

Children of Deaf Adults:

PARENTING & COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Children Of Deaf Adults are often known as CODA's or in the deaf community a common phrase to identify a hearing child of deaf parents is "Mother father deaf".

Statistics show that over 90% of all deaf parents have hearing children (CODA's). These are families that bridge the hearing and deaf worlds, thus facing unique communication and parenting challenges. Although there is a lot of research about the issues facing deaf children of hearing parents, little research or awareness exists about the cultural, communication and parenting issues faced within families of deaf parents with hearing children (CODA's).

Language is an important part of everyone's cultural identity and for Deaf people this is especially so. Although not all deaf people use BSL (British Sign Language), it is considered to be the most important element of what connects the deaf community together (Filer and Filer.) Many Older deaf people attended state residential schools for the deaf, and there they learnt BSL and important cultural traditions of the deaf community as well as making connections to the wider Deaf Culture and communities. Sadly, many Deaf people have negative experiences with the hearing world, and therefore they will often limit (or avoid) contact with hearing people. CODAs often serve as interpreters for their parents, thus becoming the communication link between their parents and hearing people- even family members. There are several concerns surrounding children that serve as interpreters for their parents. One is that children are expected to interpret in situations that are inappropriate, whether it is the subject (eg Medical situations) or age appropriateness; (complex matters) placing them in confusing and vulnerable situations. This creates unwanted pressures and burdens that some CODAs are too young to resist or negotiate (Singleton & Tittle.) It is quite interesting to note that most of these situations are 'encouraged' by members of the hearing world (They argue that it's easier, quicker or cheaper than using an interpreter). On a positive note, CODAs also enjoy the richness associated with the knowledge of language and cultures of two worlds and report that maintaining this 'special' role in the family structure helped them gain responsibility, maturity and an ability to empathise with others (Preston, 1994.)

Another issue that CODA's face within the family unit is regarding Protection (theirs and the parents). The hearing child may not interpret to their parents any insensitive remarks made by hearing people (who may assume everyone in the family is deaf because they were all signing.) - even their friends. Often CODAs experience isolation and rejection from their peers because they do not feel comfortable or want to associate with the CODAs deaf family, thus creating a situation in which the CODA may not feel they can openly discuss emotions and feelings of rejection with their parents for fear of hurting their feelings. Children may also become hyper vigilant, listening for things that their parents cannot hear such as burglars, smoke alarms, and cracking sounds of the ceiling collapsing or in young ones maybe 'monsters', (Filer & Filer.) Many feel that this 'role reversal' (taking on parental role of protector) and could later cause problems for the parents when teenage trials and power struggles take place. It's also interesting to note that these struggles appear to start earlier than in most 'hearing' households.

Perhaps the most critical issue is communication between the deaf parent/s and the hearing child. Studies show that most deaf parents "have no particular problem" accepting their child's ability to hear, but "acutely aware" that parenthood forces them to address things "they have no knowledge about." (Sell) The family power structure is affected by the flow of information and understanding of any given situation. In a hearing family this is open within the family and the larger community, but the flow of information changes drastically with the addition of a deaf member; moreover, it can be blocked or severely restricted when families with deaf and hearing members do not have a mutual communication system (Rienzi.) Although BSL is a legitimate language for family interaction, sometimes within a deaf-parented family there could be several

different communication systems, some BSL and other not. Deaf parents may use BSL between themselves but use a mixed modes of communication (Lipreading and sign, SSE -Sign supported English) with their hearing children. Furthermore, communication between a deaf parent and a hearing child may not always be effective. The deaf parent may use fragmented speech to the child, but expect the child to sign back to them. This causes problems as the child doesn't learn to sign as the parent is not signing to him/her so communication may be very limited. Thus, often the child can understand what the parent says, but not vice versa. (Rienzi) Parents may have a misguided notion that they should not sign with their child simply because the child is hearing, and some parents have reported not signing with their child in order to prevent reliance on their child to serve as their interpreter. Such parents elect to speak to their child with reduced speech clarity and probable ungrammatical (BSL) form. The end result of this situation may be that the hearing child cannot sign and the parent-child relationship becomes restricted and asymmetrical. (Rienzi) This also has the added issues for CODA children in language development- difficulties in learning to speak properly (mimicking their parents 'Deaf voices') and learning correct English grammar.

As 90% of deaf children are brought up in hearing families- they are sometimes over protected and this means that they grow up reliant on others to do even basic everyday tasks. This can mean that they are so used to passing decision making/responsibilities to hearing people that when they become parents they may continue to do so and may rely on their own children. This lack of independence can mean they have no experience in how to teach their own children normal boundaries/learning so that they are often unaware of inappropriate behaviour- theirs or their children's.

BSL and Deaf culture is very direct and expressive- sometimes intensively so. This can result in CODAs being wrongly identified as having behavioural issues or being seen as aggressive. Deaf culture also accepts much smaller personal boundaries which hearing people find intrusive and rude. It is also part of Deaf culture to touch and the community is much more tactile in a way that hearing people often find unacceptable- especially so where some BME groups are concerned. This can lead to problems in peer social groups, school and the hearing world in general as the boundaries are different as a result the CODA child may not behave appropriately or acceptably, resulting in isolation or rejection and confusion as to why.

In summary, research and parenting literature generally find that deaf parents are competent and caring and have excellent relationships with their hearing children. Although there are some unique issues involving communication, it does not appear that deaf parents are at a greater risk for serious family dysfunction any more than hearing parents of hearing children. (Rienzi) Today, there are many resources available that can help protect CODA's and their parents from many of the issues discussed. First, professional interpreters should be used whenever possible for situations that might be inappropriate for the CODA's to interpret such as adult conversation, legal issues and school matters. Second, deaf parents should make sure that they tap into resources to help them achieve a sense of independence and the ability to be the 'protector' in the household.(Deaf Parenting courses etc) Parents should have open and frank discussions regarding discrimination and give 'what to do' tips and suggestions to their children when those situations arise. Thirdly, and most importantly, deaf parents should make sure that they teach their hearing child the form of communication that is predominately used by them. It is critical for the hearing child to be able to communicate his/her feelings with their parents and not just serve as an interpreter of the parent's feelings and decisions.

References

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