

## TO BE VISUAL OR NOT TO BE VISUAL? THE HARD OF HEARING CHILD

*by Roger Carver*

The Deaf Children's Society has had a significant increase in the number of families with hard of hearing children who signed up for our services. It happened despite "conventional wisdom" in which DCS wasn't "supposed" to work with hard of hearing children. Some might even ask: "how can an ASL-oriented and Deaf-centred program support families with hard of hearing children?" The answer is simply this: young hard of hearing children have needs similar to those of young deaf children and stand to benefit greatly from visual language learning strategies. Infants and toddlers, regardless of their hearing status, are primarily visual learners by nature. It may not have been a well-known fact, but DCS has successfully worked with families with hard of hearing children for years from the beginning. We do not require such families to learn ASL (although they are encouraged to do so) and can provide guidance in auditory-oral training to these families.

Philip Garcia, in his recent book, *Toddler Talk*, makes a persuasive case for young children with normal hearing to use signs from American Sign Language (ASL) first before developing speech, saying that it gives them a tremendous head start in terms of language and cognitive development. He cites research evidence pointing to superior linguistic and academic functioning in children who were exposed to sign language from an early age. In their 1978 review of research on visual-verbal development in young children, J.L. Debes and C.M. Williams argue that visual cognitive development occurs more quickly in infants than its auditory counterpart and that visual stimulation is richer and more complex than auditory stimulation during the first few years of the child's life.

I recognize it is important not to neglect the development of residual hearing through auditory-oral training and of speech and speechreading skills in hard of hearing children. I also recognize that there are some who may not even require sign language. However, each child must be regarded as unique. The audiogram does not present a complete picture of the child; it should not even be the determining factor in communication choices. Rather, the ability of the child's family to provide full communication support and to follow the child's lead in terms of communication are the more crucial factors. It is important to make sure that **all** the communication tools are available to **any** child, regardless of his/her hearing ability.

More and more parents of young hard of hearing children are now beginning to understand and realize that they could lose valuable developmental time by neglecting their children's visual cognitive development for the first few years in order to develop an auditory-oral language. They have come to appreciate the fact that a visual language such as ASL effectively fills in the language gap by accelerating the language development process during these crucial years, and that it is a valuable tool in the subsequent development of speech and auditory skills. Many Deaf parents do have hard of hearing children, and, despite the fact that these children's first language is ASL, many of them have gone on to develop excellent auditory-oral skills.

ASL, far from being a detriment to young hard of hearing children, actually strengthens and enriches their communication abilities. It actually enhances their self-concept as they are able to express their feelings and thoughts more clearly to others. Many parents of hard of hearing children have reported to us their feelings of frustration, as well as those of their children's, when they are not fully able to understand what the children are saying, and vice versa. This frustration can lead to feelings of alienation and poor self-esteem on the parts of these children. In turn, it develops into a denial of their hearing problem and an identity crisis.

The typical hard of hearing child, due to the stress of trying to understand oral communication and communicating with impatient persons, develops a habit of pretending to understand everything being said to him/her, giving rise to the illusion in his/her parents and teachers that the child is doing "fine". My wife, who has been hard of hearing since birth, recalls having been a "good actor" who had everyone fooled, including even her parents. Yet this kind of deception only masks problems for hard of hearing children as they struggle to keep up in a hearing world which is largely insensitive to their needs. In fact, it makes them worse as hearing persons tend to take for granted that these children could understand everything and function normally. The hard of hearing child subsequently becomes more and more reluctant to admit to having a hearing problem. It can lead to serious identity problems and social isolation. It has been often said that the typical hard of hearing person is more handicapped than the typical Deaf person. I've heard from quite a few hard of hearing persons how they suffered through their formative years as primarily oral communicators and how they felt incomplete and incompetent until they learned to sign.

Hard of hearing children, who are encouraged to sign, use other visual language forms and interact with Deaf children from infancy and early childhood, have a better chance of becoming effective communicators and attaining healthier self-concepts. In interacting with Deaf persons and through signing, they come to appreciate their own natural abilities and to understand and be more open about their own hearing limitations. Learning to sign at an early age provides a good safety net for those who later lost their residual hearing, either suddenly or progressively (which occurs all too often). It can be devastating to those who didn't learn to sign earlier, but for those who did, it is a passing inconvenience. It happened to many hard of hearing persons I know, including my sister-in-law, who woke up one day with much of her residual hearing suddenly gone. She was very thankful that she already possessed ASL skills and was involved with Deaf persons socially and professionally. Although it happened over 15 years ago, she hasn't missed a beat and still retains her excellent speech skills. My wife is aware that she can also lose her residual hearing one day, but she is also better prepared to cope with it than those hard of hearing persons who haven't been exposed to ASL and the Deaf community.

More and more parents of young children are aware of and concerned by this outcome. They now realize that oral communication by itself does not guarantee success, and they want their hard of hearing children to have as many tools at their disposal as possible to be able to fend for themselves and to function more fully in our society, and that includes visual language learning and Deaf experience, of which DCS has plenty.