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Social-Emotional Learning:

How Can We Best Support Deaf Adolescents?

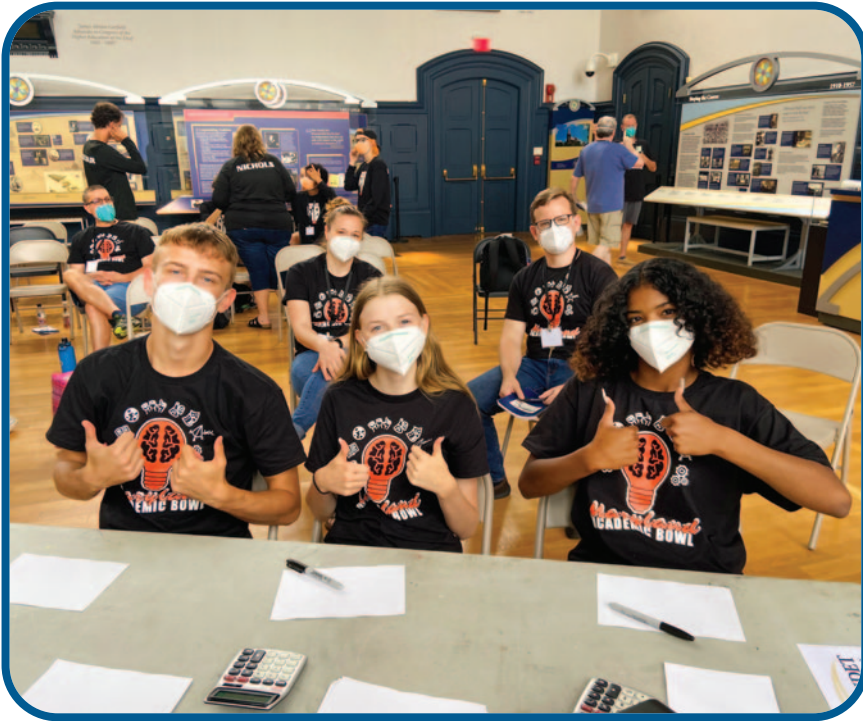
By Melissa Herzig and Carly Leannah

When a teacher at a residential school for deaf and hard of hearing students returned to in-person instruction after a year and a half of remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic, she found her students distracted and difficult to engage. "The students just prefer to converse with friends or create mischief," she said. "It feels like I'm spending more time keeping them in line than teaching them."

The lament above was relayed to co-author Carly Leannah when she interviewed educators and staff about their experiences with deaf and hard of hearing students returning to in-person instruction after extended school closures. Lockdown measures implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., social distancing, remote learning, canceled extracurricular activities, restrictions from in-person visits with friends and extended family) created social isolation and loneliness—and that had a significant impact on adolescents' well-being and mental health. More than a third of high school students reported that they experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and 44 percent reported feeling sad or hopeless (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

This impact was even more significant for deaf, hard of hearing, and disabled students: 87 percent of students with disabilities reported feeling that isolation was a main cause of stress (Williams, 2021). Deaf adolescents, facing communication barriers, may have experienced even more isolation and thus more stress than their peers. Behaviors observed by the teacher illustrate what occurs when this happens

Photos courtesy of Sara Lee Herzig and Donna Frank



Left: Social-emotional learning helps students develop problem-solving and communication skills and understanding, that will help them embrace diversity and build healthy relationships.

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and students' social-emotional needs are not addressed. The behaviors highlight the importance of incorporating social-emotional learning into education, especially for adolescents and, even more important, for adolescents who are deaf or hard of hearing. Social-emotional learning is a process through which students develop a skill set that includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow them to develop healthy identities, regulate emotions, feel and show empathy, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). There are five core competencies for social-emotional learning: developing self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2020). When teens learn to recognize their emotions and develop good communications skills, they are better able to navigate through conflicts. This, in turn, leads to improved academic performance, fewer conflicts with others, and more involvement with school and community.

The Adolescent Brain No Longer Child, Not Yet Adult

Social-emotional learning is important for adolescents because adolescence is a unique time of brain growth, and adolescents rely heavily on peer connections for social and emotional support (Whitman & Kellcher, 2016). While negative mental health consequences developed among adolescents in response to the stress of COVID-19, adolescents who felt socially connected were protected (Magson et al., 2021). For adolescents who are deaf or hard of hearing, the struggle with communication with families and peers due to lack of full language access may have provided an additional lack of connection and source of stress (Hall et al., 2017). Further, early access to family and peer communication, also protective factors against mental health distress, may have been missing for these students (Fellinger, Holzinger, & Pollard 2012).

Adolescence is a time during which teens

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Language and Communication Ever More Critical

Language is best developed through positive social experiences based primarily in interactions with children's caretakers. For this reason, parental communication skills are vital. In fact, the ability of parents to communicate with their young deaf and hard of hearing children is even more significant for language attainment and academic performance than parental involvement (Calderon, 2000). Parents do not need to be native or even fluent signers; they just need to know enough sign language to communicate with their child (Allen, 2015).

Language and communication have everyday effects on deaf and hard of hearing adolescents as learning scenarios become more complex and they work to develop a sense of belonging, build relationships with others, and develop a healthy

sense of identity and self-esteem. Social-emotional

learning and language learning are so related that they are almost indistinguishable. When students increase their language proficiency, they also undergo social-emotional growth, and when students are involved with social-emotional learning, they increase their language proficiency (Spencer & Koester, 2015).

Even those students whose language competency is high, who are succeeding—or at least getting by—academically in public school face the daily stress of trying to fit in while they focus on communication through interpreters and struggle with making friends during breaks or lunchtime. These adolescents find themselves unable to develop the sense of belonging that alleviates stress and the barriers of building relations (Oliva & Lytle, 2014). Poor social-emotional skills can lead to social rejection and an increased risk of developing mental health issues that may continue throughout adulthood (Luckner & Movahedazarhouli, 2019). Unsupported,

Above: Early access to family and peer communication is a protective factor against mental health issues. **Below:** When adolescents are able to socialize with their peers, it helps to ease loneliness and stress and to reduce depression.

explore their identity, trying to understand who they are and what they want to be. Isolation during the pandemic (whether due to distance caused by geography or due to distance caused by families and friends who did not provide access to communication) impacted teens' sense of identity (Walters & Knoors, 2008; Leigh, 2009). Identity depends on teens' attitudes about themselves and how they think others view them as deaf or hard of hearing individuals. This, in turn, impacts teens' ability to interact with others because it is during this period when they are more prone to self-consciousness and are sensitive to the influence of their peers and chemical changes in the brain (Sebastian et al., 2008).

Further, all students have an attitude toward learning—and the attitude, known as an *affective filter*, is critical (Krashen, 1992). When students feel safe, self-confident, motivated, and free from anxiety, affective filters are low and support learning. When students feel anxious, when their comprehension is limited, when they are self-conscious about speaking or about their grammar or choice of words, affective filters are high and inhibit learning. As negative experiences build on each other, the affective filter becomes stronger and more negative. By the time students who are deaf or hard of hearing reach adolescence, they may have had so many negative experiences that their affective filters inhibit learning, which is already made more difficult by their unmet communication needs.



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Right: Adolescents are able to build relationships, are more confident, and have better self-esteem if they learn to recognize their emotions and develop good communications skills.

adolescents are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017).

Deaf and hard of hearing adolescents show gains in self-esteem and self-confidence when they have friends who are like them. Additionally, direct communication with deaf and hard of hearing peers and adults is important to learning and social-emotional development (Lytle & Oliva, 2016). Finding activities after school, on weekends, or during the summer with other deaf and hard of hearing peers helps develop those friendships and feelings of belonging. Social media may be helpful in staying connected and in socializing when they are not together during evenings or weekends (and especially during lockdowns or when students are quarantined).

What Teachers Can Do

Teachers need to be aware that more than cognitive factors affect a student's motivation to learn. Fortunately, a systematic review revealed that interventions in social-emotional learning can enhance adolescents' social and emotional skills and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in the short term (Clarke et al., 2021). Teachers can foster an environment of communication and respect for others and set the tone for positive interactions (CASEL, 2012). They can help students develop relationships with peers and adults, and they can support students as they communicate thoughts and feelings through both verbal and nonverbal means. Teachers can support opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, share feedback, solve problems, and resolve conflicts with their students.

Motivation is important, and teachers can foster a combination of factors to motivate students. One important factor is understanding and responding to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Meltzer and Hamann (2004) have shown that adolescents' cultural identities shape how they perceive the world around them. The more teachers know about the cultural backgrounds of students, including their values, beliefs, language, and behavioral expectations, the more students can feel respected and connected. The more teachers incorporate the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students into their lessons, the more students are motivated to learn (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004).

Understanding the social-emotional world of adolescents who are deaf or hard of hearing means recognizing the special skills and special needs of students who are neither children nor adults. The vulnerability of the still-growing brain and the lack



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of early communication, as well as the possible lack of communication day by day, requires teachers to exert a special understanding. This understanding can lead to social-emotional learning, and it can be the basis on which academic learning rests. Teachers can incorporate social-emotional learning into their classrooms in various ways, including through the use of technology or apps. (See “Intervention Strategies: Tips for Teachers and Parents” on pg. 40.)

What Parents and Caregivers Can Do

Building relationships through direct and clear communication builds trust and reduces frustration and stress. Sign language may be critical. Use of sign language is tied with higher self-esteem, and higher self-esteem correlates with higher reading scores (Leigh et al., 2009). Direct communication is vital for learning and social-emotional support. Parents and caregivers should take the time to seek out and promote relationships between themselves and their deaf or hard of hearing child outside of the home. Building support networks with parents and caregivers of deaf and hard of hearing children helps participating parents and caregivers to become more comfortable and confident with their communication skills and can lead to a stronger connection with their deaf or hard of hearing child (Oliva & Lytle, 2016).

Collaboration—Home and School

While social-emotional learning is critical in response to the unique situation of the pandemic, it should also become part of the curriculum and be implemented system-wide. Educators during classes, staff after school, and families at home should collaborate in bringing social-emotional learning to their children. Together, educators, staff, and families can work to ensure social-emotional learning occurs and our deaf and hard of hearing students are ready to learn academically.

Intervention Strategies: Tips for Teachers and Parents

By Carly Leannah and Melissa Herzig

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- **Offer explicit social-emotional learning instruction.** Deaf and hard of hearing students—sometimes due to language deprivation that begins early in life and sometimes continues throughout every school day—may need to be taught how to communicate their needs. **Asset Education** (www.asset-edu.org) is a resource that provides a curriculum to learn about resiliency and responding to stress. **Inspire: Teaching and Learning** (www.harmonysel.org/sel-resource-hub/) is also very helpful; it offers free resources and professional development training and webinars about social-emotional learning and instruction in Pre-K-12 classrooms.
- **Promote social learning activities.** *Part of the Group: Games that Increase Social Understanding* is a book with great activities compiled by researchers that focuses on increasing social learning. It can be purchased at www.dawnsign.com.
- **Use sign language to empower students to take ownership of their learning.** When new content is introduced and discussed in academic ASL, students feel more connected. They can visualize new concepts more easily, and teachers are more able to offer supportive scaffolding for learning and connecting content in English. Find opportunities for teachable moments to discuss idioms, metaphors, world events, or characters' behavior in both ASL and English.
- **Utilize social media.** View and discuss news via ASL. This activity supports social-emotional development. Suggested sites: Daily Moth at www.youtube.com/c/thedailymoth and DPAN TV at <https://dpan.tv/videos/>.
- **Build connections with families.** These connections, in addition to establishing important personal relationships and connections, can help enhance the understanding of students' cultural experiences and support student learning. When teachers reach out personally, parents and caregivers are more motivated to participate in the school community.
- **Utilize social-emotional learning apps and websites.** These apps will help students recognize the way in which they perceive themselves and their place in society as well as learn how to be nice to each other. Examples include:
 - **Teen Career Path** (www.brightenlearning.com/teen-career-path/)—includes several interactive, animated webisodes that combine social skills development and career exploration and life readiness.
 - **Middle School Confidential** (www.middleschoolconfidential.com/apps.html)—a digital, interactive graphic novel that includes themes such as bullying, self-image, friendship, and critical thinking.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- **Promote visual communication at home:**
 - Visit www.vl2family.org to learn research-based information about ASL and bilingualism as well as to find support available in your state.
 - Seek out ASL classes from local community centers, colleges, universities, and public libraries.
 - Sign up for classes at Gallaudet's ASL Connect (www.gallaudet.edu/asl-connect). Classes are entirely online and self-paced, and ASL Connect also has a Signing Pals mentorship program.
- **Establish a support network of parents and caregivers.** Set up a place and time for your child to connect with deaf and hard of hearing peers or mentors. This may also provide children with a safe environment in which they can learn and talk about issues and perspectives. It will help to provide them with a positive self-image and boost self-esteem.
- **Promote peer socialization.** An essential part of identity development is peer socialization with other deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Look up after-school or summer deaf camps and programs. Gallaudet lists several on its Youth Programs website (www.gallaudet.edu/youth-programs). The nearest school for the deaf may also have information about camps and after-school programs.
- **Utilize resources for self-advocacy and accessibility.** The National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (www.nationaldeafcenter.org) offers great resources on family support for deaf and hard of hearing teens.
- **Stay connected via technology.** There are several features in your child's phone, laptop, and desktop computer that your child can use to stay connected to peers and other individuals (e.g., email, texting, WhatsApp). To converse in sign language via camera or video, your child can use FaceTime, WhatsApp, Marco Polo, or Snapchat. Video relay services are also available that allow your child to communicate with hearing individuals in real-time through an interpreter or to talk face to face with other deaf or hard of hearing individuals who have videoconferencing equipment.

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