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**Top, right:** Interveners sometimes play back and forth games with students (e.g., brushing a student's face with the paper strips on a birthday hat and waiting for the student to communicate that he wants the action repeated).

# A Positive Perspective:

## PREPARING PROFESSIONALS TO WORK WITH DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

*By Julie Mitchiner and Linda Risser Lytle*

As co-directors of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and their Families Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program at Gallaudet University, we believe that it is important to infuse a positive perspective of being deaf as we work with families with deaf and hard of hearing children. Typically, these families first learn about being deaf through a deficit model of hearing loss, and as a result they experience grief and anxiety about having a deaf or hard of hearing child (Hintermair, 2014). In a paradigm shift, our students are trained to provide appropriate support and service to children and their families from a perspective in which being deaf is similar to the way one views individuals with cultural differences. The program, which began at Gallaudet six years ago, offers students a framework with which to work with families that emphasizes the deaf or hard of hearing child's strengths (Bauman & Murray, 2010).

Perhaps one of the most important aspects in this sociocultural model which presents being deaf in a positive way is a change in terminology. Students are prompted to pay attention to their language and use it to provide families with an optimistic perspective. The term *early intervention*, for example, has negative connotations so we reframe this term and refer to *early family involvement*.

*Photos courtesy of Debbi Bosso, Erin Kline, Dana Stewart Kline, and Lisa Charney*



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Jesús O. Barreto Abrams



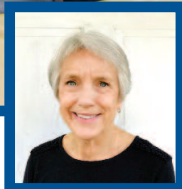
LaTrice L. Downtin



Emily Wojahn



Dana Stewart Kline



Elizabeth Allen

Similarly, when we discuss the children with their families, we avoid the term *hearing loss*, preferring to refer directly to children’s *hearing levels*. Instead of discussing communication options, which implies that the family must choose one approach to communication for the child, we use the phrase *communication opportunities*, which implies that a child can benefit from a range of communication approaches. Changing language can change attitudes, and these changes enable parents to see their children in a more positive light.

### Working, Researching, and Exploring The Capstone Projects

An especially exciting aspect of the program, which is based partly online and partly in the classroom, is the capstone project required of each of our students. These projects bring together students’ learning as they apply what they have learned to design and implement a project in the community. Community service

**Above, left to right:** Five graduates of the program who completed capstone projects with exciting results.

projects give students the chance to internalize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions developed through their coursework and contribute to the field in meaningful ways.

Jesús O. Barreto Abrams, a student who works in the Washington, D.C., area as a sign language interpreter, did his capstone project in his native Puerto Rico. Abrams, who joined the program while working on his doctorate in clinical psychology, secured funding from Gallaudet University’s Research Support and International Affairs to look at the perspectives of parents and professionals involved in early intervention with deaf children. Fluent in Spanish, American Sign Language (ASL), and English, Abrams used a phenomenological approach to identify Puerto Rico’s most significant problem for both parents and professionals—which was the lack

**Linda Risser Lytle**, PhD, professor in the Department of Counseling at Gallaudet University, is director of the Summers & Online School Counseling Program, which is supported by a training grant from the United States Office of Special Education Programs, and co-director of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and their Families: Leadership and Collaboration Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program at Gallaudet University. Lytle is a licensed psychologist and maintains a private practice in Washington, D.C. She received her doctorate in counseling from The Catholic University of America. Most recently, she co-authored *Turning the Tide: Making Life Better for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Schoolchildren* (2014) and *Raising the Whole Child: Addressing Social-Emotional Development in Deaf Children* (VL2 Research Brief No. 11, 2016).

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**Left:** Staff members encourage students to become active participants in reading (e.g., by turning the pages of a “touch and feel” book).

of resources. He also found that every participant in his study, regardless of background (e.g., audiologist, teacher, parent), supported the use of signed language with their children, either through ASL or through signs and spoken language in conformance with the principles of Total Communication.

LaTrice L. Downtin, another of our graduates, earned her PhD in clinical psychology at Gallaudet University and is also a specialist-level nationally certified school psychologist. Downtin developed a memory assessment for deaf and hard of hearing children, ages 2 to 5 years and 11-months as her capstone project. This memory assessment is to be included in a nonverbal pre-school performance scale published by Stoelting. With the materials finalized, Downtin and her co-author are working out the last parts of an instruction manual that will be published first in English and hopefully later in ASL. Downtin said she felt her work in our program not only prepared her for success but was the reason she secured an internship with Tulane University School of Medicine in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she is already making home visits; consulting for primary care; providing psychoeducation and therapy for caregivers and young children; and helping infants, toddlers, and their caregivers form healthy attachments. Downtin is one of our newest program faculty; she is currently co-teaching the capstone courses.

Other graduates have experienced similar career boosts. Emily Wojahn, who just received her certificate, had been working as a kindergarten through second grade teacher in the Family-Centered Early Education Department at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind. After she graduated from our program, she was able to change jobs, becoming a Colorado regional hearing resource coordinator for the Pikes Peak region of Colorado. In this position, she works directly with families of children who are deaf or hard of hearing (ages 0-3).

Dana Stewart Kline, another recent graduate, is working as the student advisor at the Delaware School for the Deaf (DSD) where she provides behavioral support and counseling services to students K-12. Kline earned her certificate while pursuing a graduate degree with the Gallaudet Summers & Online School Counseling Program. During this time, she worked full time at DSD, providing consultative and direct services to students K-12 with deaf-blindness and additional needs and serving as the liaison to Delaware’s Statewide Deaf-Blind Program. Kline,

who enjoys working with families, produced an hour-long video to educate parents of deaf-blind and multiply disabled children on detailed strategies that support literacy development. The video has been published on YouTube, used for multiple trainings across several states, and posted on the National Center on Deaf-Blindness website, which is shared with each state’s Deaf-Blind Project as well as the National Family Association for Deaf-Blind. Called *Literacy for Us*, the video may be accessed at <https://nationaldb.org/library/page/2678>.

Elizabeth Allen, a 2013 graduate, developed a monthly program for families with deaf children, called Families to Families, that brought families together to meet, share information, and provide each other with support. Based in Norfolk, Virginia, that project is ongoing.

### **An Interdisciplinary Focus**

Our students are professionals, many of whom work full time as teachers, interpreters, speech-language pathologists, and other specialists. They study social work, audiology, counseling, and international development, among other fields, and they bring the diverse perspectives and expertise from their various disciplines to our program. Skills in collaboration and leadership with professionals from different disciplines in the fields of early family involvement and early childhood are emphasized.

Courses are taught using a co-instructor model, with instructors coming from different professional disciplines, and one instructor who is deaf and one instructor who is hearing. While this structure takes quite a bit of work and planning, it is one that we deeply value. Learning as part of an interdisciplinary group is quite different from learning within one’s chosen discipline and sometimes takes time to get used

to. However, the value of learning with and from others with differing personal and professional perspectives is enormous. As Beth Hamilton, one of our graduates, stated:

*This program was a 180-degree change for me from what I thought I knew. It encouraged me to seek more information, to engage in deeper conversations with other professionals and with parents, and to better understand how effective interdisciplinary approaches can be. (Personal communication, 2013)*

In an instructor-solicited course reflection assignment, which was completed anonymously, another student reported:

*The mutual exposure and experience of learning together and being challenged by various worldviews was certainly my favorite part of this course. With each discussion, I felt as though I learned valuable information from my colleagues even if the topic was an area with which I was already familiar. (Personal communication, summer, 2017)*

Students not only learn about interdisciplinary teamwork, but they practice it in each of their courses. The heart of the program is interdisciplinary. This is shown in a multitude of ways—through the program’s management, instructors, students, curriculum, and even location. Rather than being found housed within an academic program, our department is housed in Gallaudet University’s graduate school. Understanding the importance of collaboration and

contributing knowledge and skills from their respective disciplines to support the child and the family is critical.

Creating a learning environment in which deaf and hearing professionals learn together and support each other is another key component of the program. Hearing individuals sometimes come to the program with limited experience with deaf people, and deaf individuals sometimes come with limited or negative experience with hearing people. Courses are designed so that individuals with varying personal and professional backgrounds and varying hearing levels and language abilities work and learn together—and are enriched in the process as they develop new skills, assimilate new information, and sometimes cultivate new attitudes. Teamwork and mutual respect are modeled by our deaf/hearing instructor teams.

### History of a Program

The program was the brainchild of Marilyn Sass-Lehrer, formerly within the Department of Education at Gallaudet, and Beth Benedict, within the Department of Communication at Gallaudet. The collaboration model they developed has remained strong. When Sass-Lehrer and Benedict moved on to other endeavors, the interdisciplinary program co-director model was retained with co-directors coming from the Department of Education (Mitchiner) and the Department of Counseling (Lytle).

When it was first conceived, the program was one of a



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### DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INFANTS, TODDLERS AND FAMILIES: COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP INTERDISCIPLINARY GRADUATE CERTIFICATE

The Infants, Toddlers, and their Families certificate program is an 18-credit program offering courses online and on-campus.

The program offers a range of disciplines with current evidence-based knowledge and skills for working with families and their very young children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

For more information,  
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**Above:** An intervener may provide a student with a touch-cue to let the student know where he or she is.

handful of online programs offered through Gallaudet University. Today online instruction has become mainstream as professionals throughout the country value being able to work full time while living at home and earning a certificate in an area important to their jobs. At Gallaudet, a bilingual university, ASL and English are equally valued. Instruction and student work are shared online both through English and ASL; accessibility is key.

Our students want the Gallaudet experience, the experience of a bilingual environment of ASL and English. We are finding that as difficult as it is, individuals are willing to take time off to come to on-campus classes because they find worth in the experience of face-to-face interactions in the classroom. Both the first and final courses in the program are a hybrid; they include a long weekend on campus and several weeks of work online. Additionally, periodic video meetings with our students individually and in groups foster robust discussions.

### Goals: Looking to the Future

The first cohort of eight students graduated in the summer of 2012, and as the program continues to thrive, 60 students have graduated and approximately 10 new students enter each year. Our goal has remained the same: to address the critical need for more well-prepared professionals to work with young children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families. Deaf professionals, who have rich experience and a deep understanding of what it means to be deaf and can meaningfully contribute in our field, are especially needed. Evidence shows that families benefit from interactions and mentoring with professionals who are deaf (Hintermair, 2000; McKee, 2006; Watkins, Pittman, & Walden, 1998). Deaf adult professionals become role models and cultural mediators between the hearing and the Deaf community.

Also crucial is recruiting diverse instructors to support

professionals in becoming competent to work with families from diverse backgrounds. This is especially important as the number of families from diverse backgrounds is increasing. Their cultural knowledge and experiences in working with young children from all backgrounds enriches the field in early family involvement.

Unfortunately, today many practicing professionals still lack the specialized knowledge and skills needed to work effectively with families of deaf and hard of hearing children, and they are often required to obtain training after they have been hired for a position (Sass-Lehrer, Moeller, & Stredler-Brown, 2016). Our program—with its emphasis on a positive view of being deaf and support for work in community—begins to fill this training gap. It is an exciting time in the field of early family involvement, and we are excited to be leaders in preparing students to meet the growing need for well-prepared, culturally knowledgeable professionals.

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