

Spotlight on Success Article

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Program Submitted:

Oklahoma Family Network and Oklahoma School for the Deaf

Title:

Silent(ish) Zooms

Community, social interaction, and friendship are crucial for humans. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted so many aspects of daily life for so many. In a sense, the ability to connect socially was lost. Silent dinners are a prominent feature in the Deaf Community where people gather and communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). Like so many other events, silent dinners were either cancelled or in some cases done over Zoom.

Silent(ish) Zoom meetings were born out of this need for socialization. In August 2020, the Oklahoma Family Network partnered with the Family and Early Childhood Service at the Oklahoma School for the Deaf to offer monthly Zoom meetings where people are welcome to communicate using spoken language and ASL as they are comfortable. The online gatherings start out with brief introductions and move on to light-hearted ice breaker questions or games that foster vocabulary practice.

The original goal of the Silent(ish) Zoom meetings was to allow families of children with hearing loss who have chosen to use American Sign Language or Total Communication, a combination of spoken and signed language, to have an opportunity to practice ASL in a non-judgmental and safe setting. Families are encouraged to join with any level of ASL expertise allowing new signers to feel welcome.

Initially, these gatherings were directed at parents of children with hearing loss but have expanded to include grandparents as well as parents of children who are using ASL to communicate in absence of hearing loss. An individual studying ASL at a local university participated in the October Zoom meeting. In October, the meeting featured a Halloween themed Bingo game and included both parents as well as children.

These online gatherings have given families a chance to chat, sign, laugh, and learn. One participant who has a child with hearing loss commented that "it was the highlight of [her] week". Another parent commented that "I could really use chat time with adults" and that she "really enjoyed last night". One parent of child using ASL in absence of hearing loss said that she "had a good time and learned a lot".

Gatherings via Zoom extend beyond boundaries of Oklahoma. Silent(ish) Zoom meetings are promoted using social media and private Facebook groups as well as via email. A parent of a child with hearing loss living in Connecticut saw one such post and contacted Oklahoma Family Network inquiring if her parents living in Oklahoma could participate in the October meeting. Hence, the first grandparents joined the meeting. After attending, they said that they "had a great time playing Halloween Bingo"! They "immediately texted their daughter in CT and told her

how much fun it was! Our motivation for learning ASL is even stronger now. Who knew that it could be so much FUN”?

Some of the participating families with children with hearing loss receive services through the Family Engagement and Early Language Support (FEELS) program through the Oklahoma School for the Deaf. The FEELS program offers early intervention from birth to age six to families in Oklahoma with children who have hearing loss. Parent Advisors, trained professionals, assist families with language and communication goals for their children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. They serve as coaches and provide support in ways to encourage language and literacy development. Interested families may receive services by filling out the following online referral form https://www.osd.k12.ok.us/505418_3.

Oklahoma Family Network (OFN) provides emotional support through support groups and by connecting families with other families. Families receive information and training learning to advocate and lead with regional coordinators that contact and engage families. OFN strives to provide unbiased support to these families regardless of the chosen method of communication e.g. spoken English, sign language, or total communication. Families who would like to talk with another family with a child who has hearing loss may fill out the online referral form <http://oklahomafamilynetwork.org/what-we-do/talk-with-another-family/>.