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deaf role models making a critical difference in new mexico

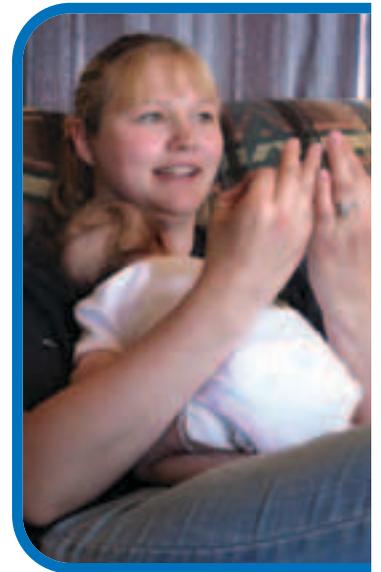
By Stacy Abrams and Rosemary Gallegos

In this issue of Odyssey, Joanne Corwin describes New Mexico's statewide partnership among several agencies for the provision of early intervention services to infants and children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families (Effective Partnering of State Agencies to Achieve Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Benchmarks, p. 20). One of these services is the Deaf Role Model Program, operated as a statewide Early Intervention Program through the New Mexico School for the Deaf (NMSD).

With greater understanding in the field of deaf education of the critical nature of early and accessible language and communication, Deaf Role Model Programs have played a significant role in early intervention services for families across the nation. A recent national survey conducted in the spring of 2010 (Gallegos & Lawrence, 2010) indicates that at least 18 states, through their state schools for the deaf, are utilizing deaf role models. In some states, programs are expanding in response to families' requests for more frequent visits from a deaf role model and for services beyond the Early Intervention time frame. Establishing and expanding a Deaf Role Model Program involves careful planning, collaborative partnerships, and visionary leadership.

Vision and Mission

Many deaf and hard of hearing children are born to parents who do not have experience or information that will help them open up their deaf child's world visually and make language available to their child at all times. Due to the importance of early and accessible language and communication and the development of positive self-esteem, it is critical that parents have resources that allow them to help their child develop language and have full interaction with their family. NMSD has the vision that, given adequate resources, parents can build a community of signers and role models for their child as they themselves



Photos courtesy of Stacy Abrams



Left: A father and daughter involved in the Deaf Role Model Program learn how to sign *I love you*.

Far left: A mother learns the sign *family* from a deaf role model.

negotiate learning a new language. Deaf adults are a valuable resource in supporting this vision.

The mission of the program needs to be clearly defined for all stakeholders. In New Mexico, the Deaf Role Model Program is statewide and serves families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in the birth through 6 age range. Deaf role models use the following strategies to implement the mission of the program:

- Share experiences about growing up as a deaf or hard of hearing person
- Encourage the family to attend special activities that broaden their community of deaf and hard of hearing contacts, enhance their communication/language model, and provide opportunities for interaction using sign language
- Share career goals, work experiences, and enthusiasm about the future potential of the child
- Model natural communication and teach sign language
- Focus on language and communication, making the child's world accessible, Deaf culture, literacy, and building community
- Encourage the inclusion of all family members in learning to communicate

Program Components

Effective Leadership

Various leaders comprise the successful implementation of a Deaf Role Model Program. Key to growth and quality of the program is a coordinator who can build a team of deaf role models through extensive networking and his or her enthusiasm of the program. The impact of a deaf role model can significantly influence a family's perspective, shifting it to a "can do" and "anything is possible" attitude for their child. In New Mexico, our coordinator travels to all areas of the state, interviewing potential deaf role models, meeting families, doing joint home visits with other NMSD School-age Outreach and Early Intervention Programs, assigning deaf role models, assuring that services are consistent and meet standards, and providing direct services to families when no deaf role model is available.

Upper administration plays a vital role by expecting communication, teaming, and resource sharing among the budget and personnel resources in its various programs such as early intervention, instruction, and School-age Outreach. Superintendents, directors, and other administrators travel to meet families and regional

providers at family events designed to bring families into proximity to each other and to more deaf adults.

Requirements of Deaf Role Models

Qualifications and requirements are clearly communicated to deaf role models during the hiring process. They understand that they must attend a series of trainings regarding program procedures and mission, the Shared Reading Project, and an annual statewide meeting of NMSD's Early Intervention Program. They are expected to be flexible in working with hearing people with and without an interpreter. Deaf role models must be gainfully employed, established homemakers or college students, and must receive clearance on a background check as required by state law. They are also expected to submit required monthly documentation substantiating the content and frequency of home visits. For services to children in the birth to age 3 category, a college degree is required in order to attain New Mexico Developmental Specialist Certification.

Training and supervision also involve regular contact from the program coordinator in the form of a review of all paperwork, check-ins with families as to satisfaction of services, frequent videophone contact, joint home visits, and individual work sessions to address any problem areas identified by either the deaf role model or the program coordinator.

Curriculum and Resources

Curriculum and resources used by the New Mexico Deaf Role Model Program include the SKI-HI Deaf Mentor Curriculum (SKI-HI Institute, 2001),



Above: A child and his mother sign together.

the Shared Reading Project (Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, 1995), and Signing Time (Coleman, 2005). Also, invaluable are the human and program resources embedded within NMSD. The Deaf Role Model Program regularly interacts and teams with the School-age Outreach Program, the NMSD AmeriCorps Sign Language Model Program, and the Step*Hi Early Intervention Program. The Deaf Role Model Program also relies on its relationship and network with professional deaf adults employed at NMSD for recruitment of its deaf role models. NMSD alumni are valued for their knowledge of the Deaf community in their areas of the state.

Referrals

Information about the Deaf Role Model Program is provided to families through the well-established NMSD statewide Step*Hi Early Intervention Program and NMSD satellite preschools. These programs have multiple entry points from the state public system including the state's EHDI (Early Hearing Detection and Intervention) project, local educational agencies, audiologists, early intervention agencies, and doctors. As children enter Step*Hi or preschool, they are informed about the Deaf Role Model Program. This allows the Deaf Role Model

Program to capitalize on a network already recognized by the state system and to begin working with families as quickly as possible.

Meeting Diverse Needs

Meeting diverse cultural and language demographics must be considered so that families agree to participate in the program and are served effectively. Over 50 percent of families seen by the NMSD Early Intervention Program are Hispanic. When needed, Spanish language interpreters as well as sign language interpreters are provided for initial home visits when a family is still adjusting to communicating directly with the deaf role model in American Sign Language. Spanish language interpreters are also provided for all events sponsored by the program. Providers live in the communities where they work so they are accustomed to and knowledgeable about the traditions and values of the community and possible social boundaries when visiting families in their homes. Deaf role models know

that Hispanic and Native American cultures are highly inclusive of extended families and ensure strategies are used that allow them to interact with and involve all members of the immediate and extended family.

Monitoring Program Effectiveness

Feedback from families—and the gathering of their stories—on a regular basis helps the program monitor its impact. One such story involves a primarily Spanish-speaking family living in a small farming community in southern New Mexico. Their son was referred to Step*Hi at 2 months old, and by 3 months old he had been introduced to the Deaf Role Model Program and begun receiving periodic visits from the coordinator. He started receiving regular visits from a deaf role model by his first birthday. The family has participated in Outreach learning events on NMSD’s main campus and has been introduced to other families and a number of deaf adults. The child is now 1.5 years old, and his assessments show his progress at or above his developmental age for language and communication. This story helps the program identify areas of strength, such as early referral resulting in timely provision of services, expected child outcomes, family involvement, and the ability to reach families in rural areas of the state. One weakness of the program when analyzing the story is the time lapse between entering NMSD’s Early Intervention Program and the regular services from the Deaf Role Model Program, most likely caused by the paucity of deaf role models in that area of our state.

Keeping a record of various types of data helps inform the program of the next steps and viability and provides justification for additional resources. The Deaf Role Model Program hired a full-time coordinator in 2008 with the goal of expanding the number of deaf role models and the number of families served. As can be seen from the simple data collected below, this goal was

achieved with the number of families almost doubled within two years. Clearly, the addition of a full-time coordinator and a full-time provider has increased the program’s ability to expand the number of part-time deaf role models recruited and to provide services to more families.

difference not a disability, and that building a rich, natural language and communication environment for a child is critical to realizing his or her potential in life, including becoming a full member of his or her family and community.

2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time coordinator • 15 part-time deaf role models • 33 families in the program • 29 families on the waiting list 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time coordinator • 20 part-time deaf role models • 45 families in the program • 22 families on the waiting list 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time coordinator • 1 full-time deaf role model • 23 part-time deaf role models • 62 families in the program • 17 families on the waiting list

Partnerships and Public Awareness

In order for a Deaf Role Model Program to be successful in meeting its goals and reaching the targeted population, it operates with the awareness that it is one part of multiple systems at the family, community, state, and national levels and, as mentioned before, key programs within NMSD. The NMSD Deaf Role Model Program is a recognized service of New Mexico early intervention Part C. It derives a network of contacts and referrals as well as funding by operating within this structure. As a member of this recognized mandated state service, the Deaf Role Model Program benefits from additional quality control related to required documentation of services and qualifications of staff it can employ. In turn, the presence of the Deaf Role Model Program informs the Part C (birth through age 3) state system that a deaf child is to be celebrated. It becomes a resource in facilitating understanding of the fact that with early and ongoing access to language, being deaf is a

References

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