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The Early Years: Parents and Young Deaf Children Reading Together

By Lori Lutz

Research is just beginning to describe the role of reading in the lives of families with deaf children (Swanwick & Watson, 2007). While the time that deaf children spend reading or being read to represents only a small part of their lives at home, research highlights its importance for young children—hearing as well as deaf. Children whose parents read to them at home develop reading and literacy skills before they enter school (Akamatsu & Andrews, 1993; Clay, 1979; Maxwell, 1984; Sulzby & Teale, 1996). When children are read to during their first five years, they develop several areas of understanding: they learn that print has meaning; they develop a knowledge of letters, including phonological awareness; and they glean knowledge of words and vocabulary (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Goswami, 2001; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, and Lawson, 1996; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Diverse, Complex Lives

Families who read with their young deaf children incorporate this activity in their complex and busy lives. Most parents work, raise their children, and socialize with others in a variety of communities (e.g., school, work, church, neighborhood). Parenting a deaf child often means also meeting and working with early service providers, early childhood education teachers, and professionals at home and in schools, hospitals, and medical offices.

Reading to children may appear to be a challenge to parents whose children are deaf (Gioia, 2001). Most hearing parents are not expecting their child to be deaf and,

*Photos by Cat Valcourt-Pearce
Illustration courtesy of Lori Lutz*



Left: Children whose parents read to them at home, especially during their first five years, develop reading and literacy skills even before they enter school.

therefore, are not immediately prepared to think about their deaf child's access to language (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002). Hearing parents who read with their deaf children often pursue a more conscious, deliberate activity since a shared language is needed for them to read together. Perhaps this makes the activity even more important, whether it's a bedtime routine or a spontaneous read-aloud of labels in the grocery store. Reading is not only about learning; it is a shared and social experience.

Hearing Parents, Deaf Children

Lutz (2013), in a study of families of six young deaf children, focused on factors that helped and hindered their reading together. The parents and their children's teachers were interviewed, and from these interviews, individual children's journeys to becoming readers were described. Reflections shared by parents and teachers provided a glimpse of children's early literacy experiences at home and at school.

Each of the six families talked about reading with

The children's reading through their parents' and teachers' eyes ...



Jennifer – Beginning independent reading



Sean – Putting sounds and letters together



Rebecca – Beginning sight reading



Lisa – Picture book reading



Chris – Independent reading at school and shared reading at home



Sara – Reading to learn

their deaf child. The children, ages 5–6, included four girls and two boys (Jennifer, Sara, Rebecca, Lisa, Sean, and Chris^{*}). All except Chris had cochlear implants. Parents reported use of both sign language and spoken language at home, particularly during the first one to two years of their deaf child's life, and their language for reading during those years was primarily sign language. Three children are currently attending public or private elementary schools in different states, and three children are attending schools for the deaf in their home states, although most of the parents had been involved earlier with multiple schools and programs during their children's first five to six years, either working with at least two early intervention programs or moving their children from one school to another.

These children were a diverse group of readers. One child was reading picture books, a few were sounding out letters and words during reading or beginning reading, and one was reading to learn.

Learning from Families

Parents, in sharing their stories, reported similar events that influenced their reading with their young children. These events included learning about their child's hearing level, selecting early intervention programs, choosing

language for communication and reading with their deaf child, and making decisions about including reading as part of their daily lives. Parents also talked about how their deaf children's schools were involved with their reading with their children. Experiences shared by families suggest the importance of the following activities for supporting parents' reading with their deaf child:

- participating in an early intervention program early and regularly,
- participating in a shared reading program as part of early intervention services,
- recognizing or encouraging the child's interest in books, and
- using reading strategies and/or approaches.

Participating in Early Intervention

Five children were identified between birth and 4 months of age; however, one child was not identified through newborn hearing screening but by his mother who noticed her son did not respond to loud noises. The hearing level of the sixth child, Lisa, was not identified until she was 9 months old due in part to the parent's difficulties obtaining appropriate services, which

Left: Children are divergent as a group of readers, even within a very narrow age range.

meant Lisa did not have access to language for most of her first year of life.

Most families also participated in early intervention programs by the time their child was 6 months old. Chris's family did not. His mother reported that he was born with progressive hearing loss; this likely meant that he was not considered eligible for early intervention services.

Three of the six families went to two different early intervention programs, each with its own language approach, and one family participated in an early intervention program that provided parents with opportunities to learn and use both signed and spoken languages.

Three families said they spent many hours a week participating in early intervention programs, especially when their child was between 1 and 2 years old. These parents talked about having frequent and multiple home visits, home-based activities, school-based activities, presentations for parents, sign language lessons, and a variety of services (e.g., audio-verbal therapy). They decided to participate in these activities because they wanted to provide their deaf child with as much access to language as possible, both in American Sign Language (ASL) and in spoken English.

You can't decide for an infant how they're going to communicate and what skills they can have I mean, if they're spending so much time just trying to give them language, how are they ever going to get to the reading part? You know, reading is so dependent on so many other things falling into place and following each other that you can't—if you're playing catch-up, your child is 4 or 5 years old, can't even—doesn't even know their colors yet, I mean ... it just doesn't make sense because they haven't spent the time. I mean, we saw that. ~ Jennifer's mother (parent interview)

Reading as Early Intervention

All parents indicated that they engaged in or tried to engage in reading books with their deaf child, and most also reported use of sign language as part of their book-sharing experiences.

Experiences shared by parents, especially the parents of Sara and Jennifer, suggested a need for a home-based shared reading program in which an early intervention specialist, literacy specialist, or tutor visits the family at home, shares strategies for reading with deaf children, and teaches parents sign language using books. The benefits of participating in a shared reading program include:

- learning specific strategies for reading to deaf children,
- receiving additional and continued support for learning sign language for communication with their deaf children, and
- including shared reading as part of their home life.

Learning Strategies

The parents of Sara and Jennifer reported that they benefitted from learning strategies for helping their children learn to read, such as acting out stories, focusing on pictures rather than text to tell the story, and talking about environmental print. These parents pointed out and discussed signs and billboards, used books to explain life situations (e.g., doctor visits, going to the store), experimented with books to see which their children preferred, asked their children questions about the stories they read, and incorporated exaggerated facial expressions and speech inflections as part of their reading books aloud.

Jennifer's father explained, "We always try to really highlight the exclamations and the expressions, to use all the facial characteristics, and just try to emphasize/overemphasize a lot of what we find in a book."

Sara's mother noted, "Some of the deaf [adults] that we worked with were much better at ... pointing things out and

showing written words." After observing this, Sara's parents began to look for and talk with Sara about print in the environment and not just focus on books.

Sharing Reading at Home

As part of their involvement with a reading program, these parents read books with their deaf child, not only during the weekly home visits of a specialist or tutor but also as part of their bedtime routine. Jennifer's parents participated in a reading program as part of their early intervention services.

We started reading with her when she was probably about 2 or 3 months old. The [early intervention] program ... really, really stresses the reading. Literacy is a huge buzzword out there. (parent interview)

Jennifer's and Sara's parents' involvement with shared reading activities provided them with opportunities to learn and use sign

language, a new language, for sharing books, interacting, and communicating with their deaf child—the social, dynamic aspects that come with parents and children sharing books together.

A shared language allows the parents to engage in a dialogue with the child using print in books and in the child's environment, and through this interaction the child learns that things in the environment have names and labels.

Rebecca's mother noted the importance of sign language:

I think that having sign language was really important for [Rebecca] because it gave her access to some sort of language and access to labeling things, access to understanding that there were names for things and that there were colors ... otherwise she would have missed a whole year. (parent interview)

Support for Learning Sign Language

Participating in shared reading allowed parents to receive additional support from adult signers who came to their homes and showed them how to sign and use books while reading aloud with their deaf children; the shared reading programs also enabled them to watch videos of signers reading the same books aloud in ASL.

Sara's mother recalled the importance of seeing stories told in ASL:

We have a joke because there was this book about a boat. ... it had single words, just really simple sentences on each page. We're like, "Don't even need to see the video on this one. We can sign it." Towards the end of our week, we decided to look at [the video], and we were amazed at ... the classifiers and stuff that [the signers] were doing. We're like, "Wow. This is, like, the best video!" (parent interview)

Support from these shared reading programs seemed to enable these parents to not only include reading to their children as part of their busy lives, but

A shared language allows the parent to engage in a dialogue with the child using print in books and in the child's environment, and through this interaction the child learns that things in the environment have names and labels.

also to use language as part of the interaction with their child using books and environmental print. This made it possible for parents to continue learning and using sign language.

Recognizing and Encouraging the Child's Early Interest in Books

Parents' descriptions are based on their personal experiences of reading with their deaf child and comparing their experiences to reading with their other children. Early interest in reading was reported by parents of three children (Jennifer, Rebecca, and Sara). They noticed their children's early interest in picture books, using examples of behaviors such as intense attention, looking at pictures in books, and maintaining joint attention to both the book and the mother.

Rebecca's mother observed that Rebecca as a baby showed her interest by:

... just being willing to sit there and sort of look at you and clearly be engaged by something rather than, you know, wanting to bite my ear or do something else. And then, you know, as she got older, there's just sort of an active participation in the reading process. (parent interview)

Parents' observations are based partly on their experiences reading with their other children. Jennifer's mother related:

She always was interested in [books]. She never would, like, throw 'em or eat 'em or anything. Her brother did that. He didn't get interested in books until he was probably closer to 2 years old. (parent interview)

Rebecca's mother, who used spoken English for reading, also observed differences in interest in reading between her two children. She reflected:

I never really felt like I don't know how to read to [my deaf daughter]. Maybe

because she responded so well to everything. She's just a very engaged, an engaging little person. So maybe ... had it been [her sister] ... that had ... been born profoundly deaf ... I did feel more challenged with her and she could hear. (parent interview)

She continued:

Her [hearing] sister has a shorter attention span ... she, especially as a baby, was just not a book kid, and I would sort of ... for a while I got really

books. Jennifer's mother explained:

Reading with her was always so much fun. I mean, I just liked to do it. She was so interested in it, and she was so excited when she would get something right, you know, like especially those books that just have the pictures. And you know, the first time she signed "ball" and she said "ball" and stuff, it was just ... you know, it was really neat. (parent interview)

Their children's responsiveness



frustrated ... And then I just sort of was like ... she wants to go do different things, she can learn other ways. I mean, she's not as literate a kid as Rebecca is. (parent interview)

Sara's mother observed:

I know some parents were frustrated because their kids didn't want to sit still and look, and that was fortunately not really an issue for us. (parent interview)

These children's responsiveness (Sara, Jennifer, and Rebecca) made it possible for both children and parents to enjoy their experiences together involving

encouraged the parents to keep reading to them, thus possibly easing somewhat some of the challenges of sharing books using a new language (sign language) and ensuring the child understood the language as part of the parent-child interaction and the picture book itself. These parents' reflections show that the influence is not just one way—from the parent to the child—but also from the child to the parent.

However, early interest in books does not always mean the child will read early. For example, although Rebecca showed early interest as a baby, she now prefers activities other than books.

Rebecca's mother observed:

She would rather probably write before she would read, or make pictures before she would read, or build with LEGOs® or something like that before she would sit down and actually just read a book on her own. (parent interview)

Similarly, lack of early interest in reading does not preclude this interest developing later. Chris's mother, in fact, reported that her son had little interest in reading as a very young child, and that his interest emerged suddenly and spontaneously later. Chris's mother noted:

When he was really young, 1, 2, and 3 [years old], he had no interest. ... He would just hop right back off your lap and leave. And so we were actually kind of frustrated ... [We] were trying to just give him as much language as possible and he didn't ... want to have anything to do with [books]. (parent interview)

However, this changed when Chris turned 3.5 years old, an event that took his parents by surprise. Chris's mother remarked:

He'd just basically throw a book in my lap and hop in my lap. "Okay, you're gonna read it to me." (parent interview)

These children are clearly their own little persons, exerting their influence, even at a young age, on their parents' efforts to share and read books with them.

Results of the Study: Insights and Hope

All of the parents in the study read with their children in an attempt to foster literacy development. While their efforts were personal—based on early interventions, shared reading undertakings, programs they attended, approaches suggested by professionals, and the interests of their unique children—many of the strategies they pursued were similar. The parents were

able to incorporate the understanding and enjoyment of printed words into their homes and their children's lives. They were also able to increasingly develop their skill in sign language. Hopefully, the result will be that

Jennifer, Sara, Rebecca, Lisa, Sean, and Chris learn to read and write on par with—or ahead of—their hearing peers.

**Students' names are pseudonyms.*

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Families and Deaf Children: 8 Strategies for Reading

By Lori Lutz

When the families of Chris, Jennifer, Sean, Sara, and Rebecca described reading with their deaf children, several strategies—some initially suggested by early intervention providers and reading specialists—emerged. Research suggests that parents' use of a particular language may be associated with specific types of reading strategies used with their deaf child (Swanwick & Watson, 2005, 2007). Some of the strategies below suggested for parents would benefit both deaf and hearing children, and some are tailored specifically for use with deaf children:

1. **Use personal conversation and dialogue.** With book in hand, ask questions such as: "What do you think will happen next?" Talk about the pictures and summarize the story.
2. **Make reading dynamic.** Parents used exaggerated facial expressions and speech as well as animated language. Sometimes they acted out stories, adopted characters, and imitated sound effects; other times they used the books as storytelling events.
3. **Incorporate environmental print.** Several parents encouraged their deaf children to read using recipes and menus and to check out road signs, billboards, and grocery food signs. Noted Jennifer's mother: "Reading isn't just [about] the book It's everything. It's opening up a whole new world."
4. **Identify and choose books related to children's interest.** Five parents talked about choosing books related to their children's interest and, in some cases, trying different topics before identifying their children's interest and choosing books.
5. **Focus on letters and words to develop sight word recognition.** Sean's mother described how she did this:

I will read [the word] first, and I will kind of sound it out, and then I will say, "Okay, now you read it to me," and then he will read it to me. And then I will have him read the next page or I will read one page and I will ask him to read the next page. And then if he gets stuck ... I will sound it out with him. So, I will sound out whatever word he is stuck on.

6. **Select books slightly above the child's level.** This strategy, presented by their early intervention specialist, was followed by the parents of Jennifer. Jennifer's mother explained:

We learned ... [to] stay ahead of [the child being read to] ... keep it moving forward, don't stay still.

7. **Create a positive climate.** Several parents said that it is important that their child enjoy the time they spend together reading. Reading to their children presented an opportunity to spend quality time together, not simply to work on developing reading skills.
8. **Incorporate school literacy.** Parents talked about including school-based theme books as part of the bedtime reading routine and practicing school words in different contexts (e.g., at home, at the farmer's market). Sean's mother explained:

We practice [school words], look at them, talk about them here at home, and then we actually went to a farmer's market with him. And we walked around and we ... kind of pointed out the different vocabulary words and ... just kind of explored.

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