

The Deaf Mentor Program:

An Effective Approach to Involving Deaf Adults in the Lives of Hearing Families and Their Children

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Paula Pittman presented conference attendees with an overview of the Deaf Mentor Program and the research results that were gleaned from the study that was conducted on that program.

Deaf Mentor services enable young children who are deaf to learn American Sign Language (ASL) which supports and enhances the child's simultaneous early learning of English. As models and teachers of ASL, deaf adults (Deaf Mentors) share their language with the deaf child and family. The early learning of ASL enables the young deaf child to acquire language proficiency during the critical period for language development and prepares her/him with the language base necessary to enter school ready to learn curricular material.

Deaf Mentors assist family members to learn ASL, and they interact directly with the child using ASL. Through weekly home visits and activities, Deaf Mentors help family members learn, respect, appreciate, and enjoy the language of the Deaf. Concurrently, a parent advisor, or early interventionist, assists family members to learn and use English through signs presented in English order. The parent advisor also makes weekly home visits, coordinating the content, activities, and target language of the visits with the Deaf Mentor. Family members learn the difference between signing in English and using ASL and may use both in ways that are appropriate for them and their child in the home. With this valuable communication input and guidance from both the Deaf Mentor and the parent advisor, the family and child become comfortable interacting with both deaf and hearing persons. The child's lifetime opportunities to interact with and learn from both deaf and hearing persons are optimized.

In addition to helping the child and family learn and appreciate the language of the Deaf, Deaf Mentors also assist families to appreciate and understand Deaf Culture and to participate in the Deaf community.

Of course, the child is part of a Hearing Culture by being in a hearing family and by having a hearing parent advisor, hearing relatives, and hearing friends. The Deaf Mentor assists families to appreciate and understand the Deaf experience and Deaf Culture. The Mentor shares his or her experiences of growing up deaf and being a deaf person. The Mentor describes Deaf Culture to the family, takes the family to Deaf community activities and events, and introduces the family to other deaf persons.

The Deaf Mentor is also a role model for the young deaf child and promotes the child's identity and positive self image, and helps the child feel confident and proud to be a deaf person. The Deaf Mentor helps the family truly appreciate their child who is deaf and this, in turn, helps the child develop a strong, healthy sense of self-worth. Ultimately, the child and family develop strong positive attitudes about Deafness, and they learn to feel comfortable in both the Deaf and Hearing worlds and to respect and appreciate both the Deaf and Hearing Cultures.

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM

The basic conceptual design of the Deaf Mentor Program is based on research in the area of language acquisition for young children who are deaf. The conceptual design uses a paradigm showing school readiness of the hearing child in an English speaking home and in a bilingual home, and the school readiness of the deaf child of hearing parents in an English speaking home and in a bilingual home where both English and ASL are used. The Deaf Mentor Program is based upon the paradigm of the deaf child in a bilingual home as shown on page 7.

The results of the research conducted on the Deaf Mentor Program reveal that children of hearing parents who are exposed to a bilingual-bicultural

environment through Deaf Mentor services benefit positively from that experience. Not only did the BiBi children have a beginning knowledge and use of ASL, they also were developing English skills at a rate beyond those children who did not receive Deaf Mentor services.

You will find a full account of this research study in an article published in 1998 in the American Annals of the Deaf, Volume 143, No. 1. The article is titled, "The Deaf Mentor Experimental Project for Young Children Who Are Deaf and Their Families."

Training is currently available for states/agencies interested in establishing a Deaf Mentor program. For information regarding this training or information regarding any other aspect of the Deaf Mentor Program, please contact Paula Pittman, SKI•HI Institute, Utah State University, 6500 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-6500, (435) 797-5589, Fax (435) 797-5580.

Paula Pittman was involved in the development of the first birth to six Deaf Mentor Program at the SKI•HI Institute and is currently the director of the Deaf Mentor Outreach Program. She has also been a Parent Advisor/Early Interventionist for the past 16 years.



The Hearing Child (with Hearing Parents)		
	What Happens In the Home	School Readiness
Hearing child in home of hearing parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Normal communication ◆ Normal language development occurs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Child is a fluent native language user ◆ Ready to enter school to learn subject matter
Hearing child in bilingual home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Two (or more) languages used ◆ Both languages develop normally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Child fluent in both languages ◆ Ready to enter school to learn subject matter in either/both languages

The Deaf Child (with Hearing Parents)		
	What Happens In the Home	School Readiness
Deaf child in home of hearing parents who use English (no Deaf Mentor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Child often does not learn language (ASL or English) ◆ Communication in home is seriously affected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Child may not be ready for school; not linguistically ready to learn subject matter ◆ Does not have English skills to access curricular content
Deaf child in bilingual home (Deaf Mentor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Develops visual language in a way that is the most appropriate and meaningful for the child ◆ Develops ASL, an easily-perceived visual language of the Deaf ◆ Develops English through both visual and auditory forms ◆ Communicates easily with both hearing family and deaf individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Is linguistically competent and ready to enter school to learn subject matter ◆ Further learning and use of each language enhanced by the other