



COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mentors/Role Models

1. What do we mean by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mentors?

When an educational planning team is assembled to discuss services for a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, the positive outcome desired is the product of an interdisciplinary effort by service providers and parents. The inclusion of Deaf and hard of hearing mentors/role models can have a profound impact for everyone; child, parent and professional. Deaf and hard of hearing (d/hh) mentors, guides or role models are uniquely qualified to provide the child, parents and professionals with a positive and hopeful perspective from their day-to-day, real life experiences as a d/hh person living in a hearing world. In sharing these experiences and insights, d/hh mentors may be able to articulate what the child cannot, which brings an important perspective and credibility to the team discussion of the child's needs which can extend beyond academics.

This was demonstrated during a conversation with a mother who was hearing and her daughter who was hard of hearing. The little girl was preparing to embark on her first sleep-over. The mother knew the conversations would become difficult as the lights went out and all the girls prepared to bunk down for the evening. She shared her concerns with a d/hh mentor who was able to recall her own feelings and memories of childhood sleepovers and camping. In sharing some of those experiences, the mentor encouraged the mother to buy little flashlights for all the girls. Knowing that any child cannot resist the lure of a flashlight, her daughter would now have access to light and be able to see enough to hear and communicate during her first sleep-over. While the long term outcome would be for the child to self-advocate, at the age of six, it's easier and more fun to have a tool, (a flashlight in this case), than to explain to a group of little girls why having the light at night was beneficial to her. In this situation, the d/hh mentor had successfully modeled a realistic and positive way to handle a real life issue. The development of self-advocacy skills are based upon the multiple ordinary experiences that moments like these provide.

When a hearing parent of a child with a newly identified hearing loss looks ahead, they may only be able to focus on what is missing. The d/hh mentor has an opportunity to present to the family a perspective of optimism. By sharing stories, experiences and asking questions, the family may be able to take a step beyond that first awkward moment of how to “talk to a Deaf or hard of hearing person.” The d/hh mentor can model effective and meaningful communication and build a relationship with the family, and support the relationship between the parent and child. What we desire for all families, hearing or not, is the ability for our children to form and maintain lifelong relationships. Initiating this connection, starts the family on the path of building relationships in a way that they could not have foreseen prior to their child’s identification of a hearing loss.

2. What issues are at the forefront in initiating opportunities to connect Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mentors and families?

Creativity and foresight is needed to fund and implement a Guide By Your Side (GBYS) Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guide or other Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mentor Program. Early intervention programs, hospitals, diagnostic centers and schools need to collaborate and connect families with d/hh mentors. Collaboration with other non-profits and agencies need to be explored, as well as searching out public and private grants. Mentors need to be compensated for their time and viewed as a part of the family support system. Mentors need written job descriptions and training to be appropriate in their roles and influence. The development of policies and procedures needs to be a part of a strength-based program, with strong role models which in return will help build strong families.

Successful GBYS or other d/hh mentor programs come from creative systems and benefit from a diverse group of Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. D/hh Guides and Mentors need to be open minded and professional in their work. They need to be current with the wide variety of communication approaches. They must have effective team-working skills, be confident in home and professional settings. D/hh mentors need to have interpersonal skills which empower. And finally, d/hh mentors need an honest awareness of their personal opinions and how to remain unbiased as they communicate and support the families whose choices may differ.

3. What should every parent or professional know about initiating Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mentors?

The d/hh mentor is coming into the team to support everyone. Families and professionals do not need to be in a crisis mode, stuck in a decision making quandary or have burning questions in order to benefit from the inclusion of a GBYS DHH Guide or d/hh mentor. Connecting families with d/hh mentors throughout a child’s life, even when things are going well, is beneficial. It may be difficult to foresee or fully comprehend how meeting a d/hh mentor will help until after families have had the opportunity to work together. Likewise, professionals who have mentioned that a child has worn hearing aids for years and is doing well, may gain additional insight and perspective not only for the child but for others they serve. At different points in a child’s life, the child may encounter new questions or concerns, but they may be unsure of how to express it. Having the opportunity to work with a d/hh mentor can be valid and useful as the child sees or hears what worked for the d/hh mentor. . A personal perspective from a d/hh mentor may increase an openness to examining issues with greater depth.

One thing professionals may miss is that the diagnosis of a hearing loss changes the identity of both the parents and the child. (Author Stephanie Olson points out that her husband once commented, “I had no idea I was a hearing person until I met you!”) By presenting families with opportunities to meet d/hh mentors, families begin to understand and recognize the potential in their child regardless of the

child's hearing diagnosis. New ways of communicating and thinking become the new normal for families as they see these strategies modeled and supported by d/hh mentors.

“A young friend of mine, who is hard of hearing, asked if she could only marry a hard of hearing man. Would she have options? That was an issue that kept me awake at nights as a teen. Families have many questions from the heart that they may want to ask, such as, should we stop playing music if our child can't hear it? How will we handle teasing? Why is it so important to point out all the sounds in our world if the child most likely won't hear them? I can share with them that while I can't hear all the sounds in my home, I am always amused that they exist, such as, the dog's toenails on the wood floor or the dishwasher changing cycles. Another d/hh mentor might have a different perspective which is why it is important for parents and professionals to understand that matching a child's audiogram or hearing loss to a d/hh mentor doesn't guarantee the same life experiences or perspective. Every child should be supported to reach their own unique potential regardless of how they communicate or what their audiogram looks like.”

4. Where can I find information about Deaf and Hard of Hearing Mentors?

The Hands & Voices Communicator (quarterly newspaper, see <http://www.handsandvoices.org/resources/communicator.htm> for more information) and this article for a parent perspective: <http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/perfect/V12-1relevant.htm>

<http://www.skihi.org/> is a website with information about the Ski Hi Institute and training curriculum which features Deaf mentors

Hands & Voices Guide By Your Side program has a GBYS Deaf/Hard of Hearing Guide feature; find out more at: <http://www.handsandvoices.org/gbys/index.htm>

THE AUTHOR

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Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that's designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We've recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!