

Hearing Parents in a Deaf World

By Janet DesGeorges

Many parents ask the question, "What will the future hold for my child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing?" I had great fears around this issue when my child was identified with a hearing loss. Over the years, my fears on this subject have greatly subsided, due to the input of adults who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing whom I have had the opportunity to meet. To see and talk with adults who are happy, healthy, contributing members of society has helped to set a vision in my heart concerning my daughter who is hard of hearing. I have had the privilege of meeting deaf/hh(deaf/hard of hearing) adults who use ASL; who use their voice only; who are learning to sign later in life; who are bilingual; who are successful in their careers, marriages, relationships and life pursuits. In short, who have a diverse set of life experiences and yet have achieved what I want my child to become, a well-adjusted successful human being! The opportunities to meet and exchange ideas about what it means to be deaf from individuals who are living this experience, has opened my mind, enlarged my beliefs, and filled me with hope. However, this awareness has grown over time.

I remember the day I first sat in a meeting filled with deaf and hard of hearing adults. I wanted to run for the door. My two-year-old daughter Sara had just been 'diagnosed' with a hearing loss, and I went to a meeting to learn about communication options. I remember thinking that this place had nothing to do with MY daughter, with OUR family's life, with MY experiences. I was overwhelmed with how little I knew about the deaf or hard-of-hearing experience. I felt no connection to the people sitting around me, and to tell you the truth, I didn't want any.

Of course, that was many years ago, and I never get the urge to run away when I'm in a group of people who happen to be deaf or hard of hearing. I also consider many deaf and hard of hearing adults as my friends, if not lifesavers, throughout our journey of raising a child who is deaf/hh. I would like to share with you my experiences over the years of the impact adults who are deaf/hh have had on my life as a hearing parent of a deaf child. These experiences have played a huge role in shaping the choices my husband and I have made regarding her communication, the development of her self-esteem, and our ability to embrace her 'difference'. I would also like to share with you the importance of valuing and respecting hearing parents of deaf/hh children, and their contributions to bettering the systems that serve our children.

One of the first deaf adults that I encountered shortly after Sara's identification of hearing loss, seemed to carry a great deal of anger about her 'hearing parents'. When she expressed her isolation and discontent about the choices her parents made for her growing up, I was filled with a sense of panic. I certainly did not want my daughter growing up feeling isolated in her own home, and estranged from her parents. At the time, I felt like I needed to make a choice between raising my child in the 'hearing' world or the 'deaf' world, with great sacrifice on either side - no matter what I chose for her. If we forced her to live in our world, trying to make her as 'hearing' as possible, I knew we ran the risk of losing her someday to the deaf world. If we chose the deaf world, would

we then risk the chance of losing her from our family community and culture? I think the mistake in my thinking at the time was that we had to choose one or the other...

I have talked to other parents who were confronted by deaf adults that seemed to belittle or discount their choices for their deaf child, because we as hearing people couldn't possibly understand their life experience. To an extent, this is true. I am a hearing person. I don't know what it is like to be deaf. But what I do know is a parent's love; a parent's motivation to see my child become an effective communicator in her world; a parent's commitment and expectation to an excellent education. I advocate and fight for these things. I have learned over the years the impact my daughter's deafness has had on her access to communication, to an appropriate education, and to her self-awareness as a human being.

I have learned some great lessons from deaf and hard of hearing adults that have helped me to step outside the box of my own life experience.

...I remember the story of the deaf woman who can't remember any projects she did in elementary school 25 years ago, but she does remember hiding in the bathroom stall of the girls' room from her speech therapist...It made me committed to letting my kid be a kid!

...I remember walking through the airport with a deaf man who did not use his voice, and realized he was perfectly capable of communicating and getting his needs met in a completely 'hearing' environment...it made me realize a deaf person will be OK out there in the 'hearing' world, even if they don't use their voice.

...I remember the hard of hearing woman talk about how hard it is sometimes to maintain friendships, it takes a little bit more patience from people to adapt to her needs....It made me realize I did not want to lose my patience with my daughter, and appreciate the friends in her life who have taken the time!

...I remember feeling judged by a deaf person about the communication choices we have made for my daughter, who didn't know our family's story...it made me realize that while other's might want to put a box around our daughter's life, I have refused to.

...I remember feeling totally accepted and encouraged by deaf/hh people about the choices I have made. It made me proud of the choices we have made, and of who my daughter is becoming.

...I have been challenged by deaf/hh people to do more, to learn more, to open up my mind, to think of the possibilities.

I have met deaf oral adults who are perfectly happy to have been raised orally and are doing fine.

I have met deaf signing adults who are perfectly happy to have been raised using sign language, and are doing fine.

By having deaf and hard of hearing adults in my life as a parent, I have been able to open the door for my daughter to be who she is. A deaf person. But she is also a deaf person with a family, and we have a heritage and tradition that she is also a part of. Our community values, religious beliefs and family traditions are also a part of who she is. I'm glad she has deaf pride. I'm also glad she has pride in who she is as a member of our family.

So, where does Sara live now, you might ask? Does she live in the deaf world or the hearing world, or can we define her 'world' outside these terms? The truth is, she lives in a world where we sometimes struggle to give her equal communication access, where she sometimes feels isolated from hearing people, where she sometimes has the opportunity to be immersed in Deaf community, where she sometimes chooses just to be with her hearing friends, where she defines herself not just by her degree of hearing loss, but by her gifts and talents, and her hopes and dreams as a human being. Isn't that what we all deserve?

My point is that in the beginning of our journey, we were told that there was only one right way to raise our daughter, or she would be doomed. By taking the time to meet other deaf/hh adults, I have learned that it's not about finding THE right way, but finding what works for our daughter, in our family, in her life.

Hearing parents should embrace the stories and life experiences of deaf and hard of hearing adults in order to understand their own child better. The deaf and hard of hearing communities also need to value and respect hearing parents who have deaf children and the choices we are making. Today's parents are different from a generation ago. We have more choices. We have the opportunity to be better informed. A new breed of parents who are raising their children in today's world are refusing to be drawn into the battle of methodology that has existed over the last 100 years. Organizations such as Hands & Voices (www.handsandvoices.org) provides support to ensure that each child is living in a communication rich environment with the ability to communicate effectively in their own homes, in their education, and social lives. State agencies such as Schools for the Deaf and others provide Role Model and Mentor programs so families can meet Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults in a safe setting.

Obviously, our story is not finished. Our daughter will continue to grow and make choices for herself as moves through life. I am completely satisfied that whatever choices she makes, from what college she will attend, to the friends and the communities she is a part of, that she is going to be just fine out there in the big, wide world!

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