers to watch, one leading the eurythmy gestures and the other interpreting the stories. This created a confusing visual overload. The Deaf children then started private sessions with a therapeutic eurythmist on a regular basis. The second year of eurythmy is now successful. The Deaf children follow and move fluidly. They vocalize the sounds as they are moved and I give them brief pictures of the story through sign as we go along. Because of their connection to the visual, the Deaf children seem to understand much of the eurythmy without needing interpretation. It is clear that eurythmy allows Deaf children to experience sound visually.

Transitions were initially very challenging. The Deaf children lagged behind and were very slow to make transitions. A meeting with the parents and a Deaf education consultant showed us that the hearing children were getting many early, subtle cues about upcoming transitions that were not accessible to the Deaf children. Understanding this allowed us to add visual cues and signed information early enough to allow the Deaf children to transition easily and this is no longer a problem.

The benefits of having a bi-lingual class are manifold. After years of teaching, learning new stories was still a struggle for me, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that learning the fairy tales in ASL along with the English made the memorizing come more fluidly. The pictures went deeper and this made learning stories easier. My Deaf assistant teacher sits by my side and we

both sign the story as I tell it. I notice the children memorizing the signs along with the words and then bringing it into their play. Watching the stories in ASL is somewhat like watching the story being painted into a picture, each sign adding a new stroke of color or form.

The spatial orientation of ASL is body geography, and this helps children overcome primal reflexes or early movement patterns, breaks down midline barriers, and brings a general sense of well-being. The extra movement the hands and body are doing has been shown by mainstream research to have a positive effect on brain development. A recent study shows how hearing children exposed to sign at a young age will later on in life have a larger vocabulary and be better learners. It also helpful in working with children with difficulties in reading and spelling. I hope having Deaf and hearing children in class together will lead to respect and curiosity for all the world, that awareness will grow that it is not only how I am that is normal. Normal comes in many forms. I look forward to seeing in the future how this experience will live into all of the children and their families.