Hearing Parents in Crisis: Providing Access to a Language-Rich Environment to Assure Literacy Development in Deaf Children

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Language acquisition in early childhood is crucial to literacy development. Imagine the thoughts of hearing parents when confronted with the birth of a deaf child, a child who cannot hear spoken language. How will this child acquire critical language skills to build a foundation for literacy and future social and educational opportunities? Though communication exists between parent and child from the moment of birth, the deaf newborn has no access to the rich cultural context of spoken language. Because brain specialization for language acquisition occurs within a specific window of opportunity, an impoverished linguistic input puts the deaf child at risk. According to Charlotte J. Evans, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, less than 10% of deaf children have a deaf parent or older deaf relative. Hearing parents’ adjustment to a child’s deafness is traumatic, and the child most often enters kindergarten lacking adequate signed or spoken language skills. As speech and hearing professionals, we have a responsibility to offer parents every possible option to help their deaf child develop these crucial skills within appropriate developmental milestones. The deaf community views themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority rich in history, mores, and signed language. In contrast, the medical community views deafness as a deficit and offers interventional approaches in a restorative attempt. My research examines the tension between these cultural and infirmity models and explores signed language as a foundation for acquiring and developing literacy skills in deaf children. Ultimately, providing a language-rich environment for the deaf child must take precedence when counseling and assisting hearing parents in crisis.