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Research Supporting Deaf and Hard of Hearing Adults to Families Programs

Overview: Research consistently demonstrates that Deaf and hard of hearing adults provide valuable support to Deaf and hard of hearing children and their families. Whether serving as Deaf Mentors, Deaf role models, family guides, or family support providers, Deaf and hard of hearing adults contribute unique lived experiences, language models, cultural knowledge, and community connections that complement family-centered early intervention services.

Studies have found positive impacts on communication and language development, parent confidence, family relationships, social-emotional development, identity formation, and connections to Deaf communities. Families also report benefiting from opportunities to meet Deaf and hard of hearing adults who can share authentic perspectives and help families envision positive futures for their children.

Common Benefits Reported Across Studies

- Improved communication and language development
- Increased parent confidence and knowledge
- Stronger family relationships
- Greater connection to Deaf culture and community
- Positive social-emotional development and identity formation
- Access to Deaf and hard of hearing role models
- Increased family engagement and empowerment
- Improved educational and life outcomes



Peer Reviewed Research

The Deaf Mentor Experimental Project for Young Children Who Are Deaf and Their Families

Watkins, S., Pittman, P., & Walden, B. (1998). *The Deaf Mentor Experimental Project for Young Children Who Are Deaf and Their Families.* American Annals of the Deaf, 143(1), 29–34. https://doi.org/10.1353/aad.2012.0098

Children who received Deaf Mentor services demonstrated stronger language development, larger vocabularies, and higher communication scores than children who did not receive Deaf Mentor services. Parents also reported greater confidence using sign language and increased familiarity with Deaf culture and community.

Deaf Community Support for Families: The Best of Partnerships

Benedict, B., Crace, J., Holmes, T., Hossler, T., Oliva, G., Raimondo, B., Richmond, M. A., Sass-Lehrer, M., Swann, M., & Vincent, J. (2015). *Deaf community support for families: The best of partnerships. In L. Schmeltz (Ed.), A Resource Guide for Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) (Chapter 18).* National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management, Utah State University. https://www.infanthearing.org/ehdi-ebook/2015_ebook/18-Chapter18DeafCommunity2015.pdf

This chapter highlights the value of including Deaf and hard of hearing adults in family support services. Deaf adults provide families with authentic perspectives, communication guidance, cultural knowledge, and emotional support that strengthen family decision-making and child outcomes.

Role Models as Facilitators of Social Capital for Deaf Individuals: A Research Synthesis

Cawthon, S. W., Johnson, P. M., Garberoglio, C. L., & Schoffstall, S. J. (2016). *Role Models as Facilitators of Social Capital for Deaf Individuals: A Research Synthesis.* American Annals of the Deaf, 161(2), 115–127. https://doi.org/10.1353/aad.2016.0021

This research synthesis found that Deaf and hard of hearing role models contribute to language development, identity formation, social connections, educational success, and future employment outcomes. Role models help individuals build confidence, expand opportunities, and navigate life through shared experiences and mentorship.

Involvement of Adults Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in EHDI Programs

Shuler-Krause, E., & White, K. R. (2019). *Involvement of Adults Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in EHDI Programs.* The Journal of Early Hearing Detection and Intervention, 4(1), 54–61.

This national survey found that families who had access to Deaf or hard of hearing adults reported stronger communication confidence, increased cultural understanding, and improved connections to community resources. The study also identified a need for greater access to Deaf and hard of hearing adults within EHDI systems across the United States.

The Deaf Mentor Program: Benefits to Families

Hamilton, B., & Clark, M. D. (2020). *The Deaf Mentor Program: Benefits to Families.* Psychology, 11(5), 713–736. **https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2020.115049**

Families participating in Deaf Mentor services reported increased confidence in supporting their child's development, stronger communication skills, and greater understanding of Deaf culture. Deaf Mentors helped families build meaningful connections with the Deaf community while supporting children's language, identity, and social-emotional development.

Deaf Adults in Early Intervention Programs

Gale, E., Berke, M., Benedict, B., Olson, S., Putz, K., Yoshinaga-Itano, C., et al. (2021). *Deaf Adults in Early Intervention Programs.* Deafness & Education International, 23(1), 3–24. **https://doi.org/10.1080/14643154.2020.1792071**

This international study highlights the important role Deaf adults play in early intervention programs. Families reported that Deaf adults provided valuable language models, cultural knowledge, emotional support, and lived experiences that helped them better understand and support their Deaf and hard of hearing children.

Deaf Role-Models for Deaf Children in Hearing Families: A Scoping Review

Joy, A., Ledger, S., & Duncan, J. (2024). *Deaf Role-Models for Deaf Children in Hearing Families: A Scoping Review.* Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 30(1), 17–30. **https://doi.org/10.1093/jdsade/enae028**

This review found that Deaf role models provide important benefits to Deaf children and their families by supporting language development, strengthening family communication, increasing parent confidence, and fostering positive connections to Deaf culture and community.

Program Reports and Practice-Based Evidence

Deaf Role Models Making a Critical Difference in New Mexico

Abrams, S., & Gallegos, R. (2011). *Deaf Role Models Making a Critical Difference in New Mexico.* Odyssey, 24–27.

This article describes New Mexico's statewide Deaf Role Model Program through the New Mexico School for the Deaf. Deaf and hard of hearing adults partnered with families through home-based early intervention services, providing language support, cultural connections, role modeling, and guidance that strengthened family engagement and communication.

Deaf Mentor & Parent Advisor Pilot Project

Diaz, B., Duncan, T., Weeks, A., Robinson, C., Mills, E., & Tennessee Schools for the Deaf. (2022). *Deaf Mentor & Parent Advisor Pilot Project Legislative Report.* Legislative Report.

This Tennessee pilot project examined outcomes for families participating in a Deaf Mentor and Parent Advisor model using the SKI-HI Deaf Mentor and Parent Advisor curricula. Families reported increased confidence in communicating with their children, greater access to language resources, and stronger connections to Deaf and hard of hearing role models. Program data also demonstrated language growth for participating children and high levels of family satisfaction with services.

Conclusion

Across research studies, program evaluations, and state initiatives, findings consistently support the inclusion of Deaf and hard of hearing adults in family-centered services. Deaf and hard of hearing adults provide families with unique lived experiences, language models, cultural perspectives, and community connections that contribute to positive outcomes for children and families. These findings reinforce the value of Deaf and hard of hearing adults as essential partners in supporting Deaf and hard of hearing children from the earliest years.