

The importance of rich early childhood experiences for deaf and hard of hearing children

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for Deaf Children Australia, April 2021

A child's early years are a critical period for communication, language, and social-emotional development and lay crucial foundations for future learning and the forming of identity. This early childhood period is particularly important for deaf and hard of hearing children, whose challenges in communication and language development have been widely researched and reported.

More than 90 percent of deaf babies are born to hearing parents, most of whom have had very little experience with the impact of deafness on a child's communication and language development. In many cases, it is a challenging task for parents to understand the communication needs of their deaf child and to foster interactions that lead to strong language outcomes.

Research in the early childhood field has found that deaf children's language development is greatly influenced by early identification of their hearing loss, followed by fitting of assistive listening devices, such as hearing aids or cochlear implants and commencement in a high-quality family-centred early intervention program, preferably within the first few months of life. Family-centred early intervention supports children's development by building on families' strengths and skills and by encouraging their positive interactions, active participation and advocacy for their children. We know that when families and communities collaborate in positive ways, a deaf child's capacity to achieve their learning potential is significantly enhanced.

Other important factors that impact on a young deaf child's developmental outcomes are the level of family involvement in their child's early intervention program and early childhood activities and the parents' and caregivers' communication skills. These skills also include the use of gestures, facial expressions, body language and attention-getting strategies that support language input and enhance the quality of parent-child interactions. It is important that the whole family feels comfortable communicating with each other and that the surrounding language environment is rich, rewarding and meaningful, so the sooner parents can communicate effectively with their deaf children, the better the outcomes.

With the rapid advances in hearing aid and cochlear implant technology and access to high-quality audiological support, young deaf children are provided with enhanced opportunities to develop spoken language. However, there is also strong evidence that a bilingual approach, incorporating a spoken and a signed language, such as Auslan (Australian Sign Language), provides significant benefits for a deaf child's language and intellectual development at critical stages in their development, irrespective of their degree of hearing loss.

By immersing a very young deaf child in a bilingual environment with a family's spoken language and Auslan early in their development, they are provided with a 'safety net' for the acquisition of at least one strong language for future learning. If a child's first language can be acquired within normal developmental milestones, there is a much greater chance that

they will be able to use their language skills to achieve to their highest potential and therefore have a wider range of educational and vocational opportunities.

There is no doubt that parents and caregivers play a major role in ensuring that their young deaf children are provided with the best opportunities to develop to their full potential and gain a strong identity. Whilst this may seem like a daunting task at first for families, the journey is rich with rewards and the establishment of long-lasting warm and loving relationships with their deaf children through effective communication is the best gift of all.