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Baker, A.E.; van den Bogaerde, B.

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The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia

Children, Deaf, of Deaf Parents

Contributors: **Author:** Anne E. Baker & Beppie van den Bogaerde

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Deaf children with Deaf parents usually grow up in the Deaf community, that is if their parents offer them a sign language and are active members of the community. These Deaf children are similar to other children of linguistic and cultural minorities in many ways. They are also different in that they cannot, or at least not with the same ease as other minority children, acquire the majority language as a second language. These majority languages are for Deaf people always spoken languages; they are also less (or not) accessible because they cannot be heard, only seen through speechreading or written text. Due to these linguistic modality differences, the culture of the hearing majority is also often difficult to grasp in its finer details. Deaf children of Deaf parents simply by being deaf, are not raised in homogenous households in which the mother tongue is usually dominant, as opposed to their hearing peers. Deaf children of deaf parents are more likely to experience differing linguistic modality permutations in spite of sharing the same family characteristics. Nevertheless, most Deaf children grow up to be bilingual and bicultural, even if to differing degrees. Consider, the following examples.

Sara is six years old and deaf. Her parents are both Deaf and use American Sign Language (ASL) as their preferred language of communication. Her one older brother is hearing and one set of grandparents is hearing, but the other set is Deaf and she also has other Deaf relatives. She is growing up signing ASL at home, and in the school for the Deaf she is attending, using ASL alongside written English.

Her friend from very early on is Nick. He is also a deaf child of Deaf parents (DOD): Both his parents are Deaf, as are some of his other relatives, but he has a younger, hearing sister. His parents, who are active members of the local Deaf community, decided to have him implanted with a cochlear implant when he was one year old. At home Nick's language is ASL, but his parents send him to a public school where he is taught in spoken English. He actually does not use ASL at all at school, except when signing outside class to Faye, a deaf friend.

Faye is also a DOD, but her deaf parents both had hearing parents. There are no other deaf people in her extended family. Her parents learned ASL later in life but use it as their day-to-day language at home. Since they were raised orally, they use Sign Supported English with their hearing relatives. Faye attends the same mainstream school as Nick and is supported by an ASL interpreter most of the time in class. Her spoken English is not intelligible enough for her to communicate directly and easily with her classmates. That is why she often avoids using her voice and prefers to sign, with the support of a sign language interpreter in her contacts with hearing people.

The descriptions of three children who know one another and who live close together indicate how diverse their linguistic, cultural and educational experiences are. This diversity of course is found all over the world. DOD children can also be in a language situation involving more than one sign language and more than one spoken language. It is thus difficult to categorize DOD as one homogenous group.

Deaf people do not live in a geographic community, which is why the term Deaf Diaspora is sometimes used. Deaf people do not naturally form a cultural group, and since they are so dispersed, they have to actively engage in the search for cultural membership. Very few Deaf parents have Deaf children (an estimated 5–10 percent). Due to this continuous creation of vertical identities, Deaf culture and signed languages are not necessarily directly inherited from generation to generation. Deaf children of deaf families (DOD) are thus excellent catalysts for this natural transfer. They form a minority group in their own community and are considered by some, to be the Deaf culture carriers: They form the core of Deaf culture. As a matter of perspective, being a DOD is often a source of pride. Even though it is hard for hearing parents to believe, many deaf parents actually prefer to have a deaf child, notwithstanding the many challenges their child will have to face. Other perspectives indicate that it is also advantageous for a deaf child to have Deaf parents, as they are considered to have a better understanding of what it means to be deaf.

In many countries, as a result of technological advances, the environment is better adapted than in earlier times to meet the deaf child's needs. For instance, a flashing light replaces a doorbell, or alarm clocks can be made to vibrate rather than ring. With the increasing use of the Internet, smartphones, and social media like Facebook, communication is also improving. Deaf people need to be in visual contact in order to communicate in a sign language. For example, they cannot use the standard telephone without the

intervention of a hearing person. With the use of video clips online or software enabling video conversations, they can now freely use their own sign language. Online access to interpreting has also made communication with hearing non-signers easier. These technological innovations have proven to be an enormous boost to the global Deaf community, which seems to become more globally isolated every year as a result of the increasing ease of communication.

Technological advances help all deaf people, but DOD children specifically have a tremendous advantage from their parents. Signing Deaf parents provide their children with a rich environment in which they can successfully mature. In the first instance the parents function as models for their children, thus promoting social development. Secondly the deaf child is completely accepted in the family, laying a good foundation for emotional development. Thirdly the parents do not lower their expectations because of the child's auditory difference and so encourage intellectual development. Finally, a full sign language is offered to the child, allowing normal language development.

As was mentioned before, DOD children have quite different environments as the example of the three American children mentioned. Sara is in close contact through her Deaf and hearing relatives with two cultures and languages. She is a native signer, but also is in contact with the English language via her hearing relatives and at school in its written form. Since she is educated in a school for the deaf with predominantly other deaf children whose parents most likely will be hearing, some may view her as role model, even at age 6, for those other deaf children. At the same time, the schools for the deaf are often sheltered communities, where contact with hearing peers is not automatic for the deaf pupils. There are many anecdotes about the "culture shock" experience when deaf children first enter the adult hearing community and have to meet the day to day demands of functioning in a hearing environment. Depending on her ability to make herself understood to hearing people, and depending on their willingness to communicate, Sara will need to make use of interpreters in her private and work lives. Learning about these concepts is typical for young deaf adults as they begin the journey into adulthood and seek meaning within their own identities as deaf individuals. However, the personal and practical applications of these concepts are highly individual and unique, as interpreted by the learner.

Although Nick's background is similar to Sara's, he has been provided with other options by his parents, namely through the use of the cochlear implant. Nick arguably has more access to spoken English. As he is attending a mainstream school, he has close contact to two worlds. Through his school and his hearing friends he is familiar and at home in the hearing community. His family and contacts in the Deaf community mean that he is at home there. He will grow up as a bilingual bicultural person, who can easily switch from sign language to spoken language and move with confidence in the two cultures. It will be probably be more a matter of choice, less of need, for him to make use of sign language interpreters. Like Sara, learning about such concepts is typical for young adults. However, the application of these concepts may very well differ from Sara's interpretation, which reinforces the central theme of this entry: No two deaf people are alike, and no two deaf people share the same path.

Faye, Sara and Nick's friend, uses ASL at home with her parents, but they are not very actively involved in the Deaf community, although they do sometimes attend some bigger Deaf events. This is where Faye met Sara and Nick when she was still a toddler, and they sometimes played together. Her grandparents and other relatives cannot sign and use spoken English with her and her parents. In mainstreamed school, Faye is having a hard time; even though she can easily communicate with Nick in ASL, she finds it very hard to communicate with the hearing pupils in her class and with her teacher. The ASL interpreter is there most of the time, but during breaks she is not available for Faye, who therefore cannot easily mingle with the other kids. Playtime is not a happy time for this deaf child. She is struggling with spoken and written English, and her school achievements are below her capacities. Her parents find it hard to support her in her school assignments, but her hearing grandparents sometimes help out, even though communicating with them is not easy for Faye.

These three children may well have quite different experiences of the hearing world. They may encounter discrimination in many forms. Some hearing people believe they are superior because they can hear (audism); this can result in negative attitudes toward any behavior that is not associated with being hearing such as signing or using an interpreter. There may also be fear associated with these prejudices

(surdophobia). The children can also have different experiences in the Deaf community according to the extent to which they identify with it. They may become proactive in campaigning for Deaf rights or be more passive. Whatever the case, it is the DOD children who are the core of the Deaf communities and who are the culture carriers for the future.

Anne E. Baker and Beppie van den Bogaerde

See also [Children, Deaf, of Hearing Parents](#); [Children of Deaf Adults](#); [Genealogy, Deaf History of](#); [Genetics: Connexin 26 and Connexin 30](#); [Genetics and Ancestry](#); [Genetics and Heredity](#); [Deaf Culture Mentors and Role Models](#)

Further Readings

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