Deaf Children in a Hearing World

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Abstract

When diving into the world of vulnerable children, these individuals can be found among

a variety of marginalized and forgotten people groups. These groups vary based on country,

socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity as well as other factors. One group however, that can

be found among every single classification of vulnerable children is the deaf child. Because the

Deaf Community is not indigenous to a specific country or region, they can be found anywhere.

It is unfortunate however, that although there is easy access to this community, it is perhaps

one of the most overlooked people in the world. Gaining insight and awareness on those who

fall into the category of deaf and hard of hearing is crucial to helping the children within this

marginalized people group. Take into account the millions of children found in precarious

situations and subject to all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation within the world of

orphans and vulnerable children. Then add a communication barrier and the disconnect these

children often experience, even within their own families, and the risk increases exponentially.

This paper will focus specifically on deaf children with hearing parents within the United States

and provide the reader with an overview of Deaf Culture, the misconceptions on deafness, an

understanding of the vulnerability children within this demographic face, and the risks

associated when the needs of these children are not met.

I received my Associate of Applied Science in American Sign Language Interpreting from

San Antonio College where I was educated on the language and culture of the Deaf

Community. After graduating from the program, I received my certification as an interpreter in

the state of Texas. Naturally, this area is of special interest to me. The wealth of knowledge I

have gained about the Deaf Community and their culture as a whole over the years, I believe,

will prove to be an asset in discussing this specific demographic of children.

Deaf Culture

In taking steps toward helping any group of children, one must first understand their unique identity and culture, and what sets them apart as a vulnerable population. The following section of this paper will give the reader a sense of Deaf Culture.

Gallaudet University, the only deaf university in the world, located in Washington D.C., defines Deaf Culture as a culture that, "includes a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who are deaf and who have their own language (ASL), values, rules, and traditions" (Gallaudet University, 2015). Those in the Deaf Community possess their own unique culture, language, and set of values that set them apart as a cultural minority group. There is a wide spectrum within this group who identify with the Deaf Culture and find themselves to be a part of the community. However, not everyone who has a hearing loss claims Deaf Culture, specifically those who lose their hearing later in life as adults. There is a distinction within the Deaf Community between those who have a hearing loss and those who are part of the community and identify themselves as part of the culture. The distinction is often made by capitalizing the "D" in deaf, so that those who identify with the community and culture define themselves as "Deaf" versus "deaf" (Edwards & Crocker, 2008, p. 64).

There are several different avenues that set deaf culture apart from the majority culture. Perhaps the most recognized difference between this culture and the hearing community is language. The Deaf Community uses signed language versus spoken language. For the sake of this research paper, the focus will be American Sign Language (ASL), but similar rules apply for signed language virtually everywhere, although the specifics of each sign language varies from country to country and even varies depending on region. According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, ASL is defined as, "a complete, natural language that has the same linguistic

properties as spoken languages, with grammar that differs from English. ASL is expressed by movements of the hands and face" (NIDCD, 2019). ASL has its own grammar and syntax and can convey abstract, as well as, concrete ideas. ASL is one reason the Deaf Community has started to receive more awareness and attention within the U.S. over recent years. One example of this is the increase of schools that offer ASL as an option for a foreign language credit.

Along with visual language, there are certain values, rules and traditions within the Deaf Community. There are organizations, politics, and various arts that serve to celebrate this culture. Storytelling is one art that is highly valued. Storytelling is a way to share the rich history and events that have impacted the Deaf Community and helped bring awareness to their rights as a people group. Since there is no written form of ASL, stories serve as a way to preserve the past (Bahan et al., 1996, p. 139). These stories are often told at Deaf Events, which are local events set up by the Deaf Community in order to socialize and enjoy communicating with each other in their native language.

Along with storytelling, there are certain rules that are central to the way individuals within the Deaf Community interact. Visual interaction and physical contact are core to these rules of interaction. For example, when getting someone's attention, it is appropriate to gently pat the person's shoulder, or wave in their direction if they are out of physical proximity. When at any deaf event, the room is always arranged in a way where everyone can see everyone. If there is a meal served, the tables are placed in a square or circle and everyone sits around the outside so visual contact can be made with each person across the room. There are also certain unspoken rules, or expectations regarding departure such as being sure to say farewell to each person before leaving an event.

A unique challenge for many children who are deaf is that they often have no idea what it means to be a deaf person. They are unaware of the reality that there is a whole community of individuals just like them and that their tendencies as a deaf person are a unique part of their culture. This is due to the fact that their families are often hearing. Statistics show that over Ninety-five percent of children who are deaf have parents who can hear (Rego, 2015). What about these children who are born to hearing parents and have no understanding of Deaf Culture? Well for starters, they are unable to naturally learn their culture from where a hearing child would: their parents. Until these children encounter others like them and experience the culture of the Deaf community, they will not identify as "Deaf" and most will experience many challenges as well as misconceptions.

Misconceptions

Because over ninety-five percent of deaf children have parents who can hear, this means that there is a lack of awareness of what it is like to be deaf and how to deal with a child who is deaf. Although more awareness is growing, there is a long history of hurt, oppression, and trauma from the hearing population toward the Deaf Community because of a lack of understanding. Some of the misconceptions that have brought harm, and continue to harm, children who are deaf are those related to language, cochlear implants and identity.

When it comes to language, historically deaf children have been forced to learn to speak and not use any form of manual language. For many years, deaf children were discouraged from using sign language because of a misconception that learning sign language would hinder them from learning to speak, or use any form of spoken language (Hall, 2017, p. 961). However, research shows that this assessment is inaccurate. Deaf children who are taught sign language early on have a better chance at learning English and have a higher probability of language acquisition overall. Whereas, Deaf children who are encouraged to learn to speak and are not

taught to use any form of sign language end up falling behind in language development

(Humphries et al., 2016, p. 589).

This is because for those who cannot hear, learning an auditory language is more

difficult, and for some, nearly impossible. Sign language is acquired more naturally and acts as

a base language from which other languages are more accessible. Thus, through the long

history of language oppression, manual language has prevailed among this population of

marginalized people, because sign language is the heart language of those who are deaf. Sign

language comes naturally to those who cannot hear, whether it be formal ASL or home signs,

which are made up signs by deaf individuals in order to communicate and form relationships,

and a sense of community when there is no formal manual language present.

Another misconception related to the Deaf Community is the controversy of cochlear

implants. The cochlear implant is a technological device that connects straight to the hearing

nerve within the brain (Bleich, 2009, p. 53). The surgery requires drilling into the skull to implant

a small metal disk into the individual's head. Although cochlear implants can be a great tool for

some, there is a misconception that cochlear implants are a "one size fits all" cure for deafness

that can reverse the hearing loss. This is not the case. The success rates vary among

individuals by how much hearing a person will be able to receive through the cochlear implant.

And, of course, naturally, there are risks associated with any form of surgery, especially any

form of surgery involving the brain.

Many children are implanted as infants or toddlers, which is a main concern for the Deaf

community in relation to the rights of the child and preserving their culture (Sparrow, 2005, p.

135). The Deaf Community tends to argue that parents should wait until their child is at an age

where he/she can decide for him/herself, while the hearing population claims there are benefits

to implanting a child at a young age. One of those benefits that the hearing population claims of

cochlear implants is in aiding early acquisition of spoken language (Waltzman & Roland, 2014, p. 236). As mentioned previously, it is important to understand that cochlear implants are not always successful for every child and the risks for such an invasive surgery can outweigh the possibility of being able to hear. Assuming that the cochlear implant is successful, there is still a difference that exists between a child who can "hear" through the aid of a cochlear implant and a child who can hear naturally. An implanted child will never be a "hearing" child.

Between the confusion of language and the dynamics of cochlear implants, there can be misconceptions on what a deaf child's identity should look like. As stated previously, a deaf child does not become a hearing child simply through a cochlear implant and the acquisition of spoken language. There are certain innate values and rules of those who are deaf, concerning the way they interact and the way they see the world, that differs from that of the majority hearing world. Identity is made up, in majority, by one's culture. A deaf child in a hearing family is a part of two cultures and, therefore, struggles to discover their own identity.

Vulnerability

When addressing the vulnerability of deaf children in hearing families, there are several factors that must be considered. Several of these factors include a sense of Isolation and misfit, a hearing versus deaf identity crisis, psychological disorders, and a high susceptibility to abuse.

Isolation is a common issue for deaf children who grow up in a hearing family. For the majority of parents, their ultimate goal is for the well-being of their child and there is no question about their love for their child. However, the fact is, that even with the most loving parents, without accessible language within their family, most deaf children grow up feeling isolated and alone. This isolation is unique because although they may grow up in a loving home, engage in activities with their family and be a part of the household, with inadequate access to communication they feel left out and miss out on a lot of pertinent information. One term to

explain this concept is "the dinner table syndrome," because this is when the language and

communication disparity between the deaf child and his/her hearing family members often

comes to light. Many deaf individuals express experiences when they would be sitting at the

dinner table when everyone would start laughing. Trying to engage in the conversation, the

individual would ask a sibling, or another family member to explain what was being said. The

answer was always, "I'll tell you later." Of course, later came and went without the deaf child

ever receiving an explanation of what was said at the dinner table.

In an article addressing this concept, the author shares of the health disparities found in

individuals who are deaf due to the lack of accessible communication with their hearing parents.

Some of the health issues listed are "obesity, poorer mental health status (e.g., suicidal

ideations, intimate partner violence, and interpersonal trauma), and increased use of the

emergency departments among others." The author goes on to state that, "One possible

underlying factor of these disparities and general deaf population health outcomes may be

parental hearing status, moderated by parents' developmental language and communication

choices for their deaf child." (Hall et al., 2017, p. 2). In comparison, deaf children who are born

to deaf parents fare well. They have complete access to communication since their parents

already communicate using sign language and, as stated in "A Journey into the Deaf-World,"

their home and lives are set up in a way that is conducive to being deaf (Bahan et al., 1996, p.

25).

Identity is another area where children who are deaf tend to struggle. When born into a

hearing family, deaf children are instantly a part of two worlds and two cultures - their own (Deaf

Culture) and their family's (Hearing Culture). They often struggle to find their place in either one

of these cultures. This can cause a lot of stress and confusion when it comes to identity. As a

result, this can push the child even more into isolation. Developing an identity as a deaf person

can be a challenge for those who are surrounded by the majority hearing population. In a book

published on deaf children and addressing their complex needs, the authors state,

> Even when deaf individuals do not identify themselves with the Deaf culture or
>
> community, they must still develop an identity that incorporates their deafness.
>
> How they achieve this and the extent to which they are comfortable with this
>
> identity will have implications for their self-esteem and emotional well-being
>
> throughout childhood, adolescence and beyond.
>
> (Edwards & Crocker, 2008, p. 64)

While it is normal for youth to experience a season of figuring out their identity, there are

more challenges and obstacles concerning identity that must be worked through for a child who

is deaf. He/she must address his/her deafness and decide what that means in terms of identity.

For these individuals, they experience these obstacles throughout their life.

When children receive cochlear implants at a young age, they are often integrated into

the hearing world as hearing children. They learn to speak as best as they can. As mentioned

previously, the level of success for cochlear implants varies, so there is some variation on how

well a child is able to integrate into either the Deaf Community, or the majority hearing

community. However, this is another dynamic that adds stress to discovering and settling on an

identity. They may not feel like they fit into the hearing world because they cannot hear in the

same way as the majority hearing population, but they also struggle to fully integrate into the

Deaf World because they are unaware of Deaf Culture and its values and norms and have

grown up as a "hearing" child. If they choose to integrate into the Deaf Community later in life

they may struggle even more to adapt, especially if they have no previous knowledge of the

language, causing more stress and a sense of crisis concerning their identity.

The psychological health of today's youth is becoming more of a concern as certain

mental illnesses and diagnoses are being brought to light. Psychological disorders are more

prevalent in children who are deaf. Research shows that deaf children are at the greatest risk of

mental health problems (Landsberger et al., 2013, p. 50).

Another article shares that deaf children, specifically those who grow up in hearing

families and who do not have access to appropriate manual communication, are often at risk for

psychological issues (Ouellette, 2011, p. 1270). Again, issues such as language barriers and a

lack of understanding what it means to be deaf put a vulnerable demographic of children even

more at risk.

Abuse is another issue that is common among a deaf child's experiences. Statistics for

abuse are higher overall for individuals who have any form of disability than individuals who do

not have a disability. In their study on the abuse rates for children with disabilities versus those

without, Kirsten Stalker and Katherine McArthur state, "Among non-disabled children in this

sample, they found a 9 per cent prevalence rate of abuse, whereas the comparable rate for

disabled children was 31 per cent. Therefore, children with impairments were 3.4 times more

likely to be maltreated than those without" (McArthur & Stalker, 2010, p. 28). For deaf children

specifically, there is a concern of physical punishment becoming a form of abuse. From another

study done on the prevalence of abuse in the lives of children with disabilities, deaf children

were stated to be at a higher risk of experiencing harsher forms of physical punishment, which

can turn into a form of maltreatment (Algood et al., 2011, p. 1144). Often, with the plethora of

emotions and uncertainties a hearing parent of a deaf child experiences, it can be a common

reaction to lash out in frustration.

What is being done to protect this group of vulnerable children? There is work being done in the U.S. to protect children in general, but there is definitely a lack in standing up for the rights of the child who is deaf, or hard of hearing. As touched on throughout this research paper, inadequate access to communication for deaf children is a main concern. When it comes to forms of maltreatment and getting information from children who are deaf, there is a language deficit. Research has found that there has been a lack of appropriate ASL interpreters for evaluations concerning maltreatment (Montoya et al., 2010, p. 600). The laws are in place to protect these rights of those who are deaf, but unfortunately they are not always upheld. The Deaf Community must continue fighting to gain more rights for the children therein.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that children who are deaf, or hard of hearing experience many barriers that put them at risk and classify them as a vulnerable people group. Due to multiple factors children who are deaf are at a higher risk for psychosocial disorders and mental health concerns, as well as higher rates of abuse. There is still much research that needs to be done in this area, therefore, questions still remain. However, with a better understanding of Deaf Culture and greater attention to the needs of deaf children, this group can start to flourish. The hope is that the hearing community will start to take action in standing up for the rights of the vulnerable deaf child as they gain an awareness of this hidden demographic of children. Perhaps, in the end, the voice of the voiceless will be heard.

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