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The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia

Children of Deaf Adults

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The hearing children of Deaf parents grow up in two cultures with two languages. They are similar to other bilingual, bicultural children in many ways but are special also. They can be in conflict between two worlds and often carry an extra burden of responsibility in functioning as a bridge between the two. As long as the child is given enough exposure to both the spoken and the signed languages, both will be learned well. Since Deaf parents will most often have hearing children, it is important for them to understand the position of Kodos. Stakeholder organizations define a Koda as the hearing child of Deaf adults who are signing (kid of Deaf adults). The term Coda is usually applied to an adult child of Deaf adults.

As an example, consider Rachel, who is 6 years old and hearing. Her parents are both Deaf and use American Sign Language (ASL). One set of grandparents is Deaf, and one set hearing. Her only older brother is hearing too. She has grown up signing ASL but also speaking English, and she is a typical example of a Koda. A large group of hearing children of deaf adults do not grow up with a sign language. We know that 90–95% of children born to deaf parents are hearing, but it is not known how many children are in fact Kodos. Since the World Federation of the Deaf represents about 70 million deaf people, the number of hearing children in deaf families must in fact be staggering.

In this entry we report on signing K/Codas. Although there are many testimonials from Codas about their cultural and linguistic experiences while growing up in their Deaf families, there is comparatively little research on this group.

Rachel has been learning two languages from birth and is also growing up in two cultures, that is, in the American hearing culture and that of the ASL-using Deaf community. Codas report on the different mindsets and mannerisms that they can identify as being special for the Deaf community. All children of signing Deaf adults are the carriers of Deaf culture, although they are likely themselves to have hearing children and thus commonly form a one-generation cohort.

There is huge variation in the extent to which an individual is active in transmitting this culture. Some Codas show immense pride in their heritage. Sander, for example, in the Netherlands talks about his being active in two cultures and considering Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) as his second mother tongue. Others may reject their Deaf cultural heritage to some extent, in that they would never reveal to others that their parents are Deaf, for example. Deaf parents may also even be negative about their hearing child's being part of the Deaf community, in an attempt to protect the child from the negative attitudes that may prevail about Deaf people. However positive a Coda may be about the Deaf community, having no direct experience of being deaf is often mentioned as a barrier to full membership—by both Codas and the Deaf.

Many Codas report that they had or still have a function as a go-between for both the Deaf world and the hearing world. This is often a considerable load for the child who has to take on responsibilities beyond his or her years. For example, the child may be asked to interpret at the doctor's office regarding intimate information about the parent. Many Codas suffer from restricted ambitions due to the role that may be imposed on them. Many feel that they are misfits, belonging in neither world. Others feel that they have a positive Coda identity, but again as neither a hearing person nor a Deaf person.

Rachel is growing up learning to speak English and ASL, Sander is learning Dutch and NGT. They were exposed to these languages from birth; this is usually called simultaneous bilingualism. In this situation, the child learns the two languages like two first languages. In older Coda anecdotes, sometimes it was reported that a child was exclusively in contact with his or her extensive Deaf family for several years and exposed to the spoken language only much later. In such a case, learning the spoken language was much more like learning a second language (sequential bilingualism). This is rarely reported anymore.

The spoken language coming from hearing family members and others close to the child is essential for learning that language. Fears have often been expressed about this aspect of the development of Kodos since they are learning a sign language. But all evidence indicates that a child who receives a minimum exposure to the spoken language will learn it in the same way as any bilingual child. It is not clear what this minimum is, but the suggestion from general work on bilingual children is that 20–40% of the child's waking hours needs to involve exposure to the language. In vocabulary studies, for example, Kodos had an

equivalent vocabulary to other children learning just one language, as long as they had enough exposure.

Deaf parents use elements from the spoken language along with their signing, so-called code-blending. These elements are not always full grammatical sentences of the spoken language, and their pronunciation and intonation often may be different from the standard. They will often not use voice when articulating spoken words. These different forms of spoken language do not seem to negatively affect the child's language acquisition, as long as the deaf parents are not the only source of the spoken language.

Kodas will sometimes use a whispering voice when using the spoken language with their Deaf parents. This seems to show awareness that their parents cannot hear or is an imitation of the parents' voice behavior. As adults, Kodas will also use this whispering when citing their parents or when talking about themselves as children in conversation with their parents.

The fact that these children are learning a sign language seems to have little effect on their spoken language; that is, the structures of the sign language do not seem to negatively interfere with the structures of the spoken language. Kodas do, however, use co-speech gestures in a different way than nonsigners, reflecting the influence of the sign language. For example, their gestures are more often iconic, and specific facial expressions, such as the eyebrow movement used with questions, are also used more often. This shows that the sign language cannot be completely inhibited, but this is not a functional problem. When Kodas are talking among themselves, their speech can have some special features that are acceptable within that group. For example, word order can be reversed in terms like King Lion for Lion King or blue and black for black and blue. This order is taken from ASL and is generally unacceptable in English. Another feature is the use of Deaf parents' mispronunciations in English; for example, a vowel may be inserted in chopsticks (chapasticks) or in napkin (napikin). Such usage is viewed not as negative by the group of Kodas themselves, but rather as a way of identifying with their Deaf backgrounds.

Problems found in spoken language development in Kodas can often be related to a cluster of problems in the family, and as such should not be attributed to being a Koda. Spoken language acquisition of Kodas appears to be under the influence of the same factors as any spoken language in bilingual acquisition.

Little is known about how Kodas learn a sign language. It can be expected that, if they are exposed enough to the sign language, they will acquire it, just as Deaf children of Deaf parents do. Two studies have indicated that as adults, Kodas are slightly less accurate on a signed language task than Deaf native signers. This may be a reflection of the fact that, with time, the signed language will become the less dominant language.

Characteristic of the signing of Kodas from the earliest stages is that they produce above all a mixture of the spoken language and signed language, that is, a bimodal, bilingual language, when they are in conversation with Deaf people. Alex at age 6 years was talking about Santa Claus when he produced the following utterance:

- Spoken: "face trousers shoes gloves"
- Signed: face clothes trousers indexshoesgloves
- Translation: [I see:] [his] face, and clothes, like trousers, shoes, and gloves.

Here we see that there is slightly more content in the signed parts of the utterance than in the spoken parts. Other utterances can be the other way a round, or they can be equivalent. Sometimes there are different elements in the signed and spoken parts, as we can see in Jonas's utterance:

- Spoken: "blue jacket, blue"
- Signed: color
- Translation: The color of the jacket is blue.

Deaf parents offer mixed utterances to both their Deaf and their hearing children. It seems that the hearing children, Kodas, are exposed to more utterances in which the spoken language dominates, than are Deaf children. The type of mixing that the children use seems to be influenced by the language skills of the conversation partner. For example, if the Deaf adult was good at lipreading, more spoken language elements

were used. Codas among themselves use mainly a type of mixing in which the spoken language dominates. The different types of mixed utterances are produced in the same conversation with a smooth transition from one to the other.

Considerable variation exists in the language abilities of Kodos and Codas. This depends largely on the extent to which the individual relates to the Deaf community. Codas are bimodal, bilingual language users and not identical to Deaf native signers. For instance, since they are exposed to auditory information, they have brain areas specifically for this purpose, whereas these areas are recruited for visual processing in Deaf native signers. Like individuals who are bilingual in two spoken languages, Codas experience more of the tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon than monolinguals since Codas' two vocabularies in the sign and spoken languages are competing with one another. By contrast, because of their exposure to a sign language, Codas are better than nonsigners in transforming mental images and completing spatial arrays.

Kodas grow up with two languages and two cultures, and the extent to which they function equally well and happily in both is due to many individual factors. They are a group that needs more research.

Beppie van den Bogaerde and Anne E. Baker

See also [Bilingualism](#); [Identity Development](#); [Deaf Culture](#); [Language Contact of Spoken and Signed Languages](#);

Further Readings

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