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Maintaining High Expectations

By Roger Williams and Sherry Williams

In our house, as the saying goes: “‘Normal’ is just a setting on the dryer.”

We have six wonderful children, four of whom are deaf and adopted, two of whom are hearing and ours through birth. Author and husband, Roger, is hearing and signs fluently, and author and wife, Sherry, is deaf and uses both speech and signs although she is most comfortable signing. As parents of children—deaf and hearing—we are determined to encourage our children to do their best, and we always set our expectations high. We have found that parenting deaf children is harder than parenting hearing children, primarily because hearing children have more options and because our adopted deaf children came to us as older children after those critical early language learning years.

In some ways, as parents of deaf children, we feel like Christopher Columbus sailing the uncharted waters of the Atlantic to an unknown destination. Finding resources through the Internet and contacting other parents through social media have made some aspects of that journey easier, but the goal of raising a child to be an independent, working, happy adult is never easy. It is a journey of at least 18 years; the waters can be rough and the headwinds strong.

It is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day struggle of dealing with the school system to provide the best educational program, but it is not enough to simply obtain the best teachers and interpreters. The social and emotional aspects of a child's development cannot be overlooked.

Self-esteem, essential to a child's success and difficult to foster when a child may be the only deaf or hard of hearing individual in his or her class or even in the entire school, is essential. Self-esteem enables children to work hard and achieve because they feel worthwhile, and achievement is a fair exchange for their hard work. Success that comes with high self-esteem makes having high expectations not only desirable but eminently fair.

We have used the following strategies with all six of our children. Some are appropriate as children enter their teen years; others may be implemented when children are very young. Here are some ways parents can foster self-confidence in their deaf or hard of hearing child:

- **Read to your child daily.** This is especially important during your child's earliest years. Reading—and talking about what you read—will help your child develop his or her vocabulary and enrich his or her language development.

Photos courtesy of Roger and Sherry Williams



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- **Have your child order for him- or herself at restaurants.** At fast food restaurants, he or she can write his or her order; at sit-down restaurants, he or she can point to the item on the menu. In both places, your child can use his or her voice, gestures, or whatever communication strategies are most effective.
- **Give your child regular chores around the house.** This allows your child to be productive in the family and encourages him or her to develop a sense of pride in his or her work.
- **Have your child help an elderly neighbor or volunteer on a regular basis at a soup kitchen or at an animal shelter.** In this way, your child learns a sense of caring and responsibility for others—and experiences a sense of empowerment at the same time.
- **Make sure your child participates in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.** Parents should resist the urge to take over at IEP meetings and support their offspring, giving their child the opportunity to speak up and advocate for him- or herself.
- **Encourage your child to think about his or her future.** Does your child want to go to college, technical school, or graduate school, or does he or she want to get a job after graduation?
- **Don't always believe the experts, including the teachers.** You know your child best, and the experts are not always right.
- **Be prepared for setbacks.** We all have bad days, bad weeks, or even bad years. Don't lower high long-term expectations on the basis of short-term reversals. Continue to be positive and patient with your child.
- **Find deaf and hard of hearing adults in your community who can be role models.** This is easier for those who live in a city with a day school for deaf students. In Atlanta, Denver, Phoenix, and Minneapolis, for example, children can commute to day schools for the deaf and interact with a large group of successful deaf and hard of hearing adults on a daily basis. In a rural area, it is more challenging. Look for deaf social events or a deaf church. Your child needs to know not only deaf celebrities but the ordinary



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The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at mbinterp@gmail.com and sherryw55@gmail.com.



Above and below: The younger Williams children on a rafting trip with their parents; Andrew, Kate, Sarah, and Scott at their older brother's wedding in 2011.



successful deaf and hard of hearing adults in his or her community who are gainfully employed and living in an apartment or house, paying their bills, and enjoying life to its fullest.

- **Contact your state deaf association.** This is easy in the Internet age: Google. Look for “(your state) deaf organizations.” Find out about the issues and activities for deaf and hard of hearing individuals that are happening in your area.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Begin with simple queries: Do you think dogs should be on a leash? Why or why not? As your child gets older, ask him or her age-appropriate but increasingly complex questions.
- **Text.** Get used to checking in via smartphones, videophones, and/or computers. This is especially important for children in residential programs. A simple “Hi, how was your math test?” can boost self-esteem and encourage your offspring to do his or her best.

- **Maintain contact with your child’s teachers and dorm staff.** Keep up with your child’s academic progress and nip potential behavioral problems in the bud.
- **Be familiar with benchmarks for each age group.** Know your child is fully capable of meeting those benchmarks with or without help.

At our house, we have open discussions, sometimes heated debates, at the family table. We deliver Christmas gifts to needy families. We are active in local and state deaf events and attend deaf festivals in other states. Each of us served a term as president of the American Society for Deaf Children, and our deaf children have access to an array of deaf role models both at school and in our community. Roger has done presentations in other states on a variety of topics, including deafness, advocacy, mental health, and mental health interpreting. Sherry has taught deaf children and is an adjunct professor at the local community college.

We believe it is important to give back to the Deaf community and hope our children will do the same when they get older. Indeed, our youngest deaf daughter, Kate, just recently attended the Junior National Association of the Deaf Leadership Training Camp last summer and is heavily involved with her school organizations. Kate has known from an early age that she wants to be a chef in the restaurant business. She will graduate from the Model Secondary School for

the Deaf in June of 2014, and she plans to enter a culinary arts program. Sarah, our oldest deaf daughter, came to this country at age 13 from China, graduated from our local mainstream program last spring, and is attending the English Language Institute at Gallaudet University this fall. Her brother, Andrew, who graduated from the Model Secondary School for the Deaf last spring, has decided not to pursue college studies at this time; he lives independently with his dog and works in food service at a local college. Our youngest child, Scott, just entered high school and is still thinking about his future. Our oldest children, Heather and Brian, both hearing, live and work in Washington, D.C., and Seattle, Washington, respectively. Both of them have taken on leadership roles at their jobs, yet they take the time to contribute to their communities, too.

Our children know that we have high expectations. We expect each of them to work hard, respect the rules, maintain good grades in school, and contribute to their communities. What’s more, we know that these expectations are already paying off—because they are being fulfilled.