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Right: Children in the FEEDC program get hands-on experience as they learn about how things grow.

IT'S ABOUT LISTENING TO
OUR FAMILIES AND THE NEEDS
OF THEIR CHILDREN:

the family education and early childhood department

AT THE MARYLAND SCHOOL
FOR THE DEAF

*By Cheri Dowling, Deborah Marquez, Lori Moers,
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Current trends and issues surrounding birth screening, early intervention services, and deaf children's varying access to language and literacy demonstrate a critical need to improve our understanding of how to involve families as partners in their children's education. In the past decade, increasing numbers of deaf children have been identified through birth screening within the first few months of life (Yoshinaga-Itano, 2004; Marge & Marge, 2005). Between 8,000 and 12,000 infants are identified as deaf or hard of hearing each year (<http://infanthearing.org/resources/fact.pdf>). By six months of age, they are in intervention programs and receive intensive language services (Yoshinaga-Itano, 2004).

The family and school partnership provides critical support for children in all areas of language, cognition, social-emotional, and physical development from early childhood to the high school years. It is essential that schools and programs draw on research on best practices in family involvement to establish the type of effective communication between

*Photos courtesy of the Maryland School for the Deaf's
Family Education and Early Childhood Department*





school and home that contributes to the positive impact of family involvement on children's learning experiences. At the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD), various research-based approaches, tools, and techniques are used to promote families as partners in their children's education.

Program Overview

The Family Education and Early Childhood Department (FEECD) at MSD, established in 1968, is a recognized service provider in the state of Maryland for deaf and hard of hearing children and their families. FEECD serves deaf and hard of hearing children (including those who have additional disabilities) from birth until the child's fifth birthday at no cost to families. The only requirements are that the child has a documented hearing loss and that the child and his or her family are residents of Maryland.

The single point of entry for early intervention services in Maryland is via each local Infants and Toddlers Program. The 24 local lead agencies and MSD have a memorandum of understanding to ensure that families with deaf and hard of hearing infants access all services that are available to them. The FEECD has made a concerted effort to establish networks of referral with these local lead agencies so that accurate information is provided to families regarding early language learning and educational opportunities for their children.

Direct services to families are provided by FEECD educators, who have the training and expertise to handle the varied linguistic, social-emotional, and academic needs of the birth-age 5 population of deaf and hard of hearing children in the state. They travel extensively throughout the state to provide services to these children and their families in natural environments such as the



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home, daycare centers (both private and public), libraries, and other settings as requested by the family. The goal is to have children and families learn in their community settings and to focus on the opportunities that these various social learning events can provide.

FEECD also offers center-based services. Children participate in FEECD programs at either the Columbia or Frederick campus. Play groups are offered for infants 6 months to 2 years old two mornings a week while 2- and 3-year-old children may attend preschool classes five mornings a week. The services provided are based on either an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Three-year-old children attending preschool at MSD also have the opportunity to participate in “specials” as provided on each campus and those may include physical education, art, drama, computer, and/or library classes.

The FEECD program uses the Maryland State Department of Human Resources Child Care Administration, the Healthy Beginnings curriculum, and the Creative Curriculum. These curricula are compatible with the Maryland Model for School Readiness and the Maryland

State Curriculum, and they are endorsed by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) as appropriate curricula for early childhood settings. Coupled with an integrated early literacy thematic units/project approach, the curricula provide a strong early childhood curriculum. The focus is on preparing students to enter school ready to learn, and the following domains are covered:

- Personal and Social Development
- Language and Literacy
- Pre-reading
- Pre-writing
- Cognition and General Knowledge
- Physical Development
- Self-Help

A key component of FEECD services is a focus on ensuring that educational program decisions are based on sound evidence of each child’s strengths and needs. The following assessment tools and procedures are maintained for each child:

- Developmental scales using the Early Learning Accomplishment Profile
- Learning Accomplishment Profile; Ages and Stages Questionnaire (6-60 months)
- Language scales using the MacArthur Bates Communicative

Inventory Scale

- Work Sampling System (ages 3 and above)
- Auditory learning scales
- Portfolio assessment (18 months-3 years)
- An American Sign Language (ASL) checklist

The assessment protocol is reviewed annually to ensure use of current best practice tools as well as compliance with requirements set by the MSDE. This evidence-based practice of assessment-driven instruction using approved early childhood curricula leads families and teachers to develop outcomes that are functional, meaningful, specific, and family identified.

Another critical component is the emphasis placed on establishing communication between the child and his or her family using a bilingual approach:

- ASL is used to build language skills as early as possible since the prime time for language acquisition is between birth and 3 years of age. Direct ASL instruction is provided to families weekly at each campus. Opportunities for parents to learn ASL during the home visits allows for individual support for each family

in establishing critical early communication bonds with their infant. Children are provided direct instruction in ASL during center-based play groups and classes, and during the home visits.

- Spoken English language learning groups are available for small group instruction and one-to-one instruction. This support for spoken English development is available during home visits and on each campus. The spoken English language services are part of the instructional paradigm based on IFSP outcomes or IEP goals.
- Families are supported in the use of amplification with their deaf child, which may include hearing aids or cochlear implants. FEECD regularly works with children who are in the process of acquiring or who may already have a cochlear implant. The FEECD program audiologist and MSD campus audiologist coordinate services between implant center staff and MSD staff.

Families need support so they can gain information and access resources that will support them in maximizing their children's potential. FEECD provides this support in a variety of ways:

- Weekly parent support meetings are provided at each campus of MSD. These meetings provide opportunities for parents to meet and share common experiences in raising their children. These meetings are facilitated by an educator who can provide information related to a variety of topics at the request of the families.
- Siblings up until age 4 attend classes and playgroups with their deaf or hard of hearing sibling during these meeting times. This allows the parent to attend the parent meeting and supports the sibling relationship.
- To help families meet within their own geographical area, FEECD hosts regional meetings around the state
- FEECD plans individually designed home visits based on guided

discussions with each family. MSD service providers use a coaching model when working with families. This model supports a family in sharing their feelings, ideas, and goals. This dialogue guides the home visitor in providing the unique individual supports for each family to be actively involved in their child's educational program.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Professionals Provide Support and Hope

The Joint Committee on Infant Hearing's *Year 2007 Position Statement* emphasizes that early intervention programs should include opportunities for involvement of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing in all aspects of early intervention programs. Deaf and hard of hearing adults can be significant assets, and almost all families choose at some time during their early childhood programs to seek out both adults and child peers with hearing loss. When families are provided opportunities to interact and work with deaf or hard of hearing professionals, they are given the hope that their deaf or hard of hearing child can become a contributing member of society.

A national survey conducted by Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer (2003), published in their book *Parents and Their Deaf Children—The Early Years*, listed 13 potential sources of help for parents and asked them to indicate the helpfulness of each source. Teachers received the highest score, spouses came in second, therapists came in third, and deaf adults came in fourth. The *Beginnings Parent Manual*, offered by Beginnings for Parents of Children Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (2007), also provides this guidance: "Adults who are deaf or hard of hearing are tremendous resources for parents who are wondering what will happen as their child grows up." MSD has applied this to practice by having the MSD deaf and hard of hearing teachers provide families with a bridge to the Deaf community.

The Deaf community is extremely diverse, coming from all socioeconomic levels, educational backgrounds, and ethnic groups. Deaf individuals may use different types of technology; they may use sign language, spoken language, or both. They come from all walks of life. FEECD aims to support a Deaf community experience that gives

Top left: FEECD students and their parents participate in a cooking activity.

Right: After a cooking activity, children have the opportunity to taste what they've helped prepare.



families and their children a sense of belonging and identity knowing they are not alone in this world, having met others with similar challenges and experiences in several ways:

- FEECD staffers regularly share information about Deaf community organizations and events via e-mail lists and web-based announcements.
- Deaf professionals from FEECD have cultivated roles as mentors. The teacher-mentors offer to meet families at events to help them connect with other deaf and hard of hearing adults in attendance.
- Deaf professions from FEECD also provide weekly support to families during parent support meetings, ASL classes, home visits, and regional community meetings.
- Various Deaf community members are invited to parent group meetings and family ASL classes offered by MSD.

These deaf and hard of hearing teachers serve as role models that deaf and hard of hearing children can succeed with appropriate support from their family and school. Finally, the mentoring provided by the deaf professionals gives families the opportunity to gain an understanding of the importance of their children's whole development, the human need to and importance of developing friends, and the importance of not losing this perspective.

Family Support and Resource Center

The Family Support and Resource Center is a parent-driven resource center. The center is managed by a parent coordinator, who is a parent of a deaf child. The center is funded in part by a grant through the MSDE and is housed at MSD. Established in October 1999, the center provides support to families with deaf and hard of hearing children birth through age 21.

The center's mission is to give parent-to-parent support and help families to support their children in reaching their full potential. It has served thousands of families and professionals over the years.

The parent coordinator role is integral in providing support to families. Parent-to-parent support provided via personal contacts, as well as by matching families with trained parent mentors upon request, provides families with individual problem-solving skills and resources. The parent coordinator works with FEECD educators to host various events and programs around the state. This helps model working relationships between parents and professionals. The parent coordinator also collaborates with other agencies in Maryland in providing workshops and information.

The center provides an extensive lending library, a monthly newsletter, a resource/referral system, and parent

American Society for Deaf Children

The American Society for Deaf Children (ASDC) is a national, independent, nonprofit parent organization that supports and educates families of deaf and hard of hearing children and advocates for high quality programs and services.



Parent Choices: Key to Your Child's Future

June 22-26

The ASDC Biennial Conference provides families with five days of information and fun! Daytime workshops captivate parents while children participate in educational and recreational activities. Evening events bring families together, providing the opportunity to form new friendships and peer support.

Mark your calendar now for the 2011 conference hosted by the Maryland School for the Deaf.

Plans are underway for an exciting conference that will focus on exploring opportunities and building a strong foundation in five key areas: family, communication, education, community, and extracurricular opportunities.

For more information or to register for the conference, visit www.deafchildren.org.



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trainings. Services are aimed towards empowering parents with advocacy skills. Special interest support groups meet in the evenings to provide support and information to families on a variety

of topics, e.g., children who have cochlear implants, children who have additional special needs, enhancing positive parenting techniques for children ages 3-5, and other topics based on parent request.

“Systems and structures are things. They are programs. They have no freedom to choose. So the leadership comes from people. People design systems and all systems get the results they are designed

and aligned to get.”

The early intervention system in Maryland is an organization of structure and relationships both formal and informal. MSD is committed to building relationships with the local lead agencies within the state early intervention system and to empowering families with information and support so they can make decisions about their children’s education, language, and social development. When we listen to families and design systems to get the results they need, then we will have succeeded in providing a coordinated statewide system with a full range of opportunities for all deaf and hard of hearing children and their families. It is about listening to a family’s hopes and dreams for a bright future for their child.

If you would like more information about MSD, please visit www.msd.edu.

Conclusion

In Covey’s *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (2004), he tells us:

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