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## PARENT - EDUCATION SERVICES FOR DEAF ADULTS

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Developmental psychologists have traditionally stressed the importance of a good parent-child relationship. Special emphasis has been placed on intercommunication between parent and child as primary for healthy social, psychological, and intellectual development of the child (Hess, 1969; Roff, 1950). Parents have been described as being "people-makers": responsible for a child's feelings of self-worth, responsible for communication of meaning between family members, and responsible for conveying the rules which link individuals to the larger society (Satir, 1972). Related to this, there exists an abundance of research literature addressing the many difficulties encountered when a deaf child is born into a hearing family (i.e., to hearing parents) as 90% of deaf people are (Schein & Delk, 1974). Grinker (1969) pointed to inadequacies in early parent-child relationships as having long-standing detrimental influences on the psychological development of the child. Mindel and Vernon (1971) summarized the nature of the research findings by pointing to the nature of the hearing parents' early reactions to the discovery of the deafness and subsequent handling of the child as contributing to the noted poor social and emotional adjustment of the deaf individual. They reported that successful family adaptation to childhood deafness was rare due to a lack of early intervention attempts. They said, "As a consequence, deaf children become progressively more isolated from their families and from the hearing society" (p.24). This isolation exerts a strong influence on the deaf individual's adjustment and future ability to assume adult roles and responsibilities.

This article will address the deaf person's preparedness to assume parent-roles. Research evidence will be presented which indicates the need for development and provision

of services aimed at improving and enhancing the parenting abilities of deaf adults.

### **Deaf People and Parenting Skills**

It has been suggested that people learn parenting skills from either their own parents or from those individuals responsible for childrearing activities (Satir, 1972). Given the high percentage of deaf persons having hearing parents (Schein & Delk, 1974) and the reported nature of the parent-child relationship of hearing parents with their deaf children as previously mentioned (Grinker, 1969; Mindel & Vernon, 1971), the implications regarding the deaf adult's ability to parent effectively based on experiences with his own parents are clear, and discouraging. Pessimism regarding the deaf adult's parenting skills is deepened by consideration of the number of deaf children who attend residential schools, thus losing parent contact to institutional group management principles. The institutionalization experienced by many deaf persons educated in residential schools may further serve to reinforce the existence of a deaf subculture where deaf persons tend to associate exclusively with each other. The existence of the deaf subculture often acts to decrease the deaf adult's awareness of the flow of events in the larger culture. "Thus, his proneness to be uninformed of matters that are important to him is intensified" (Williams & Sussman, 1971, p.24). It follows, then, that deaf parents may be unable to provide the "link", described as a parental responsibility by Satir (1972), for their children to the larger society.

In addition to the concern expressed over the deaf person's poor early experience and subsequent weakness in parenting ability, serious questions can be raised with regard to added complications experienced when deaf parents are responsible for raising hearing children. There is a paucity of research litera-

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ture which examines the potential problems experienced when hearing children are born to deaf parents. What little information exists points to family relationship difficulties (Goldenberg, Rabinowitz & Kravetz, 1974), with the hearing children suffering "severe communication problems with their environment" (Halbreich, 1979, p. 129) as well as experiencing feelings of extreme alienation (Arlow, 1976; Halbreich, 1979). Hearing children of deaf parents have been described as rejecting their parents, regarding them as dependent and irresponsible (Greenberg, 1972; Robinson & Weathers, 1974), and as a source of stigma (Becker, 1980). Deaf parents themselves have been reported as feeling confused and hurt over their hearing children's embarrassment about and poor treatment of them and as expressing a sense of inadequacy to care for their children, some to the extent of placing their hearing children in some form of foster care (Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972). Halbreich (1979) referred to deaf parents' tendencies to treat their hearing children as their own hearing parents did them, stating, ". . . there is a distance in parent-child interrelationships and the parents develop guilt feelings, insecurity, and overprotectiveness. These tendencies lead to power struggles, ambivalent feelings, and temper tantrums on the part of both generations of the family" (p.135). Again, a relatively bleak picture is painted of the family situation, and success of parenting, in families of deaf parents with hearing children.

### Training

The preparedness of deaf persons for parenting activities has largely been ignored over the years in favor of efforts aimed at vocational and rehabilitation goals. While these efforts are not misguided, it is possible that a dual focus, encompassing both, would make for a better overall adjustment by the deaf individual into the larger society (Thompson, 1977). While it seems probable that efforts to improve and enhance the parenting abilities of deaf persons are being undertaken (largely in educational settings), the information and techniques are seemingly developed on an "in-house" basis with little-to-no dissemination.

Meadow (1980) suggested that the described parental inadequacy on the part of deaf adults

stems from their overall lack of preparation for childrearing and parenting as well as the tendency for deaf parents to have access to fewer social and economic resources. Indeed, Watson (Note 1) hypothesized that a general lack of parenting or family life information may, in part, account for the lower percentage of deaf persons marrying as compared to the general population as well as the tendency for marriages involving deaf persons to produce fewer offspring in the same comparison (Schein & Delk, 1974). In the keynote address given at the 1983 American Deafness And Rehabilitation Association (ADARA) national conference on mental health and deafness, John Scanlan stressed the need for providing parenting skills information and training to deaf adults. He asked, "Where do they (deaf adults) learn to parent, especially the ones who have been institutionalized all of their lives or who, living at home, experienced poor communication with their hearing parents?" (Note 2). Moreover, he warned that the children comprising the "rubella bubble", an estimated 12,000 (including deaf-blind) added to a basal rate of approximately 12,000 for the same time period (Trybus, Karchmer, Kerstetter & Hicks, 1980), are currently approaching young adulthood as they were born during the epidemic of the early- to mid-1960's. Drawing from demographic statistics on the frequency of intermarriage, these deaf individuals will most probably marry other deaf individuals, if they marry at all (95% intermarriage rate, Rainer, Altshuler & Kallmann, 1969), thus one can anticipate an increase in families having deaf parents. Moreover, given the low percentage of deaf couples producing deaf offspring, the increased number of deaf couples described will have hearing children. Rainer, Altshuler & Kallmann (1969) described the need for providing parenting information as "urgent" saying, "No group is more entitled to counseling in marriage and parenthood than the deaf" (p.215).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

It appears that there is a great need for training activities directed toward 1) increasing knowledge and 2) enhancing the parenting skills of deaf adults. The benefits of such training would be of two kinds:

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**Remedial:** enhancing parenting and family adjustment for optimal general social adjustment and rehabilitation on the part of the deaf adults involved.

**Preventive:** enhancing the adjustment of the children of deaf parents thereby decreasing the possibility of the need for later remedial efforts at the mental health level. This would hold especially true for the hearing children of deaf parents.

In addition, it seems likely that the effects of a program which would, in all probability, place an emphasis on teaching deaf parents the importance of responsibility and conse-

quences of behavior as it relates to the raising of children might generalize to other areas of daily living which are often the focus of rehabilitation efforts, again emphasizing the benefits of a dual focus for the provision of services. The need for a parent-education program aimed at enhancing the parenting skills of deaf adults has been well documented in the literature. However, activities directed toward remedying this need are not evidenced in the same professional literature. Deafness professionals should address the challenge presented by this need and, in joint effort, begin to investigate the means by which these important services might be developed and made available.

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