

INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

IMAGINE YOU ARE standing behind an airport window, watching passengers deplane. Suddenly you see a young, wide-eyed stranger stepping uncertainly down the portable stairway, wrapping her jacket tightly around herself. This is the person you've been waiting for. She is a foreign exchange student on her first visit to America and you are her host.

When this new arrival reaches the airport, she glances around, taking it all in. You sense that she is nervous. You know she doesn't speak English, so you step forward to greet her with a smile and a welcoming hug. As you do, you feel the weight of your responsibility. It's up to you to introduce this young woman to her new world.

This is only a made-up story, of course. But for parents, teachers, and other family, friends, and professionals who are charged with raising and teaching deaf children, it is an apt illustration of what both sides will face. A young deaf boy or girl may often feel like a stranger in a foreign land, unable to grasp common language practices and pick up the simple but vital bits of information that allow us to easily connect and communicate. A parent or teacher, meanwhile, is this child's guide. If we are that parent or teacher, our task is to support, to encourage, and to teach—to be a good “host.”

Many years ago, my parents faced this unexpected challenge. On the day I was born, my mother held me in her arms for the first time, gazed into my eyes, and confronted a sudden, shocking realization: that her newborn son might be deaf. The clue was the loose way I held my head, an indication I had no sense of balance. It is a common characteristic of babies with hearing loss, a sign my mother already knew well because my older brother Jonathan also is deaf.

I wonder about the questions that must have run through my mother's mind at that moment. *What will this mean for him and our family? Will he be able to carry on a conversation with other children and make friends? Where will we send him to school? Will he find*



The author and his parents.

success in a career, marry, and raise a family? Is my baby ready for the challenges ahead?

These are many of the same questions that mothers and fathers ask today when they discover that one of their children is deaf. Perhaps you are one of these parents. That moment of realization is life changing. Undoubtedly, deafness was not part of your plan. Yet all parents must eventually accept their children for who they are, including their unique traits, gifts, and passions, and let go of some of their own parental expectations. Deafness may be an unexpected challenge, but it need not be a tragedy. I encourage you to not dwell on this “set-back” and the lost future you’d imagined and instead to embrace your child and see his or her potential. Follow your instincts and don’t worry too much about making mistakes. Trial and error are part of the process. You may face tough choices in deciding what is best for your child, but I encourage you to keep the long view in mind, even if it is upsetting in the short term. The priority is to commit yourself to opening the world to your child.

The world has come a long way since my birth in 1949, though those of us without hearing still face many impediments to communicating in our modern world. Back then, email, texting, and even teletypewriters hadn’t been invented yet. More troubling was

society's attitude toward anyone who was different. Deaf people were often shunned or kept out of sight. Many parents even felt ashamed that they had produced a deaf child. Few people went out of their way to accommodate the needs of a nonhearing person. I faced some of these obstacles when I entered the world—but I also possessed several advantages, chief among them the wisdom and experience of my family. They were indeed good hosts.

I was fortunate because my parents already knew about the importance of nonverbal communication. Many parents with deaf children remain totally unaware of their children's nonverbal communication skills and their potential effectiveness. Sometimes this ignorance is a manifestation of the parents' intense wish that their child be "normal." These parents are expressing a common self-deception. Desperately hoping that the child will seem like other kids, they focus on teaching one mode of expression and exclude everything else. Often, what they are really saying to their child, perhaps subconsciously, is "Forget about other ways of communicating. Just communicate the way we do."

Some parents and instructors committed to oralism—the method of communicating and teaching deaf children through lipreading, speech, and mimicking the mouth shapes and breathing patterns of speech—even put a condition on their communication with deaf children. They respond only if these children express their messages in a clear, spoken way, with words everyone can understand. How discouraging! Consider how you would react if someone you felt close to—a relative, say, from another country—suddenly burst out in fury, "Don't talk to me in English, ever! Learn to speak my language or don't speak to me again!"

This type of misunderstanding or impatience on the part of parents and teachers can shatter a deaf child's feelings of security. To grow strong and independent, children need to feel totally accepted, and they need to be encouraged to express themselves, even if this sometimes leads to conflict. Many parents of deaf children unknowingly threaten that sense of security by making their love and acceptance conditional on the child's learning to communicate only through speech and lipreading. Children whose efforts at nonverbal communication or sign language are devalued and discouraged may come to feel that only when they learn the art of spoken communication will their parents truly love and accept them fully.

Ultimately, all communication is a kind of guessing game between people. Recognize it as such and play it with your deaf child. Play your hunches with each other. That's what we all do, all the time, when we talk with each other. Deaf children can acquire language and the cognitive tools related to it beginning even in infancy. The secret is to immerse them in language, whether it is spoken, gestural, or sign language and to show them—by whatever means necessary—how communication works. From the day of birth, “talk” to him or her with your voice, mouth, eyes, face, hands, and touch. Add an element of humor and fun to your instruction, and above all, pay close attention!

I want to pass on my parents' wisdom and experience to you. This book is my story. It relates both triumph and family tragedy, moments of shocking ignorance and cruelty and incidents of heartwarming compassion. But it is more than just the details of my journey. It also contains the knowledge and insights I gained while growing up in a family with both deaf and hearing children and while serving as a professor of deaf education for more than thirty-five years. Whether you are a parent, teacher, interpreter, or friend of a deaf person—or are simply interested in learning more about the deaf community and one member's rites of passage—this book is for you.

I have spent a lifetime studying the art of communication. What I have learned is that whether deaf or hearing, we all struggle to understand and have a desperate need to be understood. My hope is that the following chapters will ease your efforts to communicate successfully with those you work with, live with, and love. In telling my story, I have changed some names and identifying details to protect the privacy of individuals. I have written events as I remember them, but others may remember them differently.