**One Parent’s Perspective…**

In 1990, our first son was born. In 1991, we learned that he had a severe to profound hearing loss (deaf). In 1992, our second son was born. After testing at six months of age, we learned that he also had a severe to profound hearing loss. There is no history of deafness in either of our families. Many reports say that about 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. The children may be born deaf due to family genetics or become deaf due to illness.

We were put in touch with the regional teacher for the deaf from ISDB (Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind.) She came to our home and worked with us and our sons to develop sign language and communication skills. She was also our first introduction into services for the deaf and different communication methods for the deaf. She encouraged us to look into ISDB as a way to increase communication with our sons, but left the choice up to us.

I tried to learn as much as possible about deafness and ways to communicate. In the early 1990’s we did not have much access to the internet, so I tried to find books and articles about deafness. We had our oldest son evaluated for a Cochlear Implant, but they were in early stages of development and they said he would receive as good, or better, hearing with the hearing aids he had at the time. We decided to go with “total communication”, a flexible approach that uses all means of communication…formal signs, natural gestures, fingerspelling, body language, listening, lip-reading and speech.

Starting in 1995, my sons and I spent five years at ISDB, staying in a small home near the school and returning to our home in north Idaho during the summers and vacations. We all learned sign language and our sons received an education with other children who were also deaf. My children learned that they were not alone and that being deaf was “okay”. They had deaf adult role models to show them that they had no limits to what they could do in the future. I had other hearing parents I could ask questions about what was “normal” or not with my kids. Since these were our only children, I had many questions! Turns out, I discovered that my children were perfectly normal in all ways…just that they could not hear. I learned to trust my gut instincts as to what was right for our children.

Our children were mainstreamed into the Moscow School District, starting with third and fifth grades. They had interpreters and a teacher for the deaf throughout their education in Moscow. After they graduated, they went on to college. One received an Associated Degree from the College of Southern Idaho and one received a Bachelor’s Degree from the University of Idaho.

As a parent of successful deaf adults, I can tell you what worked for us and what I might do differently.

* When your deaf child is young, communicate with them through sign language **and** speech. Give them as many communication options as possible. If the cochlear implant or hearing aid temporarily fails, you can still communicate with sign language. Sign language allows all young children to be able to communicate before they are physically able to speak. Don’t close off any ways of communication. Watch the movie *Mr. Holland’s Opus* to understand a little more about communication. (Note: This movie made me cry, for many reasons.)
* Since deaf children learn visually, tape pictures with words and signs on various objects throughout the house. Ask your child to bring you something or to go find something with the picture.
* Read books with your children, focusing on the meaning of the story and not just on the English words. You don’t need to sign all the words (the, his, her, it, etc.) to get the point across. Comprehension of the story is most important. Ask your child questions about what they see and what is happening in the story.
* Use closed captioning on your television, DVDs, and YouTube videos.
* If possible, try to meet other deaf children and their parents as well as deaf adults. Socialization and knowing you are not alone are very important.
* Give your child normal family responsibilities and structured learning times. When our sons were roughly eight years old, I would give them money and tell them to buy milk or something from the local store in Gooding, while I waited outside in the car. They learned to do things for themselves and learned money skills while I monitored their activity to keep them safe.
* Our sons were involved in soccer, t-ball, and scouts while they were young. This gave them activities to do and helped them learn how to communicate with hearing peers (although I often acted as interpreter for many of these activities.)
* When they get older, a small notepad or cell phone helps with communication of written language.
* Trust your gut instincts. Only YOU know what is right for you and your family regarding communication options. Use other “experts” to get information and advice; then ponder it before making decisions that feel right for your situation.
* Don’t take other’s lack of knowledge about deafness personally. I learned that it was more productive to educate others about deafness and my child’s needs than to spend time being angry or upset with people who just didn’t understand because they had no previous experience with deafness. You are your child’s advocate and educator!
* Idaho Hands & Voices is an organization that supports families with deaf children without regard to method of communication. They are also a good source for information on communication choices.
* Regional teachers for ISDB provide information and support to families of deaf children.
* There are many wonderful websites and videos for learning ASL from the internet today. I wish I had had all that information at my fingertips when my boys were young! Check out aslpro.com, signingsavvy.com, and the described and captioned media program (dcmp.org) to start with.

I wish you the best of luck in this wonderful adventure in learning with your child!