

## More Than Their “S” Sound

By Janet DesGeorges and Sara Kennedy, H&V Headquarters

Recently, both of our daughters shared stories about their experience with speech therapy in their early years. Both daughters grew into a strong sense of identity both as deaf/hard of hearing women and in the many roles they now play--from college student to professional, friend, sister, business person, partner or mother. They enjoyed and appreciated their time in speech therapy, and both would say they are glad to be able to move between the hearing and Deaf worlds with their ability to listen and speak, as well as sign.

During those early years, we were each invested in all the interventions that supported our individual daughter’s language acquisition and proficiency, including Speech-Language, Pathology (SLP) services. For Janet, “the part of our daughter Sara’s life that focused on speech, was, in general, positive. We really appreciated the various SLPs in her life, and our primary focus was to integrate SLP supports into daily life and academic world. For example, one year our SLP in school worked on Sara’s articulation by pulling from her spelling list. At some point, though, Sara began to be ‘done’ with speech therapy, and began to ask for those services to be removed from her IEP services. She was ready to be done before we, her parents were.” Janet’s daughter Sara reflects, “I remember driving to one IEP with my mom and dad and arguing a bit about whether we could drop speech therapy or not. My dad wanted me to keep working on my ‘s’ sounds, and I was satisfied with my progress. I laugh thinking about it now, when I order a coffee at Starbucks and they ask me my name, and when my drink is ready, they sometimes call out, ‘Tara.’”

“For us, as Sara’s parents and advocates, we transitioned from being the primary decision makers in Sara’s supports and services, to letting her lead the way, including how much or how long she would continue speech therapy services. Our goals for her had always been *good language and literacy*, in whatever mode that was right for her. Recently, for a Halloween party, Sara dressed as ‘*Sally sells seashells down by the seashore*’ and the whole family shared in her laughter about how prevalent that type of phrase had been in her life.

That said, both daughters had some painful memories as well. Maddie Smentowski relates that her earliest speech therapy memories lit a fire in her to improve her speech and language. She even kept a journal of idioms in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Still, speech therapy sometimes



*‘Sally sells seashells down by the Seashore’,  
Sara DesGeorges dresses as Sally for Halloween 2021*

left her feeling “less than” when compared to another young classmate who lost her hearing related to a serious illness after learning to talk. “If we worked hard and produced our sounds correctly, we could pick out three gummy bears and their colors. If we didn’t, we would still get one gummy bear, but the therapist would choose the color. Eventually, in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, the therapist told me that the other student graduated from speech therapy because her speech was perfectly understandable,” said Smentowski. “Funny that this class-

mate now doesn't use her voice at all in public, and yet had perfect articulation. Now I understand better why some Deaf people choose not to use their voices. For me, I have seen too many instances when interpreters do not share all the information and meaning when a Deaf person is signing or others are voicing. I value the ability to voice for myself, even if that means I occasionally say something that is 'off'.

Sara DesGeorges can remember some speech therapists' frustration with her unwillingness to "keep working" on speech, when all she wanted to do was to go out and play with her classmates. She can reflect now that those sessions were important, but she also missed out on what the other kids were doing and learning.

It is not unusual to have speech-language pathologists who find themselves working with a deaf/hh student without much prior experience. Veterans and rookies alike can benefit from adults who have lived the experience of speech therapy. Stephanie Olson, a Family Liaison with Children's Hospital Colorado and a co-director of Hands & Voices Deaf/HH Infusion, notes that today's D/HH therapists are often amazing, committed professionals who make it a goal to ensure their sessions are engaging and fun for kids. They work hard to be part of the child's whole team.

Olson herself remembers handmade books about Sammy the Snake and repeating the Sally Sells Seashells by the Seashore line. In middle school, her SLP tried her best to engage and have natural conversations, but once Olson started sharing in the session...

click,  
click,  
click

went the handheld tally counter when she had less than perfect speech sounds. As a voracious reader, Olson learned to substitute words without /s/, /sh/ and /ch/ sounds to avoid those clicks. The good news: being hyper-vigilant with self-correction did lead to an improvement with those sounds even given her severe hearing loss. The bad news: it took years to realize that her self-worth was not connected to her ability to make these sounds. She is glad that today's providers much more often work with the whole child, accepting and acknowledging the limits of technology and supporting visual communication based on parent/child choice.

Olson notes that sometimes providers or parents share that their young child seems to enjoy talking but will shut down altogether when people ask questions. If responses from the child tend to be corrected or if they will be asked to repeat themselves until the adult "gets it", why would a child want to talk? There are times when correction during natural conversations may be appropriate and there are times when it's best to wait. If your child is telling a joke, wait for it. They will tell the joke again. If it's funny once, the joke will be funny at least 100 more times. You will get your chance to work on the articulation aspect of the joke.

When emotions are running high, these are difficult times to express oneself clearly, Olson notes.

Rather than asking your child to say it again, or correct the



mispronounced or unintelligible words, try asking other probing questions using what you *did* understand.

"Your brother said he was going to what?" or "Who took your turn on the swing?"

If the time is right, you can have a little fun with the mispronunciations. "I had a kiddo who was crying and talking at the same time and I could not understand what he was saying. I finally asked in a very surprised voice, "you want coffee with your snack?" He laughed and said it again until we both got it right. Now that's communication!"

What can parents and speech-language pathologists take away from these stories? We can think of a few caveats to make sure speech therapy is productive while not harming a child's sense of self.

## **Appreciating the Whole Child in Speech Therapy**

No matter what a child's articulation, a child's identity is not rooted in their ability to speak clearly.

Understandability may be the sum of many different factors, from the quality of a child's equipment, skill in programming frequently enough, environmental support, parents' and teachers' understanding and support of wearing time, and even subtler needs such as sensory integration and a child's unique hearing profile. A young child has no control over any of these factors!

Remind the child often that you love and appreciate them for who they are as people.

Help a child see their individual progress in speech and language (vs. comparing to other kids).

Refrain from always correcting a child's speech at the risk of shutting down their verbal expression.

Enjoy a child's expression in whatever means that happens.

Parents can help a therapist get to know a child's preferences and dislikes more quickly to help with building rapport.

Use the child's current academic and social goals in therapy whenever possible.

In the end, when it comes to language proficiency, signing, cueing or speaking/listening, our children's sense of self should be connected to who they are as whole human beings. We can all celebrate and be united in that! ~