

Program for the Deaf Child
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Outside the stars twinkle in the night chill. The young children are tucked in their beds. The house is put in order and the tap water is warming - but the day is not yet done. Bundled against the chill, rosy cheeked, the kindergarten teacher arrives and with her that sense of cozy nurturing. But around that coziness another energy dances, a creative impulse, a determination, an inspiration. Two others arrive and strangely the silence is unbroken except for the swish of jacket sleeves, an occasional clap of hands or laughter as greetings fly about and news is exchanged in a language unspoken.

The two silent visitors are brave soldiers indeed, crusading on a lonely and often difficult quest. They are deaf teachers in training to become Waldorf teachers. Long distance relationships, long hours, enormous interpreter bills, low pay and no job security, isolation, prejudice and the pain of others' ignorance are endured to follow a dream: A dream of bringing Waldorf education to deaf children.

This task has led to a scrutiny of each verse, circle, rhyme and artistic endeavor used in the classroom, in an attempt to find a way to translate its soul experience into one which is accessible to deaf children. Teacups settle to bookshelves and windowsills as the work begins. "The North wind doth blow, And we shall have snow, What will poor robin do then? Poor thing" How do we sign this? The concept is easy enough to literally translate, but the experience, the playful lilt of the language, the rhythm and rhyme, are then completely lost. How do we create a visual experience of rhyme? One way is to use handshapes. The group plays with finding a handshape or two that can change and move and dance and transform to represent the changing images and experiences in the verse. They settle on the "five handshape" palm open and five fingers extended. This handshape is the basis for gestures representing wind, blowing, snow, will, what, fly, wing, warm, house and many, many others. They play with the movements, the transformation from one sign to the next, and weave into that a breathing of large and small gestures and varied pace, rhythm and pause. The result is a rich and beautiful visual rhyme enriching the experience of language for deaf and hearing children alike. We all watch it one more time, acutely absorbed as we are carried by the movement of the limbs right into the formed image and as one image transforms and flows into the next.

The work continues, as silently the group discusses transitions in the kindergarten. Rather than the song or music used to gently suggest to the hearing children a change in activity, what visual cues can serve to create the same change for deaf children? Traditionally in deaf schools, the lights are flashed on and off. One person suggests using a dimmer switch, curtains and skylights to enhance or dim lighting. Another offers the idea of a clean-up puppet designating tasks and perhaps inspecting afterwards. One of the deaf teachers creates a lighthearted visual rhyme for a clean-up song and we notice we are all smiling.

Other challenges from classroom experiences are brought for discussion. We realize resting with closed eyes is a different experience for deaf children who cannot maintain their connection with their surroundings through hearing. Perhaps they can rest with eyes open. Or the teacher can give them a tactile cue when the time has come to transition out of rest time. What about holding hands in the circle or on the way to the bathroom. Neither teacher nor deaf child can communicate effectively during this activity.

How does the puppet show work? Deaf children cannot watch the story and the puppets simultaneously unless the field of view is overlapped and the timing of storytelling and action alternate. Every age old technique must be re-evaluated for efficacy with these children's special needs. The deaf teacher's experience is invaluable in realizing how subtle changes can make all the difference in the deaf child's access to communication.

The tea has grown cold now, flying hands have been too busy to drink. Much is accomplished and much remains for the next meeting. Pedagogical, medical and deeper philosophical questions, or observations that arise are jotted down to be brought to the monthly Curriculum Development Committee meeting for consideration by specialists in eurythmy, speech, medicine, deaf education and Waldorf pedagogy. We bundle up, sign our good-byes and step from bright warmth out to crisp winter darkness, full of our endeavor and eager to return to waiting families. In the car, fingers twitch remembering the verses or working out a particular visual rhyme or sign transformation. The night is quiet.

Mainstream deaf education remains a dismal failure with 30% of deaf children graduating from high school as functionally illiterate. Trillium: A Deaf Program is a nonprofit organization in Santa Rosa, California dedicated to the evolution of innovative curriculum for deaf children and finding ways to bridge the gap between historically polarized deaf and hearing communities. To date this work includes research and development of a Waldorf curriculum for deaf children preschool through grade eight, trial of this curriculum in the classroom, access to Waldorf teacher training for deaf candidates, instruction in American Sign language as a second language and sponsorship of deaf cultural events to create a larger community for deaf and hearing alike. We welcome offers of assistance to help fund continuation of this program as well as contributions of therapeutic or pedagogic experience working with deaf children. *For more information contact Patricia B. Gans, M.D., (707) 887-1276 voice; (707) 887-1278 tty.*