



Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Programs

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Language Rich Environments for Children who are Deaf or Deafblind

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Children who are Deaf and deafblind need access to rich language constantly and consistently. Researchers found that young children need to be exposed to 21,000 words everyday in order to have successful vocabulary development (Adizah Eghan | November 7, 2016). Eghan notes that “The simple act of talking to kids helps them develop not just their vocabulary, but their language skills, including listening, memory, and speaking. And beyond short-term verbal skills, these early interactions increase a child’s chances of completing both high school and college.”(Adizah Eghan | November 7, 2016). However, if a child does not have full access to speech sounds, only speaking orally to them will not give them the exposure to the requisite language needed to develop their vocabulary. Children need access to language, and a lot of it, but it is important to note that the focus should not be on one mode of communication over another, the focus must be on accessible communication. Not only is it a best practice to provide access to these children, it is also the law. The Deaf Child’s Bill of Rights (National Association of the Deaf, 2016), the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA

(ADA, 2014), Texas House Bill 548 (HB 548, 2019), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2022) provide more information.

Language Development in Children with Hearing Loss

In terms of language development, children with congenital hearing loss are born already behind. Hearing children are exposed to speech and language in the womb (Language Development Starts in the Womb, 2017). Once babies who are Deaf/hard of hearing or deafblind are born, they will need immediate language intervention. Many children who do not have consistent access to spoken language or sign language are exposed to 0-5 words a day with early signs like “more”, “sit”, “play”, “eat”, etc. while their hearing peers are listening to language all day. By the time they arrive at pre-school at age 3, their hearing peers typically have 200 or more expressive words (Gavin, 2019), and the Deaf and/or deafblind children who do not have complete access to language often have fewer than 10, sometimes even zero, words. If we provide early intervention that allows for the families to become fluent before the child goes to school, that child will have the opportunity to access the amount of language needed to develop appropriate vocabulary and language. The research shows that for young Deaf and hard of hearing children who do have consistent access to language, “A strong correlation was found for the number of appropriate and successful visual bids for communicative attention and the child’s score on an ASL vocabulary inventory (Anderson & Reilly, 2002 as cited in National Association of the Deaf, 2014)”.

Providing Support to Students with Hearing Loss

What can we, as school staff, do to support children with hearing loss? At a minimum, we can provide the recommended 21,000 words a day, in a way that is accessible to them. This can look different depending on student needs. For children birth to age 3, that may mean ensuring the family has the skills necessary to provide the required accessible language. Once the child is school-aged, they may need to be in a classroom at the Regional Day School Program for the Deaf, the State School for the Deaf, have an interpreter throughout the day, and/or maybe an intervener. It could even be possible that the staff in the current classroom could enroll in sign language classes and become fluent. Providing a student with a total communication approach at a young age can create a strong foundation and can lead to their success in using multiple communication modes in various settings later in life. There can be a lot of barriers to students having “on-grade-level” language and vocabulary, but we do not want one of those barriers to be their time at school or a lack of early intervention. Sometimes staff will say, “The student doesn’t need access to sign language all day because they are not a signer,” or, “They only have a few signs and the teacher will be able to learn those words.” They may also think the student has additional cognitive disabilities that may prevent them from learning language. The reality is that the students will not be given the opportunity to expand that vocabulary unless they are in an environment that is accessible and language-rich. They need more than just a handful of signs, or even a couple hundred signs a day; they need all day instruction and interaction that is accessible to them. We cannot know what the student is capable of until they have the opportunity to learn, and we must presume competence in each and every child.

Success Story

Many years ago I started working with a young man with hearing loss who was three years old. He lost his hearing suddenly, for unknown reasons, at age 2 and was coming into school with no oral speech and no sign language. He started the preschool program for children with disabilities right after his third birthday. I taught the classroom teacher about 200 signs and she started using them with him throughout his half-day at school. He started picking up some signs and even used those signs as a bridge to oral speech. By the time he was ready to go to kindergarten, he had about 30 expressive words/signs and many more receptively. He could successfully do the grade-level work with some modeled examples. He started in mainstream kindergarten, and while he made academic progress, his language skills did not progress. Some people on the team worried that he may have a language disorder, but I disagreed. We made the decision to move him to the Regional Day School Program for the Deaf and once he started in that program, and was exposed to accessible language all day long, he blossomed. He quickly became a fluent signer and his speech also progressed. This student didn't have additional disabilities, he had a lack of access. We thought we were giving him what he needed, but now it's clear that 200 signs was not the same thing as consistent exposure all day long.

Conclusion

School staff work in this field because they want to do what's best for kids. Figuring out what exactly is best for kids can be really difficult, but creating accessible and equitable

access to language doesn't have to be. We know all kids need language input. By looking at the student's functional hearing/listening evaluations and for deafblind children, also their functional vision evaluations, we can determine what accessible language is for that child. We don't only provide these things because they are required by law, we provide consistent, accessible language because it is what all children need and deserve.

References

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Resources

[What is Language Deprivation video from The Nyle DiMarco Foundation](#)

[Interpreter, Intervener, Co-Navigator/Support Service Provider...What's the Difference?](#)

[The Family Signs Program in Texas from the Statewide Outreach Center at Texas School for the Deaf](#)

[ASL Connect, American Sign Language courses from Gallaudet University](#)

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Figure 4 TSBVI logo.



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