

family fun night

where stories come alive!

By Heather M. Waldner

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Deaf students and their families were swept away into the world of children's literature, interpreted by older deaf students who read the stories using American Sign Language. All eyes were glued to the storyteller as she brought the book to life with her visual representation of the text. Just as hearing children love to listen to stories read aloud, deaf children love to watch stories read to them through American Sign Language and this was especially true during our program entitled Family Fun Night: Where Stories Come Alive!

The National Academy of Education, Commission on Reading (Schleper, 1995), emphasized that the best way to make children successful readers is to read aloud to them. This can be difficult for teachers and parents of deaf children. As David Schleper (1995) indicated, both teachers and parents question how to read to deaf children. "What kind of manual communication should I use? How do I hold the book and sign at the same time? What if I am not familiar with the sign vocabulary represented in the text?" (p.4)

In order to start addressing these questions, the Capital Area Intermediate Unit (CAIU) in Summerdale, Pennsylvania, created a program called Family Fun Night. We invited parents and their deaf children to a large room in our main office to watch and enjoy deaf storytellers as they read using American Sign Language storytelling techniques and strategies. The Family Fun Night program emphasized several of the principles Schleper (1995) enumerated in his Shared Reading Project. Schleper observed that, when reading to deaf children, deaf readers:

- translate stories using American Sign Language,
- keep both languages visible (American Sign Language and English),
- are not constrained by text,
- make what is implicit explicit,
- use American Sign Language variation to sign repetitive English phrases, and
- provide a positive and reinforcing environment.

Photography by John T. Consoli

During Family Fun Night, deaf storytellers used these and other strategies as they read to deaf children and their family members. Voice interpreters were provided for family members who may not have understood the storytellers' signs, but the message was often very clear because of the storytellers' facial expression and sign placement.

Deaf students from sixth through twelfth grade read the stories, while younger deaf students (pre-school to fifth grade) watched in amazement as the literature was brought to life. The younger children were divided into four separate groups: (1) pre-school, (2) kindergarten and first grades, (3) second and third grades, and (4) fourth and fifth grades. A different student storyteller read a different story to each group, which then participated in motivating follow-up activities. Parents were encouraged to join their child's respective group, to watch the stories, and to participate in the activities.

Family Fun Night included four major components: motivating and entertaining picture books, storytellers and other staff volunteers, related activities, and families. The planning for the evening took about two months as students and staff volunteers prepared for their roles in the festivities.

For the first component, teachers and sign language interpreters who were interested in participating in the program formed a committee, decided upon a theme, and chose picture books to match the theme. For example, for our first Family Fun Night, the spotlight was on author Eric Carle and his books: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Very Lonely Firefly*, *The Honeybee and the Robber*, and *The Very Busy Spider*. Books were chosen not only for their connection to the program's theme but also for their illustrations, concepts, and overall enjoyment.

The second component of Family Fun Night was a group of American Sign Language storytellers and additional staff volunteers who helped implement the activities during sessions. Several older students in the CAIU Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program volunteered to be the storytellers, chose the books they wanted to read, and for several weeks practiced reading the books with a deaf adult to hone their storytelling techniques. Other students and staff members volunteered to voice the stories or lead the follow-up activities. For the program to run smoothly, often three to four volunteers were needed in each of the four reading groups.



Family Fun Night's objective was to expose parents to various strategies for reading to their deaf children and to include them in their young children's literacy development.

The third component of Family Fun Night was related activities. Student and staff volunteers led these fun-filled, creative activities that involved the whole family. After the older deaf children read the stories, the younger children and their families participated in activities that related directly to each story. For example, they practiced making tissue paper illustrations like those in Eric Carle's books, painted a poster of fireflies, or tasted different flavors of honey and created a bar graph to illustrate their favorite flavors.

The final component of Family Fun Night was the students and families in the CAIU Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program. The goal of Family Fun Night was to expose students and families to the beauty and pleasure of reading a story using American Sign Language. One parent commented, "Family Fun Night is a great way to see your child working with books and to see how deaf storytellers read books using sign language. Being a parent of a child with a hearing loss, I like new opportunities that help my child explore the world around her. I feel Family Fun Night does that for her."

Karen Roudybush (1999), a pre-school teacher at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, explained at a workshop on bringing literacy home, "Parents need to become active

participants and supporters, bolstering growth in literacy and fostering a love of reading in their homes." Family Fun Night's objective was to expose parents to various strategies for reading to their deaf children and to include them in their young children's literacy development. Through the stories, activities, and social interaction, our hope was that children and parents would emerge from Family Fun Night with a renewed appreciation of literature and the joys of reading.

References

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- Schleper, D. (1995). Reading to deaf children: Learning from deaf adults. *Perspectives in Education and Deafness*, 13(4), 4-8.