

## **How to Choose a Quality Preschool for your Deaf Child?**

As many of you know, preschool is a critical time for children to be developing language and literacy skills. As a parent of a young deaf child, you might start asking yourself: How do I find a good preschool? There are many factors to consider when choosing a quality preschool for deaf children, including the philosophy of the school, classroom environment, and qualifications of the teacher. The purpose of this article is to provide guidelines on how to choose a quality preschool.

### *The Philosophy*

Research indicates that the best option for your visual learner is to find a preschool that subscribes to not only an ASL-printed English Bilingual-Bicultural philosophy but also one that subscribes to an emergent literacy philosophy. As many of you know a Bilingual-Bicultural philosophy recognizes that ASL is the primary language of the classroom but places equal emphasis on deaf children learning printed English. It also considers Deaf culture as a critical part of education.

But what is emergent literacy? Emergent literacy theorists believe that children start learning about literacy (reading and writing) from birth. Children can be learning about letters of the alphabet and concepts of print long before they are able to read. Think about your child for a moment. If you hand them a book do they know how to hold it right side up? Can they point to the title? Turn the page in the correct order? Even though they can't read, they learn that print on the pages has meaning.

### *The Classroom Environment*

When looking at a preschool you want to make sure that the classroom environment is appropriate for your visual deaf preschool child. Make sure that the classroom centers are open, and that children are able to see the teacher and other students during all communication activities. This is usually done best with the teacher communicating with the children at eye-level, maintaining their eye gaze and sitting in a semi-circle when in groups to ensure visual access (Morgan, 2004).

Another important part of the classroom environment is print around the room. There should be plenty of print on the walls without it being too overwhelming. Printed materials should be posted at the eye level of the children. There is no point on having print on the walls if it is too high for the children to read it. In addition, print should be changed frequently and referred to often. Print on the walls is meaningless if the teacher doesn't call attention to (e.g. Bennett-Armistead, Duke & Moses, 2008). Some suggestions for print on the walls include having an alphabet chart (in English as well as ASL fingerspelling), directions for activities, calendars, and print on bulletin boards.

In addition to print on the walls, centers should be labeled (reading center, art center, etc.) as well as cubbies and other objects. There should also be reading and writing materials in every area of the room. Many preschools have a wonderful reading center with comfy pillows, soft chairs and rugs for children to sit on, along with lots of books. While this is great and necessary, children need to have access to reading and writing materials in *all* areas of the room. For example, teachers should have pencils and paper in the drama area so children can make

shopping lists in the kitchen, have prescription pads in the “doctors offices”, and paper, crayons and books in the block area so children can read and write about what they are building.

### *Toys*

Toys are a great way to encourage children’s interaction with language and literacy. Some recommendations for classroom toys are alphabet blocks, puzzles with word labels, dry erase boards, bulletin boards with felt words and letters, and ABC magnets.

### *Books*

What type of books should I look for and how many? The classroom should have a wide variety of books. Preschools should have 5-8 books per child which can be changed frequently according to theme (Bennett Armistead, Duke & Moses). Books should be a combination of: stories, ABC books, repeatable books, picture books, board books, information books, books about people and animals, books about shapes, feelings, or colors. You also want to make sure that your preschool has books with deaf characters.

### *Facilitating ASL Development*

One way to facilitate ASL development is for deaf children to have an ASL video library. This is where children can view videos of other deaf children and adults signing stories or videotape themselves signing stories. There should also be a video camera available for the teacher to document children's ASL skills. In addition teachers should incorporate time during the day to play with ASL including ASL handshape stories, number stories and other ASL poetry. Games may also be utilized such as cards with ASL handshapes or letters.

### *Teacher Qualifications*

Preschool teachers of deaf children should be fluent both in ASL and written English. They should also have an early childhood education teaching certification.

Teachers should be familiar with strategies for making connections between ASL and printed English. Some of the strategies include sandwiching or chaining (the teacher will sign a word, point to the English print, fingerspell the word and sign it again). During shared readings teachers need to know strategies for reading aloud. For example, they should make sure that children can always see the teacher signing and the printed English at the same time, incorporate fingerspelling into read alouds, ask open ended questions, connect the story to the children's lives, and read the same books again and again so that children begin to interact more with the story and the English print (Erting, 2001; Bennett-Armistead, Duke & Moses).

### *Classroom Schedule*

When looking at the classroom schedule, it should be balanced between teacher directed activities and choice activities for the children. For example, instead of giving children free play time, have structured centers where the children can choose from one of three centers to play: an Art Center, Science Center, Drama Center. Teacher directed activities might include calendar time or read alouds.

A quality preschool also incorporates language and literacy activities throughout the day. These are not drilled activities or necessarily explicit instruction. Teachers can include these activities in simple ways. For example, during snack time, teachers can have index cards with food labeled with pictures and students can choose what they want (i.e. chocolate milk or white milk). Most importantly they should also have at least one read aloud every day (preferably more) and should have time for ASL story time as well. (This can include signing ABC stories, ASL poetry, number stories, etc.)

*What if I can't find one?*

It may be difficult in your area to find a quality preschool which meets all of the criteria described. If moving to a different location is not an option, you might consider choosing a preschool that has as many of these qualities as possible and volunteering in the preschool to help make necessary changes. For example, you can help organize a book drive to get more quality books in the classroom or suggest staff development training for teachers. You can also supplement your child's education with doing some of these suggested activities in your home.

Debbie Golos PhD is an assistant professor in the department of Communication Disorders and Deaf Education at Utah State University. Her research interests in Deaf Education include emergent literacy, educational television, and bilingual education.