

1-1981

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Recommended Citation

Baum, V. (1981). Counseling Families of Deaf Children. *JADARA*, 15(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol15/iss1/5>

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COUNSELING FAMILIES OF DEAF CHILDREN

Vicki Baum

The need for counseling among parents of deaf children is a well established fact. Eugene Mindel, McCay Vernon, Doris Naiman, Jerome Schein, Hilde Schlesinger, Kay Meadow, and Helmer Myklebust are but a few of the many professionals in the field of deafness who have written about this need. However, what about the other family members? Counseling must serve not only the parents, but all involved members within a family. Siblings, and perhaps grandparents as well as other extended family members, ought to be included in this counseling process. They, too, have areas of conflict and numerous questions about having a deaf member in their family. Experience has shown that it may be the brother or sister who will reveal feelings and attitudes existing within the home, while the parents may be resistant to do so.

Background Information on Family Counseling

Families often seek counseling because of difficulties they say are created by one family member (Werner, 1980). The deaf child is usually considered the identified member whom parents say causes family conflicts. However, during counseling sessions conflicting situations which occur within the entire family unit are revealed. These conflicts may not even be related to the identified member. Family counseling can help members see basic difficulties which existed within the family before the birth of a deaf son or daughter.

The arrival of a handicapped infant probably enhances many existing family conflicts

(Schein and Naiman, 1978). However, he did not create them. Further, when working with a family it may be revealed that other children within the family are problems, too (Robinson and Olethia, 1974). A family counselor can skillfully work with a family in order to help the members understand and deal with areas of contention. Further, the counselor, who must be knowledgeable in the field of deafness, can make concrete suggestions as how best to live with a deaf child without compromising other family members. This is no easy task. However, being a member of a family and living and working together in 1980 can be difficult accomplishments, too. More than one out of every three marriages today will end in divorce (Werner, 1980). Families are faced with changing times and changing roles. It's not easy to keep up with and understand one another in such a fast-moving environment. For families who have a deaf child the task is even more complicated.

Family Communications

Family communication is a base on which a stable, satisfactory family functions (Jackson, 1971). Often families say they are communicating with their deaf son or daughter, brother or sister. Yet in actuality communications are limited to crude gestures and a few "home signs".

In order for any family member to relate to another they may have to learn how, as open communications among members can be difficult. A family with a deaf member cannot learn how if they do not have the

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tools with which to do so. A role of the counselor is to break down barriers which block family communications (Ferber, Mendelsohn, and Napier, 1972). A counselor may have to suggest that family members learn manual communication in order to attempt to break through these family communication barriers.

Possession of good communication skills are imperative for the counselor working with a family in which a member is deaf. This will require the use of a "total communications" approach, with the knowledge of manual communication being a key factor. A family counselor can communicate with all family members through the use of speech, signs, and body gestures. If the hearing members are not using manual communication, the effect of seeing the counselor talk with the deaf family member can be a positive one. This may open up new doors to family interactions.

Parental Behaviors and Feelings

We know that hearing parents usually have difficulties adjusting to their deaf child. Often overcompensation towards the child results at the expense of the parents, their relationship, and other family members (Mindel and Vernon, 1971). Overprotection is an area that most professionals involved in teaching and counseling the deaf are familiar with.

Schlesinger and Meadow found that behaviors of mothers of deaf children differ radically from those of mothers of hearing children. They appear more inflexible, controlling, didactic, intrusive and disapproving of their deaf child (Schlesinger and Meadow, 1972). Involvement of all family members can release the mother from being the sole person in charge of raising the deaf son/daughter. Thus, the above-mentioned behaviors can diminish.

The birth of a deaf child may cause parents to feel anger, hurt, guilt, disappointment, shame, and/or sadness. In turn, these feelings can lead parents to blame themselves or each other for their child's handicap (Schein and Naiman, 1978). What most par-

ents need is help in accepting these painful or negative feelings and attitudes (Schein and Naiman, 1978). Blaming each other's family will only prolong the feelings of guilt and anger which prevent parents and siblings from moving on to the enjoyable aspects of having a new infant in the home.

Individuation and Separation

Many husbands and wives go into a marriage without fully individualizing and separating from their own parents (Werner, 1979). They bring to the marriage unfinished business which may then be perpetuated as they begin having their own family. Thus, the cycle continues. Often, inappropriate ideals, which parents may hold onto, will not be beneficial to their new family situation. When a child in the family is handicapped with deafness these old ideals may even be more harmful to the various family members.

Separation is extremely difficult. Most parents hold onto their children much too long, instead of "holding them very close and letting go" (Robertiello, 1975). It is common for parents to avoid separation from their children. These usual feelings of holding on, coupled with the anxieties of having a child who is deaf, can lead parents to be too controlling of their children's lives. It is necessary for a family counselor to consider parents' difficulties with separation and with their fears about their deaf child's ability to deal with everyday situations.

Individuation is a necessary step in one's development (Jung, 1933). We all need to become individuals as we separate from our parents. Many parents have difficulty allowing their children to become individuals. Here is another area where a family counselor can assist parents and help them allow their children to become individuals; capable of believing in their own opinions and in making decisions.

Growth and Development

A counselor should encourage the children within a family to discuss their needs and desires as they are developing. Often these may be in conflict with how the par-

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ents feel. These differences need to be brought out in the open and discussed. Salvador Minuchin asks parents how they keep their children from growing up; and he asks children how their parents make them stay little (Minuchin, 1980). Specific examples of this type of repression should be raised by the family counselor. The parents and children need to be encouraged to respond to one another.

Children need to know they can achieve and accomplish goals. Parents need to be taught how to encourage this and to allow their children to experience success. Here the deaf child must not be singled out. He needs to be presented with challenges, too, the same as his hearing brothers and sisters. Family reluctance to ask a deaf child to assume normal responsibilities and to protect him from everyday hardships can place additional handicaps on the child (Myklebust, 1950). Positive qualities and attributes of all sons and daughters should be maximized by parents, while the negatives must be minimized.

A deaf child may question his place in the family, since hearing brothers and sisters do not get in the same difficulties as the deaf child. This makes it seem as though he is not part of the family in the same way as the hearing siblings are. Certainly, this is one reason that many deaf children think their parents show preference for their hearing brothers and sisters (Myklebust, 1950).

At times, deaf children find themselves playing the role of the little tyrant. They are permitted to do more, get more favors, and do not have to follow the same standards of discipline as their hearing siblings (Myklebust, 1950). This type of permissiveness will lead to family conflicts and resentment towards the deaf member.

It is common for parents to have their deaf child be the nucleus of the family, around whom all other members rotate. True, he has special needs, but these must not make him the center of the family (Myklebust, 1950). Siblings of deaf children are apt to resent this placement. No child should function at the expense of another. Ruth McAree, a parent of a deaf child, tells the story

of a hearing woman whose responsibility it was to fill in all the gaps for her deaf sister. As a result, the deaf sister became integrated into the hearing world, developed a career as an architect, and was the family success. The hearing sister became a typist, never married, and cared for her mother and deaf sister until her death (McAree, 1970).

Knowledge of Deafness

Knowing about deafness promotes more understanding, especially in a family in which a member is deaf. A family counselor must be able to share facts and make suggestions and recommendations concerning deafness. At the same time he must listen carefully to the concerns the parents and hearing siblings have about their deaf family member.

When will my son/daughter talk? Why doesn't my brother/sister hear? Why must he wear a hearing aid? Why does the deaf child down the street talk and our son/daughter does not? Why does my brother/sister talk funny? He embarrasses me.

Answers to these and other questions are necessary. A skilled counselor can assist families in seeking these answers. In doing so the counselor shares his knowledge about deafness, so the entire family can better understand what being deaf means and involves.

The counselor should teach family members the answers to the following questions:

- What is a hearing loss?
- What causes hearing loss?
- What are the types of hearing loss?
- What is their child's hearing loss?

(Baum, 1980)

Some parents of adult deaf children are still attempting to force their son/daughter to improve their speech and lip-reading skills. Nowhere along the way did they ever learn or understand about the limitations presented by deafness. Nor have these parents fully worked through their own dreams of having had a perfect, healthy child.

In assisting families to better understand some of the many frustrations and difficulties involved in deafness, the counselor may suggest turning off the TV volume and discovering how little they enjoy viewing without auditory input (Baum, 1980). Families

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may need to try talking to one another without using their voices. They will find reading lips to be a most difficult feat.

Knowing about deafness promotes more understanding in a family in which a member is deaf. The counselor needs to be able to offer resource materials to family members in order for them to learn more about deafness. Lists of organizations, books, and periodicals should be supplied. These must not be pushed on a family, but suggested when it is appropriate according to how the counseling sessions proceed.

Family Get-Togethers

An important role of a counselor is to give families the opportunity to get together with other families in which there is a deaf member. The chance to share experiences, ideas, fears, successes, and failures is critical for families (Baum, 1980). Taking part in group affairs assures parents, and other family members, that they are not alone and the sharing of experiences often results in problem solving situations (Rotter, 1977). Some parents have even established their own groups in order to bind together for mutual comfort, support, and assistance (Webster, 1976).

It has been found that when parents

meet together in groups with a professional leader present, they often benefit more than from individual counseling (Schein and Naiman, 1978). When these parent group get-togethers occur, let us not leave out other family members, especially the siblings. As stated in the beginning of this article, brothers and sisters may be extremely involved with one another, particularly if they are close in age or have been given much of the responsibility of caring for their deaf sibling.

CONCLUSION

The need for family counseling among families in which there is a deaf member has been presented in this article. The rationale for this service as well as some areas of concern have been expressed. There are other needs and other concerns. However, let us at least begin. So little is now being done for the hearing family members to better understand, know, and love their deaf son/daughter, brother/sister. Trained counselors, therapists, and social workers, specializing in deafness, must be aware of this need. Some education systems do have parent education programs. These can be expanded to include all family members. The results will be healthier, happier lives for all those involved.

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