

Deaf parents and hearing children: No problem

NANCY HICKS / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Sunday, August 7, 2005 7:00 pm

The children of deaf parents typically learn to speak verbally as well as other children, often from other family members, according to studies and anecdotes.

People reading a recent Journal Star story about a custody battle over the hearing child of a deaf couple might come away thinking deaf people aren't capable of raising a hearing child. In fact, some say, while there are the normal problems of adolescence, the children of deaf parents often grow up with the benefit of being bilingual and bicultural. [Deaf parents return to son in Wyoming](#) | [Couples fight over boy born to deaf parents](#)

When Frances Beurivage was a little girl, her family had an unwritten code.

"You spoke with speaking people, and you signed with deaf people."

That's just the way it was.

As the hearing child of deaf parents, she lived with two languages and two cultures.

When Beurivage was a toddler, she learned to make pictures with her hands in the language her dad used. And she learned to speak words, listening to her mom and other family members.

Later, when her parents divorced and her father remarried, she would live with two deaf parents. Frances and her three younger siblings became fluent in American Sign Language.

They were bilingual.

Today Beurivage, 54, still straddles both cultures. She is a professional interpreter and works at Boys Town Research Hospital evaluating people who will interpret in school settings.

The deaf culture tends to be more physical, so she hugs her friends who are deaf and shakes hands with her hearing friends.

And she cherishes her acceptance in both cultures.


Lisa Schiffbauer also learned American Sign Language and spoken English at the same time as a toddler.

And she had no clue her family was different until her early grade school years when she first noticed that not everyone's parents were deaf.

"My parents were normal to me. I knew that I signed and spoke English. There was nothing strange or different about that," said Schiffbauer, 19, a student at Southeast Community College.

Lisa and her older sister, Jamie Olsen, said they were concerned about the public's reaction to a recent Journal Star story describing a custody battle over the hearing child of a deaf couple.

"Now people are going to think that deaf people aren't capable of raising a child, just because this couple had issues," said Schiffbauer.

Around the world there are deaf parents, like Shirley and Robert Schiffbauer of Lincoln, who have successfully parented hearing children  like Lisa, Jamie and their brother Jeff.

A common misperception is that the hearing children of deaf parents have trouble learning spoken language. These children usually learn spoken language as a natural part of growing up.

And the children intuitively know that these are separate, distinct languages.

Olsen said she had never seen anyone simultaneously sign and speak verbally until her adult years when she was around other hearing adults with deaf parents.

Often these friends sign and speak at the same time as they talk to each other.

But this is new. "As kids we spoke to each other and signed to the adults," she said.

There is little research in the area, but the work done "suggests that just because a hearing child has parents who are deaf doesn't mean he will have speech or language problems," said Dr. Tim Brackenbury, an assistant professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

"Certainly these kids can have problems, but the research doesn't suggest they will have more problems than any other kids in the population."

In fact, the limited research on toddlers learning two languages, including sign and a spoken language, indicate children are quite successful learning two languages at the same time.

Some earlier research indicated children may experience some delay in speech development as they assimilate two languages, but eventually they would catch up. More recent research indicates no delay.

"The research suggests that if a child has exposure to a second language at least 20 percent of the time, they will develop a second language in a way that most people think is OK," said Brackenbury.

Arthur Trexler, one of two sons born to deaf parents, said his first language was sign language.

"I picked up English as my second language," he said. "Actually, I don't remember learning either language," he said.

His parents, eager that their sons be fluent in spoken English, spoke and signed everything to their children when they were little.

His father's spoken English was very clear. His mother's less so, he said.

The Trexlers, devout Seventh-day Adventists, also home-schooled their boys until junior high school.

Trexler did spend one semester in the local church-run school because family friends were concerned the boys weren't getting a good education at home.

There was no need to worry. "The school was very easy compared to the program my mother had us on," said Trexler, who uses his fluency in American Sign Language in his job at Boys Town Research Hospital in Omaha.

And the two boys spoke to each other at home, while their mom ⁽⁹⁹⁾ a proficient lip reader ⁽⁹⁹⁾ listened in and stopped them when there was something she didn't understand.

Many adults with deaf parents had common experiences growing up. These common links are described in literature from CODA ⁽⁹⁹⁾ or Children of Deaf Adults.

It explains other family members ⁽⁹⁹⁾ grandparents, aunts, uncles, even older siblings ⁽⁹⁹⁾ are often the spoken language models.

And the children are relied upon to interpret for their parents, particularly decades ago, before paid interpreters were common.

The mailman came to the door, so Beurivage would translate.

"What we did was normal and necessary to help the family function in a normal way," said Beurivage.

As teens, the children of deaf parents can have special problems adjusting to their family differences.

Trexler, now 31, remembers those years.

Like any teen, you get to a certain age, 13, 14 or 15, and you don't like your parents, he said.

He had extra issues.

In addition to being the hearing child of deaf parents, his father was a preacher, which gave Trexler enough issues to make any kid "go haywire" for a while, he said.

And Beurivage remembers monitoring her friends' reactions to her parents. Those who were not comfortable or who were mocking did not get an invitation back to her house.

"I didn't want my parents to be hurt by stupid friends," she said.

But there's also something extra special about being a child living in two cultures ⁽⁹⁹⁾ the distinct deaf culture of their parents, with its own language, its own social customs, and the hearing culture.

"It's probably like the experience of a child whose parents are from a different country. You learn to live in both cultures, said Olsen, who was raised in Lincoln and now is a medical social worker in Chicago.

"I think that being raised by deaf parents is a blessing," she said. "You learn so much from it."

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