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From Communication to Language

For those children whose hearing losses are severe enough that they cannot master a spoken language, sign language provides an excellent alternative. Sign languages like American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), or Italian Sign Language (LIS), are not just gestural communication. They are full languages just like English or Spanish (Stokoe, 1960). Some investigators have even argued that gesture and rudimentary sign languages may have pre-dated spoken languages in the human species (e.g., Armstrong et al., 1995; Stokoe & Marschark, 1999).

The question, to sign or not to sign, is just one of many issues facing the family of a deaf child. In some ways it is the most central one. For many parents, accepting their child's hearing loss is difficult enough, and deciding that sign language will be their child's first language seems a big step. Some parents therefore attempt to have their children acquire spoken language, something that is particularly difficult for very young deaf children. Unfortunately, the relative merits of spoken language versus sign language for young deaf children is clouded by disagreement, personal opinions, and contradictory findings. We will try to avoid this controversy in most contexts and focus on the need for successful communication regardless of its mode. Our own reading of the history of deaf education (see chapter 2) and the available research on language development has led us to conclude that sign language is an important ingredient of early communication for most young deaf children. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that different children will benefit from various communication alternatives.

Although the degree and quality of vocal-auditory interaction will vary, we have already seen that its absence can negatively influence the developing parent-child relationship. One would expect that these effects would be fewer and less pronounced when parents are aware of their infant's hearing loss (e.g., parents who are deaf or have other deaf children). If parents are familiar with deafness through friends or relatives, they are likely to be more aware of and more comfortable with strategies that

enhance interactions in nonauditory domains. Knowing that a child is deaf at least provides parents with the opportunity to seek out information and resources, including other parents and teachers who have experience with deaf or hard-of-hearing children. Most such resources will emphasize the importance of communication, even if they differ in the mode of communication they advocate.

For deaf children with more profound hearing losses, the issue of communicating often translates into a signing versus speaking dichotomy, but this situation is far more complex than most popular arguments would suggest. Those deaf children who learn to sign at a young age tend to be better adjusted emotionally, on average. They also tend to do better in school and have better social relationships with their signing parents and peers in comparison to children with similar hearing losses raised only with spoken language. Certainly, there are exceptions in this regard, and many deaf children (although a minority) use only spoken language. One ongoing, largescale study in Canada, for example, indicated that although 93 percent of the deaf children initially were enrolled in auditory/oral programs, that figure was down to 67 percent by the time they were in preschool. By elementary school, 58 percent were still in oral programs, with 31 percent remaining when they were in middle school (Akamatsu et al., 2000). Meanwhile, more than half of all deaf children in Canada and United States have been reported to have "unintelligible" speech (Cole & Paterson, 1984).

The situation is even more cloudy for hard-of-hearing children, who have less severe hearing losses and who thus may have better access to spoken language. Although there have been some studies concerning language development in children who are hard-of-hearing (see chapter 5), however, there does not appear to be any available research concerning the link of language and social development in hard-of-hearing children.

It is easy to understand the desire of most hearing parents to have a "normally" speaking and acting child. Few deaf children, however, will ever talk like their hearing brothers and sisters, and most will not be proficient at understanding the speech of others. Contrary to the popular myths, very few individuals with severe to profound hearing losses can read lips well enough for the purposes of everyday communication. Lipreading or speechreading as it is now more commonly known, is difficult and error-prone, depending more on the characteristics of the speaker, linguistic context, and the physical environment (e.g., lighting) than the skills of the deaf person. Proficiency certainly is not something that should be expected from young deaf children. One of our friends who is profoundly deaf met someone on a recent vacation with whom he could comfortably converse only using spoken language (i.e., with speechreading). But that was only the second such occurrence in the 35 years he has been deaf (the other person is his barber), and he had the benefit of being able to hear speech until he was a young teenager.

Spoken language skills may be at a greater premium later in life, insofar as they would contribute to social interactions with a broader segment of society, and seem likely to influence employment conditions and opportunities (the Americans with Disabilities Act aside). A study involving employers of deaf individuals found that supervisors reported it easier to communicate with deaf employees who used speechreading and spoken language rather than sign language. In part, their preference in that regard related to

saving time because they did not have to write messages back and forth. Employers also noted, however, that adjustments were necessary in spoken communication with deaf employees and there was a high frequency of miscommunication. Further, the availability of speechreading and speech was said to prevent the development or use of other communications strategies, such as sign language, even when speechreading and voice were relatively ineffective (Foster, 1995; see also Steinberg et al., 1999).

Some hearing parents mistakenly believe that learning to sign will interfere with the acquisition of spoken language in their deaf child and thus they may resist sign language as long as possible. If anything, sign language seems to support learning of spoken language in deaf children, including for those with cochlear implants, and there is no evidence to suggest any interference. Delaying the learning of sign language in the hope of better speaking skills in deaf children has not been shown to have any advantages. More commonly, such delays make matters more difficult for both children and their parents. The first years of life are when basic language skills develop, and the first two to three years are generally recognized as a critical period for language learning. There is no substitute for natural language learning, and language acquisition that begins at age three or four is not natural.

It should be apparent by this point that the early acquisition of language - any language - is a critical emphasis that guides most of our thinking about the normal development of both deaf and hearing children. Although it sometimes appears that language fluency is achieved easily and naturally, it frequently involves explicit instruction at home and in the classroom. At the same time, the majority of children's experience comes in the form of language or is accompanied by language. Our perceptions and conceptions of the world often thus are colored as much by the way something is described as by its reality (Stokoe & Marschark, 1999).

Regardless of whether parents are using English, Spanish, ASL, or another language, the content and effects of communication are always present. Most obvious, perhaps, are the many ways in which early social interactions and other diverse experiences depend on interpersonal communication and help foster the acquisition of language. We have touched on these areas already, and we need to consider them in more detail to gain a fuller understanding of their roles in establishing the psychological foundation for education. First, however, we briefly consider the communication alternatives available to young deaf children.

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