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Empowering Parents and Caregivers: Supporting Families with ASL at Home

By Leah C. Geer and Razi M. Zarchy

“... I only made it through 3 of 10 classes. I dropped out because I was so overwhelmed ... I couldn't keep up.”

~ Grandparent of a deaf child, who tried to learn ASL in a community education program

We tell hearing parents that it is critical—and wonderful—to learn a signed language for their deaf or hard of hearing children, and parents report that classes in sign language are one of the most helpful ways to support their children's language-learning journey (Lieberman et al., 2022). While programs exist for families, unfortunately parents and other family members sometimes have a discouraging experience when they attend traditional classes in American Sign Language (ASL).

Families of deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, deafdisabled, and late-deafened children need a unique program—a program that is suited to the needs of adults and families (Snoddon, 2015). Several organizations and programs (e.g., American Society for Deaf Children, ASL Connect, Hands & Voices, Heritage Sign Languages Center, Oklahoma School for the Deaf) offer ASL instruction, some of them without cost. This is important as the needs of parents, grandparents, and other family members are different from teenagers who take ASL in high school, or young adults who take ASL in college, or people who take ASL to become interpreters or teachers of the deaf.

The needs of parents and family members of deaf and hard of hearing students are

Photos courtesy of Alee and Nick Capps



Left and above: Deaf and hard of hearing children benefit from their parents and other family members learning sign language. With full access to language in the home, understanding and learning increase and frustration decreases for all.

unique. Not only do they face courses that are structured without regard for their needs, but they also endure other significant barriers. In-person ASL classes can be cost prohibitive and require expenses in addition to tuition, such as transportation, parking, and, for many families, childcare. The rigor of many courses, especially those at community colleges and universities, may be unsuitable.

Further, courses designed for teenagers and young adults do not teach the vocabulary or address the communicative situations that families of young deaf and hard of hearing children face in everyday living. Most of these classes do not touch on other issues that are important to

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families, such as the importance of families feeling success in everyday interpersonal interactions that they have with their deaf children (e.g., Wittkowski et al., 2017). Parents who choose to learn signs are sometimes bucking professionals. They may need affirmation as they take classes against the advice of experts who told them that signs would impede the development of their child's speaking skills (Mauldin, 2016).

To combat all these barriers—the costs, rigor, programming, and need for affirmation—we wanted to develop a curriculum to assist teachers and professionals who work with families called ASL at Home (Zarchy & Geer, 2023).



ASL at Home: A Family-Centered Curriculum

How It Began

When Razi Zarchy—co-author of this article and a speech-language pathologist who works with deaf newborns and young children—founded an ASL class for families of children in his school district, he struggled to find a curriculum that would honor Deaf experiences and provide lessons that hearing families with deaf and hard of hearing children needed. Leah Geer—co-author of this article and linguist who is deaf and who teaches ASL and specializes in second language acquisition—had experience in curriculum development. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and parents, students, and teachers were forced to learn through Zoom, Zarchy and Geer teamed up. After brainstorming for many sessions and putting down ideas for a new curriculum that would teach and empower parents and their deaf and hard of hearing children, ASL at Home was born. It is a family-centered curriculum that focuses on the daily routines in young children's lives.

While we had intended to create something to meet our clinical needs, we found that, more importantly, parents—specifically the five mothers who worked with Zarchy during his doctoral research—

reported that they had been empowered with language and with the knowledge that they can successfully raise their deaf child. They said that they felt they were building a strong, positive bond with their child through ASL and their other home languages. This initial success has inspired us to keep going, to keep building on what is offered in the curriculum.

Looking Toward the Future

At the time of this writing, we are in the early stages of writing the next-level curriculum in what will become the ASL at Home series. This book, which will be free to parents of deaf and hard of hearing children who fill out a form on our website, will follow the same structure, basing each chapter on routines in the daily lives of children. The curriculum, for use with students ages 5-10 years



Left, above, and below: Programs and resources that support families in learning ASL help parents and caregivers to provide their deaf or hard of hearing children with full access to language-learning opportunities at home.



old, will feature in-depth grammatical instruction and teaching grammar concepts as they become relevant. It will also feature collaborations with other individuals and organizations that support our mission to empower deaf education providers and, most importantly, the families of deaf and hard of hearing children.

A message we hear from parents and family members of deaf children is that they have felt—and they have been told—that ASL is too hard for them to learn, so they should only focus on teaching their deaf children oral language. Recent research shows that this is not the case at all. Caselli et al. (2021) found that children can have age-level vocabulary growth when parents start learning ASL by the time their deaf child is 6 months old. Pontecorvo et al. (2023) found that learning ASL does not

hinder English development. Additionally, Zarchy (2023) noted in his doctoral capstone project how much parents increased their signing with only an eight-week class.

Language Access Is Key

ASL at Home is among the projects available to provide support for parents and caregivers who want to learn ASL. It allows the

most critical individuals in their children's lives to experience communication and to reinforce connection with their deaf and hard of hearing children. Most importantly, it supports these parents and caregivers in providing their deaf and hard of hearing children with full access to language-learning opportunities at home and allows those children to be fully contributing members of their families.

Resources for Families

To learn more about this curriculum as well as several other programs and resources that support parents and caregivers in providing a language-rich environment at home for their deaf or hard of hearing child, check out:

- **American Society for Deaf Children** (ASDC, <https://deafchildren.org/knowledge-center/asl-resources/online-asl-classes/>) – ASDC offers a wide variety of free and low cost online classes covering signs for use in the home.
- **ASL at Home** (www.aslathome.org) – As described in this article, ASL at Home is a family-centered curriculum designed for families with young deaf or hard of hearing children and the professionals who support them.
- **ASL Connect** (<https://gallaudet.edu/asl-connect/>) – These courses in ASL, posted by Gallaudet University, allow parents, caregivers, and other interested parties to learn ASL online on their own time at home.
- **Hands & Voices** (<https://handsandvoices.org/fl3/index.html>) – Hands & Voices has a Leadership in Language and Learning Center for Families to optimize the language, literacy, and social-emotional development of children who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- **Heritage Sign Languages Center** (<https://hsl.center/>) – Virtual and in-person family sign language services are provided by “connectors, who are culturally deaf, compassionate, friendly, professional, and fluent signers.”
- **Oklahoma School for the Deaf** (OSD, <https://courses.osd.k12.ok.us/>) – OSD offers free, online, noncredit classes for families and others taught by the school's ASL specialist.

You can also check with your local deaf school, community program, or center for family resources or to learn about any offered ASL classes.

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