

Practical Considerations for Counselors Working With Hearing Children of Deaf Parents

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Counseling literature has not adequately addressed various experiences encountered by hearing children of deaf adults. Awareness and understanding of these unique experiences would better prepare counselors to work with such clients. The authors review such experiences in the context of Deaf culture and believe such a review will enable the counselor to establish more effective counseling relationships with these children and their deaf parents.

The purpose of this article is to provide counseling professionals with information about hearing children of deaf adults within a cultural context rather than a pathological context. Such information will aid counselors in being more effective in their work with members of this group. In writing this article, we in no way mean to imply that having deaf parents in and of itself creates problems for hearing children. Instead, we take the position that we are dealing with cultural issues. Therefore, the deaf referred to in this article are those who define themselves as culturally deaf. "Most culturally Deaf people have moderate to profound hearing loss since birth or childhood" (Preston, 1994, p. 15).

Little has been written in the counseling literature about hearing children of deaf parents. In our review of journals published by the American Counseling Association from 1985 to 1997, we found only one article on hearing children of deaf parents (i.e., Buchino, 1990). Several factors may account for the dearth of articles about hearing children of deaf adults. The relative invisibility of this group is one factor. These children come from all ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds. The only common characteristic is having deaf parents. A second factor is a fairly pervasive lack of understanding of deafness on the part of most counseling professionals. The hearing public generally views deafness as a disability and has little understanding or information about deaf culture. Furthermore, Hoffmeister (1996) pointed out that many of the professionals involved in educating the deaf have viewed deafness as pathological by focusing on the hearing loss. This pathological view is in stark contrast to the view of the deaf community: "Members consider themselves neither isolated nor disabled, but rather a cultural and linguistic minority" (Hoffmeister, 1996,

p. 172). Lane (1992) stated that "What makes the American deaf community more like Hispanic-Americans than disabled Americans, of course, is its culture, including its language" (p. 20).

If the only common characteristic for hearing children of deaf adults is having deaf parents, is this sufficient to create a distinct group worthy of professional discourse? There are several ways to respond to this question. By having parents who are members of a distinct cultural group and who communicate in a particular language argues for the fact that hearing children of deaf adults are a distinct group. The occupational choices of hearing children of deaf adults offer further evidence. Preston (1994) found that 60% of hearing children of deaf adults had worked or were working in some manner with the deaf. This figure offers dramatic evidence of how influential having deaf parents may be on a hearing child. It would be hard to find any other single characteristic that would be so predictive of occupational choice. Formally, organized groups such as Children of Deaf Adults and Kids of Deaf Adults provide further evidence of hearing children of deaf adults as being members of a distinct cultural group (Preston, 1994).

DEAF CULTURE

To begin understanding hearing children of deaf adults, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of deaf culture. Language often is an important part of one's cultural identity. Although not all deaf persons in the United States use American Sign Language (ASL; some deaf rely almost exclusively on lipreading for communication), ASL still must be considered the single most important element that binds the deaf community together. ASL is a visual/gestural lan-

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guage as opposed to an aural/oral language. It is not English in pictures. Instead "American Sign Language is a natural language used by members of the North American Deaf community. It is a language that has developed naturally over time among a community of users. ASL exhibits all of the features of language . . . [phonology, morphology, and syntax]" (Valli & Lucas, 1995, p. 14).

Many deaf find English difficult to learn. The hearing acquire their language primarily through hearing it spoken, an avenue that is not available or is seriously restricted to the deaf. For the prelingually deaf (deafness occurred before the acquisition of speech), English can be viewed as a "foreign language." This "foreign" language environment can have a profound influence on development. For example, the third grade average English reading level of the deaf should not be considered an indicator of intelligence (Elliot, 1987) because the acquisition of reading skills is so dependent on hearing the language spoken.

As members of a language minority, many deaf do speak as they negotiate their way in the hearing world. However,

they may speak loudly, and with very poor modulation, since they cannot monitor their own voices by ear. Finally, they may have unconscious and often very energetic vocalizations of various sorts—accidental or inadvertent movements of the vocal apparatus, neither intended nor monitored, tending to accompany emotion, exercise, and excited communication. (Sacks, 1989, p. 130)

The deaf community prefers the state residential school for educating the deaf, because it is here that ASL and important cultural traditions of the deaf community are learned (Marschark, 1993). In fact, "Deaf people have mounted aggressive campaigns to block the closing of residential schools where this has been proposed, for example, by advocates for children with disabilities. Deaf ties formed at school are commonly lifelong" (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, p. 125). In addition to the importance of the role of the residential school in developing lifelong relationships, deaf clubs and organizations serve a vital function both in maintaining relationships developed at school and by providing opportunities to develop new deaf relationships.

The deaf often have negative experiences with the hearing world. These experiences have been described as alienation (Schein, 1989), oppression (Lane et al., 1996), or paternalism (Lane, 1992). All of these descriptions indicate the deaf feel that not only are they not understood by the hearing world but that the way they are treated is harmful. This, in part, accounts for the fact that many deaf associate only on a very limited basis with the hearing.

DEAF CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON HEARING CHILDREN OF DEAF ADULTS

How do the aspects of deaf culture discussed in the previous paragraphs affect hearing children of deaf adults? Although there is not a set of characteristics that would apply to all hearing children of deaf adults, they do share many characteristics. Both parents are usually deaf because "90% of deaf marry other deaf" (Schein, 1989, p. 106). Hearing

children of deaf adults usually have hearing grandparents because "90% of all deaf people have hearing parents. And 90% of all deaf parents have hearing children" (Moore & Levitan, 1993, p. 184). This creates an interesting array of challenges. Because ASL is learned in residential schools and not at home, most hearing parents of the deaf do not understand sign language. Therefore, the grandchild often is the only one in the family who is bilingual and understands the language of the grandparents and the language of the parents. The grandchildren's bilingualism opens an avenue of communication between the hearing parents and their deaf children that was not possible before.

Hearing children of deaf adults often become the communication link between their deaf parents and the hearing world. This may occur in several ways. They often serve as interpreters. Buchino (1990) indicated the oldest child frequently is the one who does most of the interpreting. However, Preston (1994) found that the oldest daughter often served as the interpreter, even if she had an older brother.

In addition to serving as interpreters of language, hearing children of deaf adults explain the hearing culture to their parents. This role might include explaining what a physician means, interpreting a rental agreement, or ordering a meal in a restaurant. The list goes on. There are several advantages to performing the roles of language and cultural interpreter. Hearing children of deaf adults could gain valuable information about the adult world that might assist them in their own development. In addition, they are provided an opportunity to develop a close relationship with their parents. However, there are also disadvantages associated with the interpreting role, such as placing these children in situations they are not equipped to handle. Preston (1994) found that these situations fell into two categories. The child was too young to understand the situation or was emotionally involved. However, Preston also found that hearing children of deaf adults felt that "their family experiences developed and encouraged their ability to empathize with others" (p. 143).

Underlying the concern about hearing children of deaf adults being placed in inappropriate interpreting situations is a concern of some hearing persons about the ability of the deaf to be effective parents. In these days of political correctness, such concerns might not be openly voiced. Instead, hearing parents, on learning that the parents of their child's friend are deaf, might not allow their child to stay overnight or ride in the car driven by the deaf parents. When this happens, despite the polite excuses, deaf parents know they are not trusted to monitor the safety of the children. Schein (1989) directly addressed the ability of the deaf to parent and, after a review of the literature, concluded that "on the average, Deaf parents rear children as well as parents in general" (p. 127). Mallory, Schein, and Zingle (1992) reported favorable perceptions about the parenting ability of the deaf by not only the deaf parents and their hearing children but the hearing grandparents as well. Rienzi (1990) found "[m]ost deaf-parented and hearing families . . . were in the normal range on discipline, more authoritative than

authoritarian, but deaf parents were significantly more flexible . . . [and] they deemphasize punishment but rely heavily on logical consequences, encouragement, and reward" (p. 407).

Although the deaf are no longer considered "less than human" because they do not have oral language (Lane, 1984), many of the deaf still feel the fear exhibited by many hearing when they encounter the deaf. Those contacts often increase when the deaf have hearing children. In those encounters, hearing children of deaf adults may assume the role of protector.

Protection comes in many forms. The hearing child may not interpret for their parent the insensitive remarks made by a hearing person who assumed everyone in the family was deaf because they were all signing. In a confrontation between a parent and a hearing person, to avoid escalating the situation, the child may not interpret all of a parent's angry statements or those of the hearing person. A hearing child of deaf adults speaking about her parents stated, "Any discrimination they had to face sometimes had to go through me first" (Johnson, 1996, p. 1). Another form of protection involves alerting parents to sounds that indicate possible danger, such as a police siren. Others define this protection role in different terms. Schein (1989) referred to it as *helping out*, Preston (1994) as *family responsibilities*, Lane et al. (1996) as *mediating*, and Buchino (1990) as *role reversal*.

The various aspects of the role of interpreter of language and the hearing culture role could be viewed negatively, because hearing children of deaf adults and deaf parents are involved in a dependent relationship in which the child's development of independence and autonomy seem to be hampered. However, this negative view may stem from "moral visions that presuppose individualism" (Christopher, 1996, p. 19). Individualism is distinctly Western and not a necessary ingredient for a culture to function effectively. Christopher contrasted individualism with collectivism, which "emphasizes the virtue of harmonizing one's relationships with one's in-group. Accordingly, sensitivity in understanding and anticipating others' feelings and reactions is cultivated and viewed as a sign of maturity" (p. 20). Collectivism is a moral vision that more accurately describes the

Deaf community, which relies on its own members for information as well as normative standards, [where] interdependence is a vital and socially important behavior. Their emphasis on the group rather than on the individual underscores a critical difference in how independence and dependence are perceived. Interdependence is seen not as a negation of independence but as a means of achieving it. (Preston, 1994, p. 158)

Understanding the positive nature of this interdependence may help the hearing draw conclusions about the deaf community that reflect an objective view rather than a cultural bias. Hoffmeister (1985) presented another view when he stated "A major problem for deaf parents appears to derive from the lack of exposure to good parent models" (p. 120). Although many of the deaf grew up in residential schools, parenting may be effectively dealt with by membership in

a culture that emphasizes collectivism. Rienzi (1990) offered support for this collectivism view. She found that deaf fathers were more willing than hearing fathers were to express disagreements on family matters and then negotiate with other family members. Rienzi concluded

that the hearing child in the deaf-parented family has higher levels of influence and this increased power, of itself, is neither good nor bad. The child's increased influence should be understood within the cultural context of this special family unit rather than be judged as pathological using hearing family standards. (p. 407)

COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to understanding the cultural context, having practical information on a variety of communication issues involving the deaf and knowing the impact these issues have on the hearing children will enhance the counselor's ability to work with the hearing child and the deaf parents of that child.

The use of an interpreter for the deaf involves a number of issues. Although hearing children of deaf adults or other family members should not act as interpreters in professional situations, such is often the case. The second author recently witnessed a district attorney asking a hearing child of deaf adults to interpret at her own juvenile court hearing when the interpreter did not arrive. Fortunately, the deaf parents and hearing child understood the request was inappropriate and refused. One could imagine how difficult it would be for the nonprofessional to accurately translate when what is being said is disagreeable to his or her, highly emotionally charged, or offensive to him or her. This would be true particularly for hearing children of deaf adults if they were being asked to interpret something negative about themselves. On the other hand, registered interpreters for the deaf are professionals who have their own code of ethics (Frishberg, 1990). Roe and Roe (1991) have offered practical suggestions on the use of interpreters that would be applicable in many professional situations.

A second communication issue involves the use of the telephone. Most deaf have a TTY (teletypewriter). The TTY looks like a small typewriter with a small viewing screen that shows what the party on another TTY is typing. A TTY user places a phone call in the usual manner. When the phone of the recipient rings, a phone flasher light turns on and off to alert the deaf person of an incoming phone call. Communication via the telephone is not limited only to those who have TTYs. Relay services are available in every state: "Specially trained agents complete all calls and stay on-line to relay messages either electronically over a Teletypewriter (TTY) or verbally to hearing parties" (*Makes All the Right Connections*, 1997, p. 2). Connection to a relay service is made through an 800-number. Relay operators are trained to explain how the service works. In addition, a variety of free written materials describe the service.

Counselors will more effectively use the relay service when they are aware of the cultural issues discussed earlier. The deaf sometimes have negative experiences with the hearing in the use of relay services. Although relay opera-

tors are trained to clearly explain the nature of a relay call to the hearing person who answers, the deaf often find that the hearing party hangs up without waiting for the explanation. It is not unusual for this to happen again when the call is placed a second time. A second negative experience associated with the relay is the insensitive remarks on the part of some hearing who receive a relay call. The deaf know about these remarks because relay operators type any background conversations that they hear. On more than one occasion, when the second author has made calls to professionals, support staff have made comments such as "I hate these relay calls." Counselors can train their support staff in the appropriate use of the relay system. Sometimes counselors and support staff will try to bypass the relay when they know a member of the household is hearing. The deaf regard this practice as patronizing and as a lack of respect. Even the use of TDD (telecommunications device for the deaf) as another term for TTY is a cultural issue. The deaf regard the hearing community's coining of the term TDD without considering the deaf's preference for TTY as another example of the patronizing attitude held by many in the hearing community (Colonos & Bienvenu, 1992).

A third practical consideration involves lipreading. Some deaf do not sign and rely on lipreading to communicate. Even when a deaf person relies primarily on ASL to communicate, there may be circumstances in which an interpreter is not available. Although looking at the deaf person when talking is logical, many hearing become uncomfortable with sustained eye contact and will look away. Shouting or exaggerating one's lip movements does not help, and in fact, makes communication even more difficult. Because the hearing may not always understand a deaf person's voice and the deaf may not always be able to read the hearing's lips, patience is an important ingredient in effective communication. Because the deaf can understand only 25% to 40% of the words (L. Walker, 1994) and the hearing have trouble understanding the deaf, the hearing should expect the need to repeat and to ask the deaf person to repeat. When the counselor communicates a willingness to be patient, many deaf will not feel a need to feign understanding. Most deaf have become "experts" at pretending to understand (Higgins, 1980; Vernon & Andrews, 1990). When the counselor does not become frustrated when communication is difficult and does not resort to phrases such as "never mind" and "I will tell you later," the deaf will not experience the painful memories of isolation and ridicule these phrases often trigger.

Another important practical consideration is the use of the closed-captioned capabilities of television sets. The audio is presented on the screen as text. Only sets with decoders show the text. Sets manufactured after July 1, 1993 have built-in decoder chips. Separate decoders can be attached to sets built before the 1993 date. The symbols "CC" or a box with a little tail indicate a television program or videotape is closed-captioned. When counselors are using a videotape in some type of presentation, choosing a closed-captioned video will mean the deaf can be included. It is

very important to know how to use the decoder. There are stories in the deaf community about embarrassed professionals who did not know how to use the device.

The final practical issue involves hearing dogs. Organizations such as International Hearing Dog, Inc., train dogs to become certified hearing dogs (*Training Other Ears to Hear*, 1992). These animals alert the deaf to such sounds as the telephone, door bell, stove buzzer, and baby cries, to name just a few. Certified hearing dogs are accorded the same legal privileges as other service dogs such as Seeing Eye dogs. Although they cannot be denied access to public places, many deaf have been confronted by uninformed individuals who attempt to deny access even when the dog is wearing the orange or yellow vest that identifies them as a certified hearing dog. These animals are not pets and should not be treated as such.

SEPARATION FROM PARENTS

What impact do interpreters, TTYs, closed-captioned television, and hearing dogs have on the hearing children of deaf adults? Together they represent an opportunity for the deaf to be independent and therefore less dependent on their hearing children to navigate the hearing world. In turn, this opportunity allows the hearing children of deaf adults to achieve greater separation from their parents. This situation is addressed in a number of books about growing up with deaf parents (Barash & Dicker, 1991; Preston, 1994; Schein, 1989; Sidransky, 1990; J. Walker, 1986). A brother and sister capture the essence of this issue stating,

We worried about the inevitable separation from our parents that would take place when we were older. Unlike the average hearing family, whose concerns are focused on whether the children will be able to manage on their own after leaving the home's protected environment, our situation was reversed. Our parents depended on us to help them with their problems, and we were worried about what would happen to them after we left home. (Barash & Dicker, 1991, p. 146)

Although greater separation may be obtained, this separation is not the same as that experienced by hearing children with hearing parents. The formation of the organization CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) indicates that many hearing children of deaf adults feel a lifelong connection to the deaf community. The themes of many of the annual CODA Conferences indicate both this connection and this need for understanding: "Celebration and Exploration of Our Heritage," "Reflection: CODAs and Cultures," "CODA: A Diverse Community," "A CODA Retreat: Coming Home!" and "You're Among Friends, Welcome Home" (CODA, 1999). Yes, hearing children of deaf adults do separate in that most of them move away from home. Yet many continue as "advocates for their parents as adults—whether in more direct roles on behalf of their parents, in careers related to deaf people, or merely in day-to-day interactions with friends and acquaintances" (Preston, 1994, p. 56). It is not surprising that many hearing children of deaf adults continue to perform the roles they established as children.

Because most hearing children of deaf adults have hearing spouses and children, they interpret and provide the link between their parents and the hearing children of deaf adults' family. As in their childhood, hearing children of deaf adults often find that the hearing world does not understand because "[s]uch loyalty and interdependence run counter to the dominant cultural pattern of separating from one's birth family" (Preston, 1994, p. 215).

GAINING CULTURAL AWARENESS

There are several ways to gain an understanding of deaf culture. A review of the professional literature is important. Reading some of the works cited in this article provides additional information and insight into the deaf culture. However, reading books by hearing children of deaf adults about their experiences growing up with deaf parents can be extremely informative and helpful. Just the titles of these works offer both an important and a poignant insight: *Our Father Abe: The Story of a Deaf Shoe Repairman* (Barash & Dicker, 1991), *Dummy's Little Girl* (Crowe, 1993), *In This Sign* (Greenberg, 1970), *In Silence: Growing Up Hearing in a Deaf World* (Sidransky, 1990), and *A Loss for Words* (J. Walker, 1986). Reading publications such as *Silent News*, *Deaf Life*, *Deaf Nation*, or *The NAD* [National Association for the Deaf] *Broadcaster* also will be useful. (Please see resource list after the references.) Finally, what may be most valuable is meeting and talking with the deaf and hearing children of deaf adults before working with any member of this culture.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We have shown hearing children of deaf adults to be a distinct group that can best be understood by learning more about deaf culture. With this understanding, counselors can avoid making judgments based on the norms of the hearing world. With knowledge about deaf culture and practical communications issues, it is more likely that deaf parents will see the counselor as someone who is genuinely interested in meeting the needs of their children. Recognizing hearing children of deaf adults as a distinct group and respecting their parents' culture will make counselors more effective and enable them to gain the trust of the deaf community. See the Appendix for specific recommendations for working with hearing children of deaf parents.

In closing, we recommend that research be conducted to study the following questions:

1. What are effective parenting models in the deaf community, and how are they alike and different from those in the hearing world?
2. In dealing with counseling professionals, what needs do hearing children of deaf parents believe are not being addressed?
3. In dealing with counseling professionals, what needs do deaf parents believe are not being addressed regarding their hearing children?

We believe that findings related to these and similar research questions will better enable counselors to work more effectively with the children of deaf parents and the parents of those children.

Author Note. Finally, if we authors are to be true to the spirit of this article, we cannot allow ourselves to be introduced only in the "hearing way." In professional journals, the hearing introduction frequently entails a statement on the first page of the article giving the highest degree earned and the work setting of the authors. The deaf introduction is very different and something any deaf or hearing children of deaf adults reading this article would want to know. Therefore, we include a deaf introduction. Author 1 and Author 2 are married. He is hearing. He began learning sign in 1993. She has been deaf since birth. She began signing after high school and has been signing for over 20 years. Her parents are hearing. She attended hearing public schools. Her first husband is deaf. She has one daughter who is hearing.

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RESOURCES

- Deaf Life*
MSM Productions, Ltd.
P.O. Box 23380
Rochester, NY 14692-3380
<http://www.deaflife.com/index.html>
- Deaf Nation*
814 Thayer Ave., Suite 350
Silver Springs, MD 20910-4500
<http://www.deafnation.com/>
- NAD Broadcaster*
National Association of the Deaf
814 Thayer Avenue
Silver Springs, MD 20910-4500
<http://www.nad.org/bcinfo.htm>
- Silent News*
135 Gaither Drive, Suite F
Mount Laurel, NJ 08054-1710
<http://www.silentnews.org/>

APPENDIX

Recommendations to Counselors Who Work With Hearing Children of Deaf Parents

1. Recognize that these children have deaf parents who are members of a distinct cultural and linguistic minority.
2. Do not interpret the animated facial expressions used as part of signed communication as an indication of anger or unusual behavior.
3. Do not judge the difficulties experienced by many deaf with the English language as an indication of intelligence.
4. Recognize that because of negative interactions with the hearing world, deaf parents may be guarded in their interactions with you.
5. When an interpreter is needed, use a professional rather than relying on the child.
6. When lip-reading is the mode of communication, maintain good eye contact and talk normally. Repeat when asked. At times, it may help to rephrase your statement. If you do not understand, ask the deaf person who is voicing to repeat.
7. If a TTY is not available, use the relay system for telephone communication with the deaf.
8. Read books by hearing children about their experiences growing up with deaf parents.
9. To gain a further understanding of deaf culture, read publications such as *Silent News* and *The NAD Broadcaster* as well as books about deaf culture.
10. Educate other professionals and support staff about the practical issues of working with hearing children and their deaf parents.