

# The right of the deaf child to grow up bilingual\*

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Every deaf child, whatever the level of his/her hearing loss, should have the right to grow up bilingual. By knowing and using both a sign language and an oral language (in its written and, when possible, in its spoken modality), the child will attain his/her full cognitive, linguistic and social capabilities.

## What a child needs to be able to do with language

The deaf child has to accomplish a number of things with language:

1. Communicate with parents and family members as soon as possible. A hearing child normally acquires language in the very first years of life on the condition that he/she is exposed to a language and can perceive it. Language in turn is an important means of establishing and solidifying social and personal ties between the child and his/her parents. What is true of the hearing child must also become true of the deaf child. He/she must be able to communicate with his/her parents by means of a natural language as soon, and as fully, as possible. It is with language that much of the parent-child affective bonding takes place.
2. Develop cognitive abilities in infancy. Through language, the child develops cognitive abilities that are critical to his/her personal development. Among these we find various types of reasoning, abstracting, memorizing, etc. The total absence of language, the adoption of a non-natural language or the use of a language that is poorly perceived or known, can have major negative consequences on the child's cognitive development.
3. Acquire world knowledge. The child will acquire knowledge about the world mainly through language. As he/she communicates with parents, other family members, children and adults, information about the world will be processed and

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\* This short text is the result of much reflection over the years on bilingualism and deafness. Those who surround young deaf children (parents, doctors, language pathologists, educators, etc.) often do not perceive them as future bilingual and bicultural individuals. It is with these people in mind that I have written this paper. I would like to thank the following colleagues and friends for their helpful comments and suggestions: Robbin Battison, Penny Boyes-Braem, Eve Clark, Lysiane Grosjean, Judith Johnston, Harlan Lane, Rachel Mayberry, Lesley Milroy, Ila Parasnis and Trude Schermer.

exchanged. It is this knowledge, in turn, which serves as a basis for the activities that will take place in school. It is also world knowledge which facilitates language comprehension; there is no real language understanding without the support of this knowledge.

4. Communicate fully with the surrounding world. The deaf child, like the hearing child, must be able to communicate fully with those who are part of his/her life (parents, brothers and sisters, peers, teachers, various adults, etc.). Communication must take place at an optimal rate of information in a language that is appropriate to the interlocutor and the situation. In some cases it will be sign language, in other cases it will be the oral language (in one of its modalities), and sometimes it will be the two languages in alternation.

5. Acculturate into two worlds. Through language, the deaf child must progressively become a member of both the hearing and of the Deaf world. He/she must identify, at least in part, with the hearing world which is almost always the world of his/her parents and family members (90% of deaf children have hearing parents). But the child must also come into contact as early as possible with the world of the Deaf, his/her other world. The child must feel comfortable in these two worlds and must be able to identify with each as much as possible.

### **Bilingualism is the only way of meeting these needs**

Bilingualism is the knowledge and regular use of two or more languages. A sign language - oral language bilingualism is the only way that the deaf child will meet his/her needs, that is, communicate early with his/her parents, develop his/her cognitive abilities, acquire knowledge of the world, communicate fully with the surrounding world, and acculturate into the world of the hearing and of the Deaf.

#### **What kind of bilingualism?**

The bilingualism of the deaf child will involve the sign language used by the Deaf community and the oral language used by the hearing majority. The latter language will be acquired in its written, and if possible, in its spoken modality. Depending on the child, the two languages will play different roles: some children will be dominant in sign language, others will be dominant in the oral language, and some will be balanced in their two languages. In addition, various types of bilingualism are possible since there are several levels of deafness and the language contact situation is itself complex (four language modalities, two production and two perception systems, etc.). This said, most deaf children will become bilingual and bicultural to varying degrees. In this sense, they will be no different than about half the world's population that lives with two or more languages. (It has been estimated that there are as many, if not more, bilinguals in the world today as monolinguals). Just like other bilingual children, they will use their languages in their everyday lives and they will belong, to varying degrees, to their two worlds - in this case, the hearing world and the Deaf world.

#### **What role for sign language?**

Sign language must be the first language (or one of the first two languages) acquired by children who have a severe hearing loss. It is a natural, full-fledged language that ensures full and complete communication. Unlike an oral language,

it allows the young deaf child and his/her parents to communicate early, and fully, on the condition that they acquire it quickly. Sign language will play an important role in the deaf child's cognitive and social development and it will help him/her acquire knowledge about the world. It will also allow the child to acculturate into the Deaf world (one of the two worlds he/she belongs to) as soon as contact is made with that world. In addition, sign language will facilitate the acquisition of the oral language, be it in its spoken or written modality. It is well known that a first language that has been acquired normally, be it an oral or a sign language, will greatly enhance the acquisition of a second language. Finally, being able to use sign language is a guarantee that the child will have mastered at least one language. Despite considerable effort on the part of deaf children and of the professionals that surround them, and despite the use of various technological aids, it is a fact that many deaf children have great difficulties producing and perceiving an oral language in its spoken modality. Having to wait several years to reach a satisfactory level that might never be attained, and in the meantime denying the deaf child access to a language that meets his/her immediate needs (sign language), is basically taking the risk that the child will fall behind in his/her development, be it linguistic, cognitive, social or personal.

### **What role for the oral language?**

Being bilingual means knowing and using two or more languages. The deaf child's other language will be the oral language used by the hearing world to which he/she also belongs. This language, in its spoken and/or written modality, is the language of the child's parents, brothers and sisters, extended family, future friends and employers, etc. When those who interact with the child in everyday life do not know sign language, it is important that communication takes place nevertheless and this can only happen in the oral language. It is also this language, in its written modality mainly, that will be an important medium for the acquisition of knowledge. Much of what we learn is transmitted via writing be it at home or more generally at school. In addition, the deaf child's academic success and his/her future professional achievements will depend in large part on a good mastery of the oral language, in its written and if possible spoken modality.

### **Conclusion**

It is our duty to allow the deaf child to acquire two languages, the sign language of the Deaf community (as a first language when the hearing loss is severe) and the oral language of the hearing majority. To achieve this, the child must be in contact with the two language communities and must feel the need to learn and use both languages. Counting solely on one language, the oral language, because of recent technological advances is betting on the deaf child's future. It is putting at risk the child's cognitive and personal development and it is negating the child's need to acculturate into the two world's that he/she belongs to. Early contact with the two languages will give the child more guarantees than contact with just one language, whatever his/her future will be, and whichever world he/she chooses to live in (in case it is only one of them). One never regrets knowing several languages but one can certainly regret not knowing enough, especially if one's own development is at stake. The deaf child should have the right to grow up bilingual and it is our responsibility to help him/her do so.

By the same author

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