



RAISING AND EDUCATING A DEAF CHILD

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE *to*
the CHOICES, CONTROVERSIES,
AND DECISIONS FACED *by*
PARENTS *and* EDUCATORS

MARC MARSCHARK

*Raising and Educating
a Deaf Child*

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Preface

A preface is something that comes at the beginning of a book, but it is invariably something that the author writes last. I suppose that's a good thing, because it allows one to look back and reflect on all of the work that has gone into the book and to look ahead, with hope, to how it will be received. For me, this feels a little like being a parent: I can see how this book has developed during the time I have been working on it and now, with some trepidation, I have to give up control and send it out into the world. It is thus time to get some perspective.

Looking back, my motivation for writing the book was the feeling that despite all of the excellent research relevant to children who are deaf, very little of the resulting information trickles down to the people who need it most: parents, teachers, and other professionals involved with deaf children on a day-to-day basis. My goal, therefore, has been to take what we know from a wide variety of investigations and explain it in everyday language. Because of my own perspective on the field and the needs and sensitivities of many people who hopefully will read this book, the endeavor turned out to be rather more time-consuming and difficult than I originally expected. I wanted to be sure that readers got "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," but that sometimes required decisions about whether it was worth even starting on some important points that I knew would seem trivial unless they were put in what would be a rather complex context. Compromises were therefore necessary, and in the acknowledgments, I credit a variety of people who helped me to work through these issues. I was also helped by

something Albert Einstein wrote almost fifty years ago that remains just as true today:

Anyone who has ever tried to present a rather abstract scientific subject in a popular manner knows the great difficulties of such an attempt. Either he succeeds in being intelligible by concealing the core of the problem and by offering to the reader only superficial aspects or vague allusions, thus deceiving the reader by arousing in him the deceptive illusion of comprehension; or else he gives an expert account of the problem, but in such a fashion that the untrained reader is unable to follow the exposition and becomes discouraged from reading any further.

If these two categories are omitted from today's popular scientific literature, surprisingly little remains. . . . It is of great importance that the general public be given an opportunity to experience—consciously and intelligently—the efforts and results of scientific research. It is not sufficient that each result be taken up, elaborated, and applied by a few specialists in the field.¹

Taking heed of Einstein's cautions, I have tried to summarize what we know from research concerning deaf children and deaf education while remaining true to the original significance and generality of the findings (if perhaps not always to what the original author had in mind). I fully admit that in the process, I raise almost as many of these questions as I answer. As I emphasize repeatedly, however, there are few "right" answers in this field, and what is right for one child will be wrong for another. So, my goal has been to show what kinds of questions we should be asking and where to look for the answers. Perhaps most important, I argue for the need to accept the many differences among deaf children and between deaf and hearing children without viewing these differences as deficiencies or disabilities that need to be corrected.

This book is in no way intended to be a how-to manual. Instead, I have focused on broad issues like alternatives for effective communication, the importance of diverse social experiences, and the need for consistency in parenting. In a variety of situations I have been quite specific, but only going so far as I could with confidence. For example, it should not seem odd to parents and teachers when I suggest that they need to read to their children and students. Nor should it surprise anyone when I suggest that this activity is all the more important for deaf children, who may lack other opportunities for exposure to English. I hope I have explained fully the bases for these recommendations.

I have learned a lot from writing this book. Some things I learned from doing background research in areas with which I was less familiar. Other things I learned by discussing issues with friends and colleagues who grew up deaf, with parents of deaf children, and with people who have been involved with deaf children in a variety of ways. In particular, I have learned a lot from challenging my own assumptions about deaf children. It turns out that some of the "facts" I had previously held as true are not really facts at all, but assumptions that I either made myself or accepted from others. Which of these misapprehensions were my own fault and which were someone else's is not really important. What *is* important is that until I was actually immersed in a community of people who are Deaf, until I taught deaf students, and until I knew deaf people who I could really call friends, I did not know as much as I thought I did. I do not feel embarrassed about that, and neither should parents or teachers of deaf children ever look back and feel ashamed of what they did not know. We all learn. Those of us willing to accept a role in the lives of deaf children constantly have to challenge assumptions about what deaf children can and cannot do and explore new avenues to allow them to reach their potentials. Therein lies the pursuit of excellence both for deaf children and for those who love them.

Rochester, N.Y.
February 1996

M. M.

Note

1. Albert Einstein, foreword to *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, by Lincoln Barnett (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1948).

Acknowledgments

First, I want to express my great thanks to Professors Harry Lang and John Albertini who read several previous drafts of this book, worked through many issues with me, and provided valuable content information as well as editorial help. Always insightful and with good humor, they were never reluctant to tell me the truth. I fear I never would have actually finished this project without the support and encouragement of our "Book Club" meetings; I owe them a great debt. Thanks are due to Sandy Harvey and Claudine Storbeck who each read an earlier draft of the book and provided me with important feedback. I also owe a lot to the many colleagues at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf who have been supportive of this work—and of me—in a variety of ways. In particular, I want to express my appreciation to my many deaf colleagues for their acceptance, patience, and advice.

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Ed Shroyer was kind enough to allow me to use artwork from his book

Signing English, and Sarah Perkins was the wizard who put it all into useable form. The following allowed the reprinting of various materials as noted throughout the book: *Deaf Life* magazine, Sugar Sign Press, National Information Center on Deafness, National Captioning Institute, National Cued Speech Association. Warm thanks are due to Joan Bossert and Oxford University Press for their continuing support in our many collaborations and their patience when this book was delayed by my move to NTID.

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Foreword

It was a pleasure for me some months ago to review an "almost-final" draft of *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* written by Marc Marschark. At first glance, I saw the book as a comprehensive guide to understanding the implications of being deaf. More important, this book concentrates on the implications of raising or teaching a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. In each of its chapters, I found information that parents will find valuable in making knowledgeable decisions about their children's lives.

The complexity of raising children who *can* hear, in meeting their social, psychological, and educational needs is a tough enough job for parents. When children are identified as deaf or hard of hearing, that job is made even more complex and, at times, overwhelming. Parents often experience a sense of loss, anger, guilt, and confusion. As parents, we have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and understanding about our children. Often, we are unprepared for raising a deaf or hard-of-hearing child. Our child is often times the first person we have ever met who is deaf or hard of hearing.

We turn to the "professional" in search of answers, cures, and assurances of a bright future. All too often, these well-meaning and sometimes biased professionals leave parents feeling at arms' length with their own deaf children. Our children are seen as "broken" and in need of repair or therapy instead of having a different way of communicating and learning. They are seen as cases to be handled instead of individuals who are as unique and special as any other child, hearing or deaf. Many families have depended on

trusted and well-respected family doctors, only to find that their only knowledge of deaf children was gained from medical textbooks that talked about the “pathology of hearing impairments.” We have also depended on family members or friends who, as this book points out, “may not be right but are never uncertain.”

As a young mother I remember sitting with my morning coffee wondering about this question or that, mulling over whether it would be better to adopt Plan A or Plan B for our deaf son. In the evenings my husband and I would go over the limited reading materials we could find that seemed related in any way to our son’s needs. In looking back, and watching other families go through the same experiences as ours, I know that getting information about your child’s needs is probably the most challenging and most critical aspect of being a hearing parent of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. That’s why I am so excited about this book. I believe that *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* is the kind of book that should sit on your kitchen table; the book that should be there with that morning cup of coffee and for discussion after the children are tucked into bed for the evening.

I said that at first glance, I saw *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* as an important information resource guide. As I looked closer, I saw more. This book is like a fine tapestry, the chapters woven together to reveal the shapes of future challenges and potential for future successes. In the foreground of its pages are the answers to the fundamental questions parents most often ask. Also woven into the tapestry are the questions many families are afraid to let surface when beginning their quest for knowledge and understanding of the unique child they will nurture. You will taste and savor the rich cultural heritage of deaf people—their successes, heartaches, and victories. You will grow to appreciate the culture and will relish in sharing that culture with your child. You will find the vocabulary and terminology specific to deafness explicitly defined. The many signing systems that have evolved over the years, educational philosophies, and models are explained within these chapters. This information will shape your understanding of the intricacies involved and challenges faced with respect to educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Also included are the subtle but clear details that help parents decide exactly which answers are best for their unique child. All too often, parents are preached to, lobbied, and pushed into decisions based on the philosophies of others, rather than being allowed to arrive at their own conclusions. Not this time! *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* leaves you with a sense of confidence and assurance that, despite the many challenges you will face raising your deaf or hard-of-hearing child, they will have futures just as bright and just as successful as anyone.

The thread that ties the pieces of *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* together is unlike any I have encountered before. Although written by a researcher, the language and explanation of complex issues are clear and easy to understand. It addresses not only the questions we so obviously need to ask, but also the concerns, misconceptions, and fears that parents of deaf children often find hard to articulate and perhaps harder to confront. This book will weave you through the complex patterns of what it means to be deaf versus what it means to be Deaf, of the similarities and differences between Deaf and Hearing culture, of the causes of hearing loss, and the all-important questions of communication choices. Perhaps more important, it shows clearly the twisting design of language acquisition and the implications for other aspects of language development. Throughout this book, like a woven shawl over your shoulders, you will find a warm recognition of the kinds of emotional issues that parents deal with in order to reach complete acceptance of their children and acknowledgment of their special needs.

The best decisions that parents make for their children are the ones that are the most informed. We must not deny the inherent ability in ourselves to know our children even in the midst of confronting and learning about something we've never had to face before—deafness. I know that to be the kind of parent you want to be, you must become knowledgeable about deafness. *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* will equip families raising children who are deaf or hard of hearing with the knowledge, understanding, and armor to face the many responsibilities that await them. Never before has there been such a comprehensive guide to raising a deaf or hard-of-hearing child. It touches on every aspect and topic that you will face sooner or later. In all likelihood, you will face these challenges sooner than you may think.

Timing is critical and not to be treated lightly. Your child should not be on the path of low expectations simply because you do not feel capable of making decisions regarding his or her communication needs and school program choices. Hearing parents of deaf children often delay making these important decisions because the topic seems so intimidating and the possible consequences of a “wrong” decision so great. How much better it would be if we could resolve those issues early and allow childhood to be natural and enjoyable. What a different picture you will get from talking with other parents who have been through what you are going through now. What an impact meeting and befriending Deaf adults will have on your family. Deaf adults provide our children with strong self-identities and help parents to see that a bright future is a reality.

I know you will enjoy this book and I hope that you will use it daily. May you know the same kind of joy that raising a son who is Deaf has given to my family. The days have not all been easy. The nights have not always been

serene. Our decisions have not always been correct. The things we would have changed might have been avoided if we had had a resource guide such as *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child*. You can learn the right questions to ask, determine with wisdom the answers, and make informed decisions that best accommodate your child's attributes, capabilities, and aptitudes. With *Raising and Educating a Deaf Child* at your side, you can become a successful parent raising a child who is growing up Deaf.

SANDY HARVEY

Executive Director

American Society for Deaf Children

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