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The Identity Development of the Only Hearing Child in an All-Deaf Family

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Abstract

This article focuses on identity development among individuals who grew up as the only hearing child in an otherwise all-deaf family. Being the only hearing child (assuming they have deaf siblings) is quite different from being one of a number of hearing children of deaf parents. It is critical to enhance awareness among parents, teachers, and mental health professionals of such obstacles, particularly for children who are the only hearing members of their deaf families.

Keywords: deaf parents, hearing children, school and mental health professionals, agencies

According to Hoffmeister (2008), an estimated 500,000 hearing children in the United States have deaf parents; 90% of deaf parents have hearing children; and approximately 60% of hearing children of deaf parents are fluent in sign language. No statistics are available, however, on the number of hearing children who are the only hearing members of otherwise all-deaf families.

Research suggests that hearing children of deaf parents (also known as children of Deaf adults, or Codas) commonly experience struggles with identity. They often live with identity confusion, uncertain of where they fit in (Bull, 2005; Hoffmeister, 2008). According to Bull (2005), “the question ‘Am I hearing or am I deaf?’ often creates an identity conflict for hearing children raised in a bilingual and bicultural family where one or both parents are D/deaf” (p. 1).

Identity labels associated with having deaf parents reflect relevant perspectives that can influence identity. Erikson’s (1968) theory on identity development stated that each individual’s description of identity involves community, culture, linguistics, and social values, as well biological and psychological factors. Bishop and Hicks (2008) stated that adults who identify with the Coda label see themselves as culturally and linguistically different from hearing adults with hearing parents.
Hearing children who have deaf parents may experience complications that have a negative impact on identity development into their adult lives. Limited communication, parent-child role confusion, unwanted responsibilities, and uncertainty as to their identity may lead to frustrations and eventual identity struggle. Some of these hearing children may also have additional complications in developing their identities as a result of other cultural beliefs and ethnicity (Ataman, 2008; Bishop, 2008; Napier, 2008; Shield, 2005).

None of the limited literature on hearing children of deaf parents focuses on the experiences of hearing children who grow up as the only hearing person in an otherwise all-deaf family. Obstacles that have been noted among hearing children who have hearing siblings and deaf parents include those related to identity development (Bull, 2005; Preston, 1994), communication issues (Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000), support system(s) (Hoffmeister, 2008; Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000), perceptions of the Deaf and hearing communities (Bull, 2005; Hoffmeister, 2008; Shield, 2005). The obstacles facing the lone hearing child in an otherwise all-Deaf family had not been specifically explored prior to this research.

Review of Literature

There are very few studies on issues faced by hearing children of deaf parents. Singleton and Tittle (2000) pointed out that “one difficulty in recommending culturally and linguistically appropriate practices for working with Deaf-parented families is there is very little research and literature on such practices” (p. 232). The content of this review is predominantly from peer-reviewed journals, but also includes articles in which authors shared their own experiences growing up with deaf parents. Hearing children of deaf parents struggle with different issues such as communication (Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000), interpret for their parents (Preston, 1994), personal identity (Hoffmeister, 2008; Preston, 1994; Shield, 2005; Singleton & Tittle, 2000), mislabeling (Bishop & Hicks, 2008), belongingness (Bull, 2005; Hoffmeister, 2008; Shield, 2005), and parental responsibilities (Bull, 2005; Preston, 1994).

Three main factors were identified related to identity issues. First, until hearing children of deaf parents go to school for the first time (around four or five years of age), families often do not realize their children are bilingual.
and bicultural (Bull, 2005). The hearing children believe they are deaf like their parents because they sign at home. Yet, since everyone speaks at school, these children begin to realize they are not deaf like their parents. They also realize their experiences growing up with deaf parents are different from those of hearing children of hearing parents (Preston, 1994).

The second factor is that mental health and school professionals often misdiagnose hearing children of deaf parents as having learning disabilities mainly because they have deaf parents (Bishop & Hicks, 2005) and may have what professionals perceive as language delays. Many mental health and school professionals do not understand language development when two languages—in this case, American Sign Language (ASL) and English—are used. Also, some professionals mistakenly believe children's speech delays are solely due to the supposed lack of exposure to spoken communication at home, rather than factors associated with growing up in a multilingual and multicultural environment. Also, Bull (2005) found that hearing children of deaf parents reported difficulties in various settings due to their school and mental health professionals' lack of awareness about Deaf culture. For example, hearing children of deaf parents maintain strong eye contact, as is generally expected among deaf people who sign. In addition, most hearing children in deaf families are visual learners; thus, it may be challenging for them to process information aurally instead of visually.

The third factor is that mental health, school, and other professionals often ask hearing children to interpret during conferences, appointments, phone calls, and meetings with parents (Buchino, 1990). This request creates emotional stress and conflict for hearing children, forcing them to serve as child, student, and interpreter in the same session. In order to avoid upsetting parents, hearing children sometimes do not interpret everything school officials and mental health professionals say (Buchino, 1990; Filer & Filer, 2000). They also sometimes alter what their parents say during these meetings. This gives them a great deal of power, which affects relationships at home and at settings.

Mental health and school professionals must be aware that the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, Section 504, and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) require any school or agency receiving federal funds to provide an interpreter for deaf parents (Buchino, 1990). Under this act, any agencies including schools, hospitals, and mental health agencies that receive federal funds are obligated to accommodate deaf parents' communication needs by
providing interpreters for meetings or events at no charge to the parents. Requesting an interpreter for those meetings usually requires a two-week notification period, which means school officials, mental health professionals, and parents may have to wait for at least two weeks to meet even for urgent situations. Problems need to be addressed as soon as possible, not two weeks later.

Method

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994), the author conducted face-to-face interviews in eight states with thirteen hearing children of deaf parents. Using ASL, she conducted open-ended interviews in which participants shared their experiences of growing up with deaf parents and deaf siblings. The interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. The research questions that guided this study included:

1. How do individuals who are the only hearing members of all-deaf families describe their experiences?
2. How did growing up in an all-deaf family affect hearing individuals' identity development?

Follow-up questions based on Rubin and Rubin (2005) were used as appropriate, for example, how does the hearing individual experience interactions in other systems, such as school systems, support systems, and friendship systems?

Sampling and Recruitment

The criteria for choosing participants included self-reported identification with Deaf culture and ASL fluency. Participants also had to be at least eighteen years old so that they could reflect on school experiences throughout their elementary and secondary years. In addition, they had to be the only hearing member of an otherwise all-deaf family.

Snowball sampling was used to find participants by asking hearing children of deaf parents, deaf parents, colleagues, and interpreters in the Deaf community to suggest potential participants for this study. Potential participants were invited via e-mail to participate in the study. If they showed interest, the interviewer asked questions via e-mail to ensure they met the inclusion criteria before agreeing on specific dates for interviews. According to Creswell (2007), phenomenological researchers typically interview up
to ten individuals and obtain in-depth descriptions of their experiences. Thirteen participants were identified, recruited, and interviewed.

**Participants**

All participants grew up in the Deaf culture and used ASL all their lives. They ranged in age from eighteen to forty, and came from eight states. They were diverse in terms of geographical location, and the author traveled to their locations to conduct interviews. Ten participants were interviewed at their homes; the other three preferred to meet at a restaurant or coffee shop near their homes even though the interviews were videotaped. The participants included eight men and five women, of whom nine were college graduates and four were high school graduates; seven were professional interpreters.

**Data Analysis**

For data analysis, the author followed the methods of Moustakas (1994), which involved data categorization, pattern identification, identification of emergent themes, and interpretation of the data. First, all the transcripts were reviewed to obtain an overall understanding without making interpretations. The author then read each transcribed interview to identify major emerging themes, develop specific codes for themes, and identify patterns related to the research question. Participant statements that were relevant to the research question were underlined in different colors to categorize statements and words under different themes.

Each participant's statements were sorted to form detailed individual descriptions relevant to the primary themes. This process was repeated, and statements that appeared numerous times were eventually grouped into major themes. Through this process, five primary themes were identified (with the number of people mentioning them in parentheses):

1. Recognizing distinctions from the rest of the family \((n = 10)\)
2. Identity \((n = 13)\)
3. Being Responsible or Protective \((n = 8)\)
4. Interpreting for the Family \((n = 10)\)
5. No Distinctions \((n = 7)\)
6. Lack of Interpreters \((n = 10)\)

Exemplary quotes from participants are included in the next section.
Interpretation of Findings

The data enabled identification of possible obstacles and struggles that hearing participants faced as a result of lack of cultural and technological awareness in spite of the advent of communication technologies and telecommunications. According to the participants, deaf parents, mental health and school professionals did not appreciate the special needs of hearing children from all-deaf families. They also stated that neither parents nor professionals recognized that this group had special needs. This lack of awareness highlights the need for research about the experiences of being a hearing child in an all-deaf family, and also for research on what mental health professionals and parents know about the special needs of this population.

Most participants shared common experiences, such as not being aware that they were hearing until they went to school, attending schools and agencies that had limited familiarity with accessibility laws, mental health and school professionals using them to interpret. Their detailed descriptions provide consistent evidence that supports the importance of cultural and technological awareness for the deaf and hearing communities.

Recognizing Distinctions from the Rest of the Family

In this study, ten of thirteen participants said they did not consciously understand that they were not deaf like the rest of their families until they attended school for the first time. They also did not notice differences between being hearing and being deaf until they were four or five years old. One participant said, “I always knew [my parents and my deaf siblings were deaf] but it didn’t really hit me until I went to school for the first time, like at age four or five, and I saw that the other kids’ parents were different.”

Two participants stated that they struggled with speech skills when they went to school because they had minimal or no speech exposure at home. As a result, they had no confidence in their social skills. Three participants knew they were hearing from the beginning because their parents had emphasized to them that they were hearing, not deaf. Two participants had grandparents who used speech with them. Some participants said they would have liked to receive more parental guidance; they wanted to be exposed to both worlds to help them better understand how and why they were different from their deaf parents and how this would affect their lives. One participant shared:
I guess at age five or six, I started going to the small preschool with hearing people. That was my first big exposure to hearing people. At home, there were neighbors that were hearing. Sometimes I'd see them and say hi. I would hear them speak a little bit, but I didn't really understand that I was hearing like them. I didn't recognize that they were hearing and that my family was deaf. Later when I was in school, that's when I realized that I was hearing.

Another participant stated:

I think elementary school was hard for me too because at home, I only signed so I hadn't even learned to talk yet until age three when I went to preschool. The first year, I was placed with other special [education] kids. I remember looking at them and thinking I didn't fit in with them at all except that we were all learning to talk. The second year, when I was four, I went to a different preschool and learned to talk again. I had three years of preschool, and then at age five, I went to kindergarten so it was a slow process for me to learn to talk. I still couldn't say the right words sometimes and had a hard time reading. I wasn't really made fun of necessarily but the kids would point out my mistakes. I think by third and fourth grade, I picked it up better and caught up with my peers. But even then, every once in a while, I would struggle with some words and how to properly use them. I would know the sign but didn't know how to say the word.

One participant knew she was hearing, but still felt different:

I would say around ... fifth grade? fourth grade, fifth grade ... I always wanted to be deaf. I knew I was hearing, I was different, but I always wanted to go to deaf school, wanted to be involved ... and I think around fifth grade I realized and gave up, I realized I had to go to hearing school. I will have different friends. I think it was around that time, maybe puberty
hit... Around that time I realized I wouldn't have the same life; it would be different. I think that I started to make new friends, I saw their families, and I realized that's how they worked. Up until then it was all about playing. Then I started realizing emotions... I saw that other families were different and realized my family's different and thought, interesting. I remember one time at the dinner table, my friend asked me to talk to her because it was quiet. I was like, "What do you mean, quiet? It's fine!" Her family usually argues back and forth all the time so I said, "All right, the two of us can talk."

One participant remembered:

For my teachers it was like, you don't even know anything about deaf parents and deaf culture, you don't know anything about my family, you know nothing about me, that side of me. I felt disconnected. That feeling Codas often feel of like, loss... like, they don't understand me.

Identity

Hearing children of Deaf parents may identify themselves as hearing, deaf, bicultural, Coda (Child of Deaf Adults), Hearing-Mother-Father-Deaf (HMFD), or OHCODA (Only Hearing Child of Deaf Adults) (Bishop & Hicks, 2008; Blatt, 2007; Hoffmeister, 2008; Napier, 2008). Hoffmeister (2008) points out that the experience of having grown up in a certain type of cultural environment influences the way of thinking and sense of identity of each hearing child of deaf parents.

In this study, six participants identified themselves as Codas. Two struggled to understand who they were until they were adults. They stated they wished they knew their identity when they were much younger instead of struggling until adulthood. None of the participants considered themselves OHCODAs. Six participants did not view themselves as Codas simply because they came from a deaf family. They preferred to say that they had a deaf family. One participant who lived in a rural area had never heard of the word "Coda" before. He had never met a Coda before and still lived...
with his family. Simply mentioning that he had a deaf family was his way of identifying himself.

One participant summarized how he identified himself:

I call myself a Coda. I want to say, that first I’m a man. Then second I’m a Coda. Third by race (name of race withheld). Fourth, American. That’s what I want to say. But really inside, I feel that first I’m a Coda. Second I’m a husband/brother/son. I think that shows my priorities.

Another participant stated:

Some people really take it seriously and say, I am Coda, that’s who I am. My view is, people don’t say, my name is (name withheld) and I’m hearing. No, people don’t say that. I would say deaf family, yes. I never really said Coda or OHCODA, no. I think [it’s] just a word that some Codas use to relate to something so they feel involved or feel a part of. I don’t feel that way. I don’t feel I need a label. They need something to be connected to, that’s me, that’s me. But I don’t have that. I never struggled with that so I feel I am me.

One participant recalled:

When I was in high school, I had a lot of social anxiety. I would avoid school, I would avoid social situations. Nothing bad happened to me, just in my head I felt overwhelmed by all the people, kids, the popular kids . . . I felt left out. But I don’t know if it was about the hearing/deaf thing, or just me and my personality in general. But I suspect that if there was more of a relationship between my family and my community that maybe that sense of anxiety, that I don’t want to or can’t join in the group, would have been reduced. But maybe if there was more socialization, maybe I wouldn’t have felt so isolated. Yes, I had hearing
friends but typically just one or two. I never had a lot of friends. I don’t know.

Another participant described himself as a shy and quiet guy and was not sure if the reason he did not make friends easily had to do with his deaf family. He said:

I don’t make friends easily. Once I consider you a friend, you stay a friend for a long time. But I’ve never had many friends. I’ve always preferred more intimate, close knit groups. If you’re someone that I talk to once in a while, I don’t consider that a friendship. I don’t have many friends, no. I’ve always had a few, two or three, I think the most friends I had at one time was maybe 10. Really, mostly it was very small groups. It depends. I would say four normally but not very comfortable, in the real world, in the public...

Another participant rebelled in high school:

I think in high school, sometimes, from my perspective, it was more of an issue with society. You know in high school, everybody is worried about how they look and how they dress and how other people perceive them. I think at first, I was nervous that people would look down on me having a Deaf family because that made me different. Like if I was with my parents, I wouldn’t sign. I would just look around and try and keep quiet. My parents were kind of a little confused. I think my mom didn’t really know what to do with me.

Another participant explained his identity process:

I think I overcame that at age 14 or 15 or so. I learned to accept my identity as a person. I didn’t care when people judged me or when people would say things about me having a deaf family. I didn’t really care about any of that – that was at age 14 or 15. Before that it was definitely a struggle for me.
Being Responsible or Protective

Some participants expressed that they felt the need to be protective by taking care of their families mainly because they became the families' "ears". They knew they were the only ones who could hear in their own families. They had to make sure their family members were alright, worrying about them if there was a fire, and being stereotyped by society.

One participant stated:

I definitely took on the role as a second mother to my brother. I was very protective of him. I would say, "Don't play with my brother"—I was very protective of him. My parents wanted more children but because of their own upbringing, once they had a deaf child, they were afraid to have more. Because they felt so oppressed growing up as deaf people, they didn't want to have more kids. They didn't know what to do with a deaf kid. Being protective of my brother started around the time I was in high school, so more when I was older.

She continued by saying:

I think because I was so used to defending or protecting my parents, I just expected it would be the same for my brother as well. I became the ears for all three of them so I felt like I needed to be with them all the time because that was expected of me growing up. My grandmother on my mother's side is a Coda—her parents were also deaf. Now she grew up in the 1930s, so it was a different time for her, but she was expected to make phone calls for her parents and was expected to communicate for her parents so that was sort of passed down to me. I was expected to communicate for my parents and make phone calls for them. I called the bank, the doctors, anything that was needed, I would call for my parents. I just assumed it was to be the same for my sibling too. I would make calls for him, communicate for him, write for him.
She had added burdens:

When my husband and I bought a house, I was scared to leave my mom and dad because I thought, what if the fire alarm goes off? No one will be there to let them know to get out of the house! Even though my whole life, for the (age withheld) years I lived with my parents, the alarm never went off. Yet I was thinking, now that I’m gone, it’s going to go off all the time and they can’t hear it! What am I going to do? (Laughing) So that was another area where I had to let go. You know, I can’t be that person anymore. I still feel protective of the three of them but you know, my mom is (age withheld) and my dad is (age withheld)- they’re adults and they’re okay (laughing) They’re okay without me!

Another participant worried about her family sleeping through something:

I did always have a problem with sleeping because I was paranoid. What if someone breaks into the house? If something happens I’m the only person that can hear it so I would toss and turn. Especially because we lived in the country, so if I heard something… I can’t imagine if something happened. I always wanted to sleep in my parents’ room. “Mom, dad, please can I sleep on the floor?” I can’t… I was paranoid. My parents would be like, “Stop, stop, we have it under control!” But no, I can’t, still to this day I’m paranoid at night. That’s my one thing. I was really young, yes, I was 5 or 6 years old. I was always wide awake all night, trying to convince myself to fall asleep because it was fine. Always. Just if, I heard something break the window, my parents couldn’t hear it so they would get killed and... that kind of thing. They would get my parents and then my brother and get me last so I wouldn’t have time to stop it. That was really the one thing I felt responsible for, protecting my family at night.
Another participant described what he perceived as his responsibility:

Our refrigerator makes a beeping noise if the door is left open. Sometimes my mom leaves it open in the middle of the night so I hear it and have to get up and go out to close the door and then go back to bed. It's just little things. It's out of my control but it's still extra responsibility for me. Or if someone knocks on the door, I always have to be the one to answer. We used to have a flashing doorbell but we don't anymore because I always open the door.

Interpreting for the Family

In spite of the advent of communication technologies and telecommunications such as video relay services (VRS), some participants felt obligated to interpret for their families while others were not encouraged or forced to interpret for their families. Most of the participants who interpreted for their parents stated they detested this obligation. It was difficult to determine from the data whether the participants' obligations to facilitate communication in order to meet their family's needs had to do with their parents' educational backgrounds or the demographic location of where they live due to lack of cultural, legal and technological awareness. For example, a participant stated that because she used to live in a city where a college with a program for deaf students was located, the community, including school systems, was aware of Deaf culture and accessibility laws. However, she noted that her parents were aware of the law but found it convenient to have their daughter interpret instead of requesting a professional interpreter. Again, if there were differences, it would be difficult to determine whether they were related to the parents’ educational levels, demographic location, or other factors.

According to Preston (1994), prior to the 1980s, there was no technology for deaf people that allowed them access to communication with hearing people. There were no phone relay services, fax transmissions, pagers, or similar communication devices. Deaf parents had no choice but depend on their children to facilitate communication. Today, there is advanced technology that allows communication access for deaf people. However, the data showed that parents still depended on their hearing children to interpret for them.
A participant expressed frustration at interpreting for his parents throughout life:

It's also frustrating that I have to interpret often. Many Cadas were also frustrated because of that. Because in a way, it feels a little bit like you lost being a kid, like what I mean by lost is, you grew up too fast. I am the always the only one who has to interpret for my deaf family because I am the only one who can hear. I guess that's a big part of the frustration. Like going out to eat, like here we're in front of Panera. Sometimes you have to go in to order. Sometimes it's easy, they would just ask me to say the numbers. But sometimes, I don't want that. Young. Really deep interpreting, no, but restaurant interpreting, I was six or seven years old. Young. Then as I become older, I did more complex interpreting, like talking about drivers insurance, my parents got into an accident one time and I had to go to the lawyer's office. That happened... I think I was around 14 or 15. Communication barriers, yes. Interpreting, I felt frustrated.

A different participant stated that his parents rarely had him interpret. However, they faced an emergency when the hospital did not provide an interpreter:

I've heard horror stories, but me personally, I had very little of that. My biggest horror story when I was forced to interpret was for my sister, when she had to go to the hospital. She had a urinary tract infection. And I had to interpret for her when the doctor was examining her, inserting the probe. It was embarrassing for me, it was embarrassing for my sister. That was the only... I was about 12 years old at that time. It was an emergency and it just happened that there were no interpreters at the hospital at that time. You really needed to bring your own interpreter, most of the time. Most places would provide but you had to plan in advance to have one available. If you just showed up there was no way to get one, those were the times when I had to interpret.
Another participant stated that he changed his career mainly because his deaf family relied on him to interpret for them a lot. He originally considered becoming a doctor but changed his mind. He explained:

I wanted to become a doctor. And it was very interesting because often I would mention becoming a doctor and many Deaf people told me I should become a doctor for deaf people. And every time I heard that, I withdrew more and more. Because I didn’t want Deaf people to depend on me anymore.

Two participants never experienced having to interpret for their families. One noted:

I didn’t interpret much for them. They would communicate on their own. They would find other ways to communicate with hearing people, rather than having me interpret for them. I was too young to interpret for them, I think. I was a child. They emphasized to me that they didn’t need me to interpret for them. They didn’t want me to have the view of deaf people as people who couldn’t do things on their own and needed hearing people to interpret. Everyone in my family is pretty successful. They do well on their own. I would interpret very little. Sometimes I would want to interpret, but then they never made that assumption that as the hearing child I would be the interpreter.

He added:

I think my parents’ attitude was more that they didn’t want me to feel that the Coda experience was awful or that there would be added pressure to interpret for them. I think they wanted me to be a child and they wanted me to have fun. They wanted me to play. I think they wanted me to have a fun childhood – to be myself. They were more encouraging in that way. There were definitely different approaches they took with us. And I think that worked for us.
No Distinctions

Seven participants pointed out that because they were hearing, the parents expected that they would do fine and did not need guidance or supervision like their Deaf siblings. One participant gave the following example:

My mom thought that I was more independent than I really was. I think my mom thought, “Oh, she’s hearing, go ahead, she’ll be fine. She has all of that. My other sibling, he’s Deaf, I have to make sure he has this, this, this…” You know, that, it’s a little bit different.

Another response from a different participant was:

I don’t mean like my mom likes him [my deaf brother] better than me but I mean, he gets more attention and they help him out more financially...because they feel bad for him. And they’ll say things like, “Oh (name withheld), he’s struggling” and I’m like, “Well, I struggled too.” All people struggle sometimes whether they’re hearing or Deaf. So that has become more of an issue now that we are adults than it was when we were growing up. Growing up, everything was always very fair but now it’s not as even.

Another participant shared a similar perspective:

My mom thought that I was more independent that I really was. I think my mom thought, “Oh, she’s hearing, go ahead, she’ll be fine. She has all of that. My other sister, (name withheld) she’s deaf, I have to make sure she has this, this, this.

She added that she told her mom that she was disappointed for not receiving guidance in adolescence. She remembered:

I sit with my mom as I go along and I told her about that feeling that she like, let me go and I needed more support, I needed more guidance... Like when I told her I felt like other girls were picking on me at school,
maybe she could have guided me rather than saying oh no, you're fine. You know, I felt that, OK, I know I have to sit and talk with my mom and she's like, "I didn't realize, I thought you were fine." Yeah, I know, you thought I was always fine, but I wasn't. You know... But I think everyone in their preteens needs a lot of support and guidance. I didn't have that. I did, yes.

Another participant struggled with his parents who expected him to do well like his deaf sister:

I rebelled. Well, it was worse in high school. In middle school, I think I just kind of lost focus some. My deaf sister was the "model student" and got straight As and a lot of accolades. My mom always tried to put that on me as well but I was like, no, we're not the same. So I would kind of ignore her or rebel or act out against my parents.

He added because of not being a model child like his sister:

I was in the gym class and the minute I got into class, they called me to go to the front office. I wasn't happy about it because I liked gym class and being able to play around. I had to go to the office and some woman was sitting there that I didn't know. I was like, "Okay, what's going on?" Come to find out, this woman was a counselor that my parents had hired and sent to the school to meet with me. I wanted nothing to do with her. I was sooo pissed off. I went home and blew up at my parents.

He added:

I think because I'm hearing, sometimes my parents weren't sure what to do with me. Obviously, looking back, it's not easy to say but I think if I were the same age as my sister, it shouldn't be different but I think they did treat me a little different. Maybe it was that
with me being hearing, they didn’t understand hearing culture a little bit so they just weren’t sure what to do.

Lack of Interpreters

Ten participants had to interpret for their parents at school and meetings with lawyers or doctors because the schools, agencies, and hospitals did not provide an interpreter. As noted earlier, Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act requires that any school or agency receiving federal funds is obligated to provide an interpreter for deaf parents (Buchino, 1990). Public schools are obligated to accommodate the deaf parents’ communication needs by providing interpreters at no charge to the parents for meetings or events. The disadvantage is that most agencies require a two-week advance notification for interpreter requests. This poses a challenge in the event of a crisis, and the teacher, principal, or parent may not be able to wait two weeks to resolve the crisis. The interview data did not reflect whether the participants’ families or schools were aware of the legal requirements or other factors; however, the schools clearly did not follow the legal requirements for accessibility.

One participant stated that, when his parents were not provided an interpreter, they had to write back and forth with the doctor. He found it easier to interpret than having them write back and forth.

One participant noted:

Well, in the elementary school, they typically hired interpreters. Other times, they didn’t hire interpreters, 50% of the time. Sometimes I would show up and interpret for my parents, sometimes there was an interpreter there. I realized, sometimes my parents forgot to request one. Sometimes the school couldn’t find an interpreter. Yes, sometimes it was awkward. If a teacher was telling them they were concerned about his [my] grades, I had to interpret, ‘I’m concerned about my grades.’ You know? It was awkward. It happens. And honestly I feel like it shouldn’t happen because that communication is for my parents and my teacher, not for me. Sometimes if a teacher has a conversation and wants the student there, fine, I will join. But I don’t know if a student should interpret in the meeting.
Sometimes I like, guided a little, you know? Like if the teacher said, ‘Oh, his grades are AWFUL!’ I would sign ‘bad.’ But if they said my grades were bad, I never signed ‘good.’ I guess I sometimes did in some ways. Elementary school typically always had an interpreter there. My principal at that time was really wonderful and understood that my family was different and supported that. It was really nice. In middle school and high school I had a different principal. It was frustrating, I interpreted. I really hated it. I didn’t want to have to be there AND interpret for them.

Another participant described her experiences as an interpreter for the family:

In middle school, we went on vacation to Florida and we were on the bus from the hotel to Disney World that refused to provide an interpreter for my deaf family. The bus driver was speaking over the intercom explaining what the different sites were that we were passing. I was tired and was trying to sleep when my mother woke me up asking me what the driver was saying. I responded that I was tired and my mother got upset saying that I didn’t care about her and that I didn’t want her to know everything that was being said. So I grudgingly interpreted for that but I remember even on vacation, it was an issue. I remember that part when I was around 12 or 13 and then through high school, I interpreted a lot.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings of this study support the research literature that showed that only hearing children in all-deaf families experience obstacles in various settings. Examples include serving as an interpreter, not realizing they are hearing until they enter school, and taking responsibilities to protect their parents only because they are the only ones who can hear in their families. Some of the obstacles they encountered resulted from a lack of cultural and technological awareness, especially in various systems, such
as not hiring interpreters for parent-teacher conferences, events, doctor appointments, and asking the hearing children to interpret.

**Recommendations for Action**

The findings of the study lead to the following recommendations.

1. Schools, mental health agencies, and hospitals need to be familiar with laws concerning accessibility, such as Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, particularly regarding accessibility for deaf parents.

2. Schools, agencies and parents also need to familiarize themselves with the process of booking sign language interpreters for parent-teacher conferences, meetings, and other events, and should plan ahead for scheduled events. They should also be familiar with the interpreter’s role and responsibilities.

3. School and mental health professionals need to gain an understanding of identity issues that affect only hearing members in their all-deaf families and conflicts so they can help them resolve and deal with those issues and conflicts. They must understand the implications of the Americans with Disabilities Act, especially as it applies to the communication needs of deaf parents, and they must support compliance with legal requirements within their schools and agencies.

Technology is another area that school and mental health counselors and social workers must become familiar with in order to communicate with Deaf parents effectively.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Interviewing the participants’ parents and teachers to compare perspectives could expand the study. The parents who have just one hearing child along with their deaf child(ren) could describe (1) how they dealt with different academic settings for their deaf and hearing children, (2) their perspectives on having their hearing children interpret, (3) their understanding on their children’s identity development, and (4) whether advanced technology has helped them or not.

The findings of this study are significant because this research is new, with no other literature on this topic. This research will help deaf parents and hearing people as well as professionals broaden their knowledge of this
topic and increase awareness of struggles and obstacles that the only hearing child in an all-deaf family had to face.

Conclusion

In the open-ended interviews, thirteen participants from eight states described similar experiences with obstacles. Full communication accessibility in society, including schools, mental health agencies, and hospitals, would promote a more positive family experience. Obstacles within systems and with parents can be avoided if schools and agencies are aware of how such obstacles affect hearing children. In this study, the findings were that schools and agencies might not know how to work effectively with deaf parents, given that interpreters were typically not provided. Schools and agencies need to recognize the issues and make sure that children are not obligated to interpret during events. Schools and agencies need to be familiar with the law, deaf culture, and existing technology for deaf parents. Additionally, schools, agencies, and parents need to be aware of their only hearing child's challenges so that they can receive better support and guidance.

Cultural awareness and technology awareness are important ingredients for successful development among children. Although updated technology is available, schools and agencies still have hearing children interpret instead of bringing in professional interpreters. Deaf parents and school and mental health professionals need to gain an understanding of the impact of having their only hearing child interpret. Parents need to be made aware of the implications of their actions, and they need to educate schools and agencies about their accessibility obligations as dictated by law. This study seeks to increase awareness of the needs of this population.

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References


