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The authors invite you to learn more about FCD at [www.fcdpinellas.org](http://www.fcdpinellas.org) and welcome questions and comments about this article at [jacqueline@fcdpinellas.org](mailto:jacqueline@fcdpinellas.org) and [anthony@fcdpinellas.org](mailto:anthony@fcdpinellas.org), respectively.

# Creating Language-Rich Environments with Intentionality at the Family Center on Deafness

*By Jacqueline Wunderlich and Anthony W. Verdeja*

*The majority of deaf and hard of hearing children around the world are born to hearing parents, most of whom are not familiar with deafness or sign language. This can lead to language deprivation or delay and a lack of social interaction for these children. Below, article co-author Jacqueline Wunderlich shares her own story of growing up deaf, its impact, and how it influenced her work with the Family Center on Deafness (FCD) in Largo, Florida. The authors also share how FCD is collaborating with the local school district and other programs in order to empower the community's deaf and hard of hearing students and help provide them with language-rich environments in which to learn and grow.*

Growing up I hated my hearing aids, but not for the reason you might assume. I constantly “forgot” to wear them or to change the batteries. I hid my bare ears under my hair so nobody would know. I got smarter as I got older and wore my hearing aids without turning them on (but my teachers figured that out). In sixth grade, I didn't wear my hearing aids at all. A bigger school meant it was harder for teachers to keep track of me, and it was easier for me to get away with not wearing them. I spent most of the year reading books under my desk rather than paying attention in class. I set a school record for the number of books I checked out from the school library that year.

I learned in school, but not what I was supposed to be learning. I didn't understand how to do

*Photos courtesy of the Family Center on Deafness*



**Left:** Youth and Family Support specialist Jasmine Hall works with an elementary student on improving his reading skills by connecting ASL and printed English words.

multiplication tables until college. I didn't have any idea what was going on in my classes, and yet I still would not wear my hearing aids. It wasn't because they were uncomfortable (even though they were). It wasn't because they were, paradoxically, both too loud and too quiet (which they were). It wasn't when other kids noticed my hearing aids, or how annoying it was to manage the FM system (even though it was), or even due to any other small indignities that happened daily. I hated my hearing aids because I hated taking them off. It still catches me off guard today, the roar and rush of sound when I turn on my hearing aids, and how, when I take them off, the world feels so still. As a child, that silence swallowed me up. In that moment,

every time I was confronted with the stark reality that I am not and never will be hearing ... to me, that meant being different, it meant failure, it meant never, ever fitting in. And so I chose not to wear my hearing aids at all.

When I became an adult and learned American Sign Language (ASL), my world exploded with possibility and language. Suddenly, hearing aids were simply an optional tool rather than *everything*. I put them on to listen to music, and I took them off whenever I wanted—sometimes for weeks, months, or years. I learned that deafness, which I had hidden from my entire life, was a source of belonging, inclusion, and joy.

Unfortunately, my story is all too

common. Ninety to 95 percent of deaf and hard of hearing children are born to hearing parents, many of whom are not familiar with deafness or sign language (Hall et al., 2023). This lack of familiarity often results in environments in which children are unintentionally deprived of the language and social interactions essential for their development. These adverse childhood communication experiences, such as language deprivation and communication neglect, can have severe, lifelong consequences (Hall et al., 2023; Kushalnagar et al., 2020).

Florida's Tampa Bay region is home to the third largest population of deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the United States. Yet with the Florida School for the



**Left:** Program manager Jacqueline Wunderlich and Youth and Family Support specialist Jackie Haig give a presentation at the Nova Southeastern University Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Osteopathic Medicine on the importance of language-rich environments in preventing language deprivation.

students.

Today, FCD offers targeted educational and social support programs to deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their families, spanning from birth through high school graduation. These programs are grounded in the Deaf Community Cultural Wealth (DCCW) framework. DCCW changes the narrative from deficit-focused to

students but for their families and the broader community. We show families firsthand that deafness is not an obstacle but instead an identity to embrace and celebrate. We champion the power of connection by cultivating an accessible, language-rich environment that presents limitless opportunities for students to enhance their communication, education, and independence. Through our programming, parents and children alike are introduced to the six forms of capital that comprise DCCW: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant (Johnson et al., 2020).

Embracing the DCCW framework involves intentional actions and decisions that align with the values we champion. This is evident in our commitment to a staff composition that reflects the diversity of the community we serve. Approximately two-thirds of our team are deaf or hard of hearing.

**Below:** FCD staff and summer camp participants enjoy a book bus visit from our community partner and supporter, the Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County.

Deaf and the Blind situated just 200 miles away, most of these students are enrolled in mainstream public school settings just like I was, with non-signing and non-deaf peers. However, their stories don't have to mirror mine.

emphasizing the rich cultural assets, values, and resources inherent within the Deaf community (Johnson et al., 2020). This works to actively dismantle the stigma and misconceptions often linked with deafness, not only for the

## Family Center on Deafness and Deaf Community Cultural Wealth

In 1995, recognizing a dire need for support in the Tampa Bay region, Deaf community leaders, educators, and health professionals rallied together, setting the foundation for what would become FCD by 2003, and officially a 501(c)(3) organization by 2010. FCD is one of the only nonprofits of its kind nationally. Through support from the Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County, FCD is able to actively collaborate with the local school district and other programs in order to empower deaf and hard of hearing



Every staff member is proficient in ASL, with some also fluent in both English and Spanish, making them trilingual. This not only enriches our programs with a variety of perspectives but also demonstrates our commitment to the community in practice.

### Charlie's Story

"Charlie" arrived at FCD with zero functional language and a traumatic history of abandonment and adoption.



He was only 4 years old, but his family had already been told that he would not be successful in school and that he was not capable of learning. They believed that he had been severely impacted by language deprivation and that he would never be able to catch up or achieve proficiency in any language. Then Charlie's parents became engaged with FCD and set him on an extraordinary path of growth and discovery.

FCD's birth to 5 years old programming emphasizes embedding language learning opportunities into everyday experiences and community outings. We do this through initiatives such as the Shared Reading program and Promoting Language Acquisition for Youth (P.L.A.Y.) group programs.

Within these settings, children like Charlie are surrounded by Deaf role models and take part in engaging activities designed to foster their language acquisition.

We are intentional about the way language is presented and utilized in our environments, mindful of its impact on children and their families. For example, deaf or hard of hearing staff may choose to use their voices at times to demonstrate that ASL and spoken

**Above:** Volunteer Tatianna leads a scavenger hunt color-finding activity with deaf and hard of hearing toddlers and kids of deaf adults.

language can coexist rather than seeing ASL as merely a lesser alternative. Conversely, hearing staff members sometimes prioritize signing over speaking, even in situations where vocal speech is the norm, to reinforce the importance and validity of ASL. This intentional approach to communication allows us to introduce families to the rich diversity of Deaf identities and Deaf culture. By leveraging familial capital, FCD encourages families to view their child's deafness not as a barrier but as a unique opportunity to strengthen their bond and grow

together. Such meaningful engagement is critical for children's language acquisition and self-esteem. Ultimately, by exposing families to successful Deaf role models and demonstrating the effectiveness of ASL in a nonjudgmental environment, we open the door to families using ASL in other aspects of their lives. Building language is more than a one-time event, and it does not stop at age 5. With that spirit in mind, FCD intentionally creates language-rich environments for elementary, middle, and high school students as well.

Throughout elementary school, Charlie attended our Raising Expectations & Achievement of Children with Hearing Loss (R.E.A.C.H.) program that is focused on enhancing educational and developmental outcomes. It emphasizes cultural and linguistic enrichment, aiming to build a comprehensive development foundation for these students, their siblings, and hearing children of deaf adults (CODAs). The involvement of hearing siblings and CODAs has been critical to supporting families in ensuring everyone can have effective communication in all aspects of their lives. A fundamental goal of R.E.A.C.H. is to fill the gap in accessible extracurricular opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing students. Many mainstream deaf students historically have had limited access to activities that cater to their developmental needs due to communication barriers. R.E.A.C.H. addresses this by allowing the students to communicate directly with signing adults and Deaf role models. The program, which is a licensed child care center through Pinellas County, offers various activities, including life skills, social-emotional learning, tutoring, and Girl Scouts.

Beginning in middle school, our program allows students to dive more deeply into their interests. Weekly tutoring and support continue. Some students join Robotics Club, while others choose to participate in

Environmental Club. Others learn about 3D printing, leisure activities, and life skills. Students begin participating in FCD’s Deaf mentorship Learning Is For Everyone (L.I.F.E.) program, in which deaf and hard of hearing students are paired with Deaf adult role models and attend monthly outings together. Here, they are given guided and explicit instruction of self-advocacy, self-determination, and transitional skills through the example of our mentors and staff. This utilizes the navigational and aspirational capital of the Deaf community, encouraging the students to learn to successfully navigate the challenges of the hearing world and to continue dreaming big and realize they can achieve their dreams. The program also instills a sense of resilience and

advocacy, teaching students to challenge societal perceptions of deafness and to advocate for their rights and needs. Charlie’s participation in our program throughout middle school fostered his blossoming Deaf identity and language skills to prepare him for high school.

By high school, Charlie was initiating conversations, participating with others, and had made friends with his peers. He was once deemed incapable of learning, and yet with the incredible support and access to a language-rich environment, Charlie is now on the brink of graduating high school. Recently, he participated in a public speaking competition in which he discussed how he had overcome many challenges and remains optimistic about his future.

### Samantha’s Story

Not all FCD students join us as young as Charlie did. For example, consider the story of “Samantha.” She was a sophomore drowning in her mainstream classroom. Her family had recently immigrated to Florida, and she was the only child in her class with hearing loss. Samantha had navigated her early education experiences with minimal support. By chance, she saw an FCD booth at a back-to-school event and discovered that there were services specifically for students like her. She began attending our after-school program and quickly began learning ASL. Samantha joined absolutely everything she could—Robotics, Academic Bowl, LIFE mentorship, driver’s education, and more.

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Part of creating a language-rich environment for Samantha meant acting with intentionality. Although infants can learn language solely through observation, this is not true for older children and adults. Samantha required explicit teaching of ASL, with FCD providing interpreters so she could have access to our programming as she learned. This was a turning point for Samantha and her academic performance soared, placing her in the top ranks of her class. Trilingual interpreters made it possible to support her family's acquisition of ASL, and her siblings were encouraged to join our summer camps. This meant that Samantha went home to a language-rich environment, too. Just like I was while growing up, Samantha was hungry for not only accessibility but for genuine inclusion—finding somewhere she truly belonged. We, at FCD, are so happy that she has found it in us.

### **Inclusion Makes the Difference**

We believe that belonging is not just a feeling but a foundation for growth. It's the beauty of inclusion, where every student feels valued and sees themselves reflected in the staff and FCD

community. FCD is a place where all deaf and hard of hearing individuals know they belong.

*Authors' note: The uppercase 'D' in "Deaf" is used to describe people who identify as culturally Deaf and are actively engaged with the Deaf community.*

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