

A Quality Language Arts Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children: Parents in the Driver's Seat

Often parents of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) children ask their child's language arts teacher "how is my child doing"? While it may seem like a positive answer, the reply "good" is insufficient. Further, without follow up questioning it can mask potential problems that will be revealed in later years, often with devastating results. It is absolutely essential that the parent – appropriately supported and educated – be the director of their child's academic journey. This can only be done with solid information that helps you make qualitative decisions that result in your child's improving abilities.

What constitutes a quality language program for DHH children is a broad topic and for the sake of brevity we will limit the discussion here to 4 key components: Assessment, Qualified Instructors, Language Planning, and Parental Involvement. As parents you have undoubtedly heard that your child is unique. This distinction means that your child's language needs cannot be easily compared to another child's needs. Thus, it is critical that you as the parent learn what is best for your child. Your most important concern will be language access. Does the language you have chosen best suit your child? Can you communicate effectively with him and he with you? Additionally you will need to be aware of developmental benchmarks that show improvement in literacy and language learning. It is a tremendous amount to ask of the parent. However your child is worth it. Being an expert on your child will help you ensure that he stays on track.

Why does the parent need to know the developmental milestones of language and literacy development? Doesn't the school take care of that? The process your child will go through in learning to become literate in a majority language (English) for which he does not have full biological access means that many issues will surface and created challenges in the process. Various approaches, differing advice, and conflicting information can often make the process more difficult for the parent. The field of deaf education is constantly changing and erroneous decisions made by well-meaning professionals can have potentially devastating results on students. Further, the amount of time the child is in school compared with the time "out of school" requires parental involvement. You are and always will be the best advocate for your child. The best way to do this is to be well educated and knowledgeable about your child's particular needs.

Components of a Quality Language/Literacy Academic Program

Assessment

A father recently shared the following story with me regarding a test given to his profoundly deaf, ASL-using child. In a test used to determine receptive and expressive language abilities the child was asked several generic questions. For example "Where is the clock"? The child pointed to the wall where the clock was located as his response. In ASL, this indexing would be interpreted as "It is on the wall." This was exactly the answer he was supposed to give. However he was marked "incorrect." Why? The teacher had been given an assessment to follow whose norms and grades were determined

according to specific English language-based answers. Any variation from the stated answer is counted as an error. In this case, the child had to respond ‘ON-THE-WALL’ to receive credit. While acceptable in spoken English, this response in ASL would be artificial and certainly not produced by a three-year-old. This problem will be further discussed in the next section.

An accurate understanding of your child’s language and literacy needs is absolutely essential in order to develop the most appropriate educational plan. This is critical from preschool through the high school years. Initially, you want a compilation of assessments that provide a beginning snapshot or baseline of your child’s abilities. For the young child this includes but is not limited to: appropriate evaluation of receptive and expressive language skills, literacy tasks (e.g. alphabet, concepts of print, vocabulary screening, phonemic awareness tasks, etc.) and a narrative report that fully describes the child’s abilities. You should also receive an explanation of strengths and needs as well as recommendations and suggestions for work at home.

It is important to note here that if your child uses American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate it is imperative that they be given tests in both languages. When DHH children are given evaluations solely in English only part of their abilities will be evident. This incomplete view of their developing language does not give the parent (or the child) an overview of their strengths and weaknesses. Thus for the various areas of testing mentioned in the previous paragraph it is recommended that the bilingual child receive testing in both languages. Naturally these would be separate tests. The mixing of simultaneous communication methods (e.g. using spoken English while signing) only complicates matters. This will be discussed more fully in another article to appear in a subsequent issue.

While conscientious assessment is absolutely critical for your child it is often not accurately completed. School programs may use assessment devices that are inappropriate for your child’s audiological, communicative and language needs. Simply giving a DHH child a language test that a hearing child takes at a specific age may not be suitable. Worse, it may suggest that your child is below average when in fact the test was incorrectly used.

As children continue on in their academic careers it is imperative that parents have assessments that fairly and clearly provide a full picture of their child’s language and literacy abilities. Asking for a copy of your child’s tests and going through it with school personnel can help you (and your child) see where strengths and needs are. Further it can also detect errors in giving the test or problems with comprehension due to inaccurate directions or language use by the examiner. Your continued diligence and careful attention will ensure that you child graduates with a reading level that is commensurate with his cognitive abilities.

Qualified Instructors

When a parent sends their child to school they naturally assume that the teacher will possess all the attributes required to provide an accessible education for their child. However the requirements of a high quality teacher of the deaf are vast when compared to the teacher of hearing children. Since deafness is a 'low-incidence' occurrence the teacher is often placed in a classroom with children with extremely varied needs. It is tremendously difficult for her to adequately meet all of their needs in the most effective manner. Further, because of the small size, most programs for deaf children do not employ DHH literacy specialists who can help monitor and mentor teachers in their endeavor to provide and document evidence-based learning outcomes.

The education of the Teacher of the Deaf continues to be one of the most challenging areas in the field. Master programs for training teachers generally have 18 months to prepare their students to work with 'any DHH student'. This is an impossibility given the various needs, language competencies and knowledge base the teacher must have in order to be effective. However, conversely if the program were extended to include what is needed, few graduate students could afford the time required for appropriate training. Parents need to be aware of this as they observe the various instructional staff who interact with their child. On-site mentoring and other supportive practices are critical to assist teachers. During your meetings at school it is helpful to ask who the support people are for teachers, what kind of ongoing training they receive and how teachers are held accountable for further developing their own language skills.

What else can the parent do? Make appointments to unobtrusively observe your child in his classroom on several occasions. You are looking to make sure that your child clearly understands his teacher and is an active participant in a language/literacy rich environment. Are his eyes "alive" (i.e. following the conversation, emotionally invested, etc.)? Or is he simply sitting there, often needing reminders to pay attention? Is he interacting with his classmates and the teacher? Does the teacher use natural engaging language for discussion? It is most helpful to take an advocate with you-someone who can make notes, jot down questions and answers and provide an account of the observation. A follow up meeting is encouraged to share your appreciation or concern with the appropriate administrators.

Language Planning

Your child's process for attaining a comprehensible language and becoming literate in English will require instruction that considers many factors. As mentioned, teachers have little training in teaching reading and writing to DHH students prior to their initial job. Thus, most will rely on teaching reading/writing skills using materials that are based and developmentally ordered on native language abilities hearing children possess.

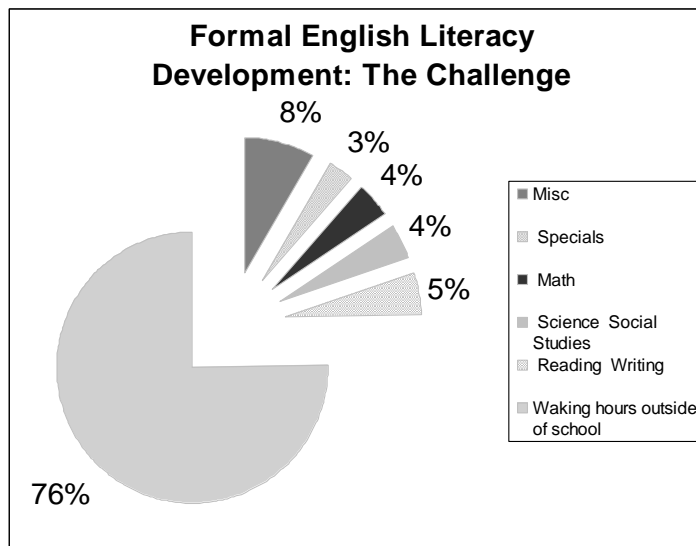
For the DHH child who has not had full access to the sound stream, literacy instruction often orients from a place of confusion rather than clarity. For example in preschool, the DHH child is typically shown a picture of an "apple." Then, using the "X" handshape, the teacher makes the sign for APPLE and expects the child to make the same connection the hearing child makes when the teacher says "A" is for "Apple." Again and again in

educating deaf children we attempt to take things that work with hearing children, replace it with signing and expect similar results.

The quality language program must utilize curricula, materials and assessment practices that align with your child's needs and show developmental outcomes based on your child's starting point. Lessons need to be hierarchically organized using visual learning strategies. The lessons your child brings home should show good evidence of challenging cognitive work. For example, grammar rules are often confusing for DHH children because they do not have the opportunity to naturally acquire them through auditory abilities. Often they will write "The dog eat the bone." Ask the average hearing adult for the rule for subject/verb agreement with singular/plural nouns in the present tense and you will generally be given a blank stare. It just "sounds" right to them. In contrast, often deaf children must learn the rules through two other avenues: extensive reading and grammar instruction that is grounded in understanding the DHH child's vantage point in language and literacy development.

Parental Involvement

If you were to analyze all of the hours your child was awake in one year you would discover that only about 25% of them are spent in school. Of that 25% only a portion of that amount is spent teaching language/literacy topics.



What does this mean for the parent? Clearly, given the short amount of time, literacy and language opportunities must extend well past the school day. Parents must be able to effectively communicate with their child. They need to provide activities that will further help their child develop reading and writing skills. This is in addition to regular schoolwork. In the coming issues of the Endeavor we will be looking at various ideas and topical discussions that will help you become more proactive in taking a role in your child's literacy development.