

Language and Communication

Margaret Finnegan, Ph.D., One Parent's Perspective

Deaf and hard of hearing children, like all children who are neurologically intact, are born with the amazing ability to acquire and develop language. From the earliest moments of life, they begin to communicate their needs and to interact with those around them. Through cries, squeals, hand clapping and eye gaze, deaf and hearing children begin to engage in the process of language learning. We watch them carefully and listen to them, certain that every utterance is meaningful. In this manner we recognize and build their skills. Through their daily efforts to make sense of the sounds of voices and/or the signs on hands, children activate their innate ability to acquire and develop the most sophisticated communication system of all - language.

Language, whether it is spoken or signed, whether it is English, French or American Sign Language, is learned through interaction. Children must actively participate in figuring out meanings, rules and structures: they cannot learn by passively observing or mimicking the language of others. Cognitive and social experiences aligned with meaningful linguistic data are required in large doses and in natural contexts for all children. By the time hearing children enter school, they have already

mastered language. They have done so without formal language instruction.

Deaf and hard of hearing children have the same aptitude for language development as hearing children do. However, they must interact with their world visually instead of auditorially. Instead of listening and speaking, they watch and often gesture to make their intentions known. Their access to interaction is visual in a world where most people depend on audition. It is this fundamental mismatch of systems which often prevents the deaf child from participating in and mastering language.

It is up to us as parents, teachers and care givers to visually maximize the interactive process for deaf and hard of hearing children. By including deaf and hard of hearing children in social and cognitive activities, by concentrating on communicating meaning (not structure) and by providing visual access to communication whenever possible, we can capitalize on the strengths of deaf and hard of hearing children. Sign language provides an access which is minimal in speech and audition. It ensures the deaf and hard of hearing child's participation in the language learning process.

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It helps us to expand our communication and this in itself leads to a stronger language competence.