



HANDS & VOICES COMMUNICATOR

Summer 2026, Vol. XXX - Issue 4

“What works for your child is what makes the choice right.”™



Amanda and boys

Serving The Families That Serve Our Country

By Amanda McGowen and Nicole Rogers, Hands & Voices Military Project with Cora Shahid, CA H&V/Fostering Joy Project

What does it mean to truly support families who serve our country—especially those families who are raising Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH) children? For military families, parenting a child who is DHH means navigating not only daily life, but also frequent relocations, changing providers, evolving school systems, and the constant need to rebuild support networks. With each move, families must reestablish services and learn entirely new systems of care. And yet, within

these transitions, military families demonstrate remarkable resilience and strength. They learn to advocate quickly, connect deeply, and find creative ways to ensure their children continue to thrive, no matter where they are stationed.

To truly support military families means recognizing both the challenges and benefits of this experience. It requires timely, coordinated services, strong cross-com-

[*Continued on pg 4*](#)





Hands & Voices is dedicated to supporting families with children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing without a bias around communication modes or methodology. We're a parent-driven, non-profit organization providing families with the resources, networks, and information they need to improve communication access and educational outcomes for their children. Our outreach activities, parent/professional collaboration and advocacy efforts are focused on enabling Deaf and Hard of Hearing children to reach their highest potential.

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Please send comments or questions to:

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Welcome, New Readers!

If you are a first time reader, welcome! Our goal at *The Communicator* is to inspire, provoke, and nourish your path as a parent of a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing or as a professional who works with families, in keeping with our motto: "What works for your child is what makes the choice right."TM You'll find perspectives on current research alongside the insights of Deaf or Hard of Hearing adults; you'll find articles from children themselves next to calls for action in the world of deaf education. We also publish abbreviated news from our Chapters (see your Chapter for more information), upcoming events, and paid advertisements for programs, products and services.

If any of our articles spoke to you, we'd love to hear from you at editor@handsandvoices.org.

If you have a story to share, see the editorial guidelines, including the "sniff test," at: www.handsandvoices.org/resources/communicator.htm. ~

Welcome New Families



HANDS & VOICESTM

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munity connections, and systems that travel with families rather than forcing them to start over. Most importantly, it means understanding that support is not just about services—it is about belonging and walking alongside families. At the recent Fostering Joy Forum hosted by Hands & Voices, participants explored this question through lived experiences and the growing impact of the Hands & Voices Military Project. What emerged was a powerful reminder: connection, equity, and community are essential.

Real Stories, Real Impact

Amanda and Nicole, co-leads of the Military Project, shared their personal experiences navigating military life while raising children with hearing differences. Their stories reflected what many military families know well—frequent relocations, changing providers, new school systems, and the ongoing need to rebuild support. Amanda spoke about the constant process of starting over—rebuilding care teams, reestablishing services, and quickly learn-



Nicole and family

ing to navigate new systems while ensuring her children continue to receive consistent support.

Nicole shared, “When my daughter was formally diagnosed (at 8 months) we went through the process of fitting her with hearing aids. We were clueless that TRICARE Prime for Active Duty covered hearing aids, and the audiologist we were seeing at the time told us that it was all uncovered. Luckily,

a military spouse I met through my husband’s squadron’s Key Spouse program had a daughter with hearing loss. She was able to guide me through the steps of requesting provider changes, acquiring new referrals and authorizations for what we needed, as well as informing me of what speech centers in the area accepted TRICARE. Through this experience, I learned how powerful parental connections truly were.”



In the U.S., families are encouraged to follow the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) 1-3-6 guidelines. However, for families stationed overseas, these timelines are often difficult—if not impossible—to meet.



Navigating Systems: TRICARE, EFMP, and Shared Knowledge

Military families often rely on TRICARE for healthcare coverage, including hearing aids and cochlear implants. However, accessing these services can be complex and overwhelming. The Military Project helps bridge this gap by fostering connection and shared knowledge—so families don't have to rediscover information with each move.

Programs like the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) provide additional support, including helping guide service access and informing duty station considerations. "But these programs don't check each and every military location for each unique individual's needs, compared to each and every service member's job. The program is a starting point. Many families want to consider more factors, such as which Deaf schools are available near a certain duty station. So, we learn how to navigate these systems from each other," noted Amanda.

A Critical Equity Issue: Overseas and Remote Duty Station Delays in Early Intervention

In the U.S., families are encouraged to follow the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) 1-3-6 guidelines. However, for families stationed overseas, these timelines are often difficult—if not impossible—to meet. Limited access to specialists, lack of deaf education programs, local support networks, and system navigation barriers can lead to significant gaps in care. These are not just logistical challenges—they are systems-level equity issues requiring awareness, stronger coordination, and targeted support to ensure timely access regardless of location.

In these situations, connection becomes a lifeline. The Military Project meets families where they are—through direct email support, monthly Zoom gatherings, and an online community where families can ask questions and share experiences. For many, these virtual connections are not just helpful, they are essential. When stationed in locations with Hands & Voices chapters, online connections smoothly transfer to local networking. Then when it's time to move again, online resources are ready to help them. Ultimately, families are building a network that moves with them.

The Power of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Adults and Professionals

A key theme that emerged was the importance of representation—specifically, the role of DHH adults and professionals, with lived experience in their roles. In areas such as education planning and language development, these professionals offer more than expertise—they bring authentic perspectives that strengthen trust and outcomes. This is especially critical in evaluations, where cultural and language understanding can shape both process and results. The discussion reinforced an essential truth: representation matters. Lived experience enhances professional practice, and inclusion strengthens systems.

While frequent moves can be disruptive, Amanda and Nicole also highlighted an important reframe. Military life can offer children exposure to diverse communication approaches, opportunities to build friendships across communities, and access to a variety of educational models and resources. Nicole discussed her experience in Alaska, where her daughter participated in a Girl Scout troop with interpreters and received specialized evaluations from a deaf neuro-

psychologist—an opportunity that may not have been available elsewhere. These experiences reflect the complexity, and possibility, within military life. This is a true Fostering Joy moment: expanding circles of support and creating shared experiences that build lasting relationships and belonging.

A Mission Rooted in Service

The Hands & Voices Military Project is grounded in a shared belief: through awareness, collaboration, and support, we can ensure timely and meaningful services for military families. Its mission is simple yet powerful—to ensure that families raising children who are DHH are supported, informed, and never alone, no matter where they are stationed.

Through every challenge shared, one theme remained constant: joy. Joy in connection, resilience, and watching children

thrive. The Fostering Joy Forum reminds us that joy is not about the absence of barriers, but the strength and community we build along the way. The forum concluded with a clear call to action—there is more work to be done, and more people needed to do it. Continued outreach, resource development, and funding will help expand this work and reach more families. Hands & Voices Military Project is hoping to expand their branch representation in the future, so please be on the lookout if you're interested!

If you would like to connect, or learn more, email handsandvoicesmp@gmail.com or see <https://www.handsandvoices.org/resources/military/index.html>

Watch for Fostering Joy forums and the Fostering Joy Facebook groups for parents and professionals to keep posted on future ways to foster joy in our parent support work. ~

Indiana H&V EHDI Conference and Polo at Sunset

By Allysen Davis, Indiana H&V

The *Indiana chapter of Hands & Voices* was excited to bring back our statewide EHDI Family Conference on April 25th, offering families and professionals a day focused on advocacy, education, and connection. We were honored to welcome keynote speaker Will Frentz, a former U.S. Deaf Men's National Soccer Team captain and national advocate for accessibility, who previously presented at the 2024 Hands & Voices Leadership Conference. Additional featured speakers included Mariana Barquet, who supports families statewide through Guide By Your Side and ASTra, and Shireen Hafeez, founder of Deaf Kids Code, who is advancing equita-

ble access to computer science education for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Looking ahead, our team is preparing for our largest annual fundraiser, Polo at Sunset, taking place Friday, August 21 at the Hickory Hall Polo Club. This signature, family-friendly event features an evening of polo, picnicking, pony races, and a silent auction. Proceeds directly benefit IN H&V programs that provide advocacy, resources, and parent-to-parent support for families of children who are deaf or hard of hearing in our state.

We're looking forward to a strong season of connection and continued support for families across Indiana.



Stepping into the Future with Higher Education

By Belinda and Bailey Kittrell, Arkansas H&V

Transitioning from high school to post-secondary can be exciting and overwhelming. Breaking down the many steps of transition into smaller tasks and dates over the high school period will relieve a lot of pressure. Your child will learn skills to use in decision preparation and planning over their lifetime. Of course, the earlier you start, the better.

Some of my child's educational team were not familiar with her IEP. During 7th grade, we added an element into the IEP requiring that prior to the first school day, her team would have a professional development meeting with us to learn about her hearing loss, devices, best seating location, and additional accommodations. Also, no therapies could be scheduled during any required core subject course period. It worked wonders! They were more comfortable understanding her needs, and she could relax and focus on learning.

In 7th- 8th Grade: Your child should participate in their IEP meetings by providing information about their type of hearing loss and what they can/can't hear, their devices, and what helps or does not help them understand and learn in class. What helps them learn best?

High School Selection: Does the high school offer any concurrent credit or advanced placement courses? A concurrent credit

course allows high school students to earn both high school diploma credits and college credits simultaneously. Usually taught by qualified high school teachers at the high school, these courses offer college-level curriculum in a familiar setting, often



Belinda and Bailey Kittrell

at free or reduced tuition costs. Advanced Placement (AP) courses are college-level classes taken in high school, authorized by the [College Board](#). They offer rigorous academic content, often awarding GPA weighting and college credit upon passing the standardized AP Exam in May. There are 38+ courses across seven subject categories (arts, English, history, math, sciences, languages, and capstone). Students may need to purchase the required textbooks and school supplies. Students can have the experience of working at an elevated level prior to entering ↪

college. Also, these courses can make college more affordable and provide an eye-opening view of the college workload and increasing time management.

9th – 10th Grade: Your student should be able to create a presentation for their IEP meeting on their own. This would include anticipating and answering any questions. They will need to practice and have questions posed to them prior to providing the presentation. Encourage them to practice their presentation and praise them for clarity of information and presentational style.

It is time to start looking at test preparation, taking AP, honors, and concurrent credit courses, reviewing colleges, and thinking about majors and minors. All students participate in college and career readiness in high school. Does your school have a relationship with vocational rehabilitation services for students who are deaf/hard of hearing or with additional disabilities?

Pre-employment transition services can be provided to assist a student in narrowing down interests for future career paths, training for interviews, etc. Transition assessments should be given for students through the Transition IEP, and transition goals and activities determined by the student, family, team, and community organizations, if applicable.

ASVAB: Traditionally, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery is a vocational aptitude test which requires no military commitment. It may help the student learn about aptitude in areas of career paths with which they are not yet familiar. It measures abilities in ten areas, including math, science, general knowledge, and comprehension along with mechanical comprehension. Testing is free. There are free preparation videos and sample tests available.

11th -12th Grade:

Students need to focus on raising grade

Did you know that IEPs don't follow you to college?

point averages, securing leadership roles at their schools, in extracurricular activities, or community service projects. Juniors can apply for a vast number of scholarships from academic to full-ride awards with no essay required (but apply for those if you are a strong writer!) Improve your college admission essay writing skills. Attend college fairs and learn about entrance requirements. Select the top five colleges you want to attend. What financial support are these schools offering? Here is a look at Bailey's costs: tuition, room and board, laundry, activities, technology, athletics, experiential learning, and public safety fees.

Investigate your future job ideas. Who will you ask for letters of recommendation? Have you volunteered or have any work experience?

Primary Undergraduate Entrance Exams: The most common college entrance exams in the U.S. are the SAT and the ACT, both of which are widely accepted by four-year colleges for measuring college readiness. Both are administered by the College Board.

ACT: The ACT is a standardized college entrance exam assessing English, Math, Reading, and Science, with an optional Writing section. As of late 2025, the test is shorter (2 hours 55 minutes, excluding writing) with fewer questions, focusing on English, math, and reading for the 1–36 composite score.

SAT: The SAT is a computer-adaptive test, meaning the difficulty of the second module depends on performance in the first **scoring** ranges from 400–1600 (800 per section). The math section covers algebra, data analysis, and advanced math and allows for a

graphing calculator.

Both tests are taken primarily by high school juniors/seniors, often for university admissions, scholarships, or as a graduation requirement.

Reminder: Extended Test Time: You can apply for extended time accommodation on both the SAT and ACT if you have a documented disability or learning difference. (A hearing difference may not be enough but document carefully in high school.) Apply *early* through your school to get written approval from the College Board's Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) or [ACT Inc.](#) Collaborate with your special education coordinator or counselor to submit documentation to outline the need for accommodations. (See *What about Accommodations?* [page 11](#))

Save on fees or college tuition, and help narrow your field of study:

Accuplacer: The Accuplacer is a suite of computer-adaptive assessments used by colleges to evaluate incoming students' skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. It determines proper placement into college-

level, advanced, or developmental (remedial) courses, ensuring students are best matched to academic work. Tests include Arithmetic, Quantitative Reasoning, Algebra, Statistics, Advanced Algebra and Functions, Reading, and Writing. It is often used for students who do not have SAT or ACT scores, or for those wishing to challenge their placement. Use the free practice tools. Request a test voucher from your high **school counselor**.

ACT Fee Waiver: The ACT fee waiver program covers registration fees for up to four ACT tests (with or without the writing test) for eligible juniors and seniors in the U.S. Students must meet economic need criteria, e.g., on free/reduced lunch or residing in foster care. Request the waiver directly through your **school counselor**.

SAT Fee Waivers are also available to eligible low-income juniors/seniors in the U.S. To get an SAT fee waiver code, ask your high **school counselor**.

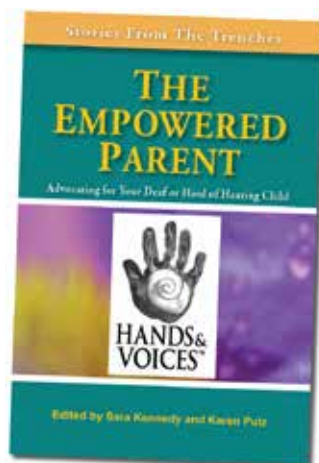
Scholarship applications: Research scholarships, grants, and work study to support your education. You can focus on leadership, academic merit, and specific →

The Empowered Parent Stories from the Trenches

Advocating for Your Deaf or Hard of Hearing Child

Our motto at Hands & Voices is simple but profound. Finding out what works for your individual child and teaching them to be their own best advocate is key. Advocacy starts with informed parents whether in or out of a classroom. Inside this book, we hope you will find the inspiration and perspective you need to have the courage to advocate.

The Empowered Parent is available in print and can be ordered on the Hands & Voices web site.



<https://handsandvoices.org/resources/products.htm>

talents. There are scholarships for hearing differences, too. Your counseling office can help. The ACT and SAT both have scholarships within their portals. Do your parents work for a company that offers a scholarship, or what about a church you attend? Local clubs, fraternities, and sororities can be a source of support for reaching your dreams.

Senior Year:

Challenge yourself to exceed the grade point average from 11th Grade. Attend at least two college fairs and stop at each table to see what is unique about the schools, staff, and campuses. Ask questions:

1. What is the average class size for first-year students, and how accessible are professors outside of class?

- **Why:** You want to know whether you will have large lecture halls or smaller, personalized classes. This will assist you in asking for appropriate accommodations.

2. What kind of academic support services are available (e.g., tutoring, writing centers)?

- **Why:** Confirms you will have the necessary resources to manage the workload.

3. What are the most popular internships or research opportunities for students in my major?

- **Why:** Highlights how the school connects academic learning to career preparation.

4. What makes this campus unique compared to similar institutions?

- **Why:** Helps identify the school's true identity, strengths, and "hidden" benefits.

What about costs? Saving funds on testing and college:

College Application Waiver: Students who use an ACT fee waiver are also eligible to request a waiver for college application fees using the separate request for waiver form.

Did you know that IEPs don't follow you to college? They end at high school gradua-

tion. You will have a disability services plan in college.

Contact the Disability Service Office for Colleges: Find the disability service offices for campuses you are interested in. Discussing services with the colleges and visiting them in person can often help you decide between more than one good option.

Disability Services Office Registration: Select your college of choice. When you have an acceptance letter, request a meeting early with the Disability Services office early. It takes time to set up your meeting, evaluation, and accommodations. The process goes like this:

Submit Documentation: Provide professional proof of your disability: audiogram, formal medical report, or evaluation. While a high school IEP or 504 Plan is helpful for history, colleges often require more recent, specific diagnostic evidence.

Complete an Intake Meeting: Meet with a coordinator to discuss how your disability impacts your learning and determine "reasonable" accommodations tailored to your needs. Ask what other accommodations might be available to you. Even late-start classes and adaptive alarm clocks may be viable options. The key is that you have to identify your own needs.

Your professors will be notified: Once approved, the office will provide an "accommodation letter" to be shared with each of your instructors at the beginning of every semester to implement services. Stay in contact with disability services for implementation and changing the plan if needed. This process will repeat each new semester. (See *What about Accommodations?* next page)

Vocational Rehabilitation Services: This could be another way to offset college expenses and increase your success in a career. Contact your state rehabilitation



services offices and ask to meet with one of their counselors about your employment and education goals. They may be able to provide support for your educational goals to help you seek employment.

Navigating this state-level agency can often help you pay for tuition, books,

or hearing tech if it is tied to an *Individualized Plan for Employment* (IPE). You must be 18 years of age to apply; applications can often be completed online before an interview. As a needs-based system, your parents' income is taken into account unless you are an independent student. It is a disability

and not a strength-based system, so be aware of that.

We hope that this will help students prepare to step into their future. ~

Belinda Kittrell serves as an Arkansas Hands & Voices Parent Guide; Bailey, her daughter with a hearing difference, is studying Biology and ASL in college.

What about Accommodations?

Accommodations are individualized supports used to give a student with a disability access to the classroom instruction or school activity.

What do you need to have the same access to learning as hearing students? Getting a list or tutoring on new terminology, asking for visual aids for each class (which can be as simple as utilizing presentation software), captions for all videos, and repeating questions from other students or allowing for a quieter place for small group discussion are all useful accommodations for most students with a hearing difference.

Be sure to consider the entire school day including transportation and extra-curricular activities.

In the high school IEP, we asked that related services would be scheduled during electives, not graduation-required courses. The team also prioritized maintenance of equipment and accommodations for listening fatigue in the IEP. Students on 504 Plans also receive accommodations

based on their individual needs.

See common accommodations on the [IEP/504 Checklist](#)

To receive accommodations in college, a student must identify their learning needs with the student disability office.

Examples of Common Types of Accommodations in College

- Testing: Extended time (typically +50%), reduced-distraction environments, or the use of assistive technology like text-to-speech.
- Classroom: Access to peer note-takers, permission to record lectures, priority seating and tutoring.
- Materials: Digital textbooks compatible with screen readers, Braille, or large-print materials.
- Campus Life: Accessible housing (e.g., single rooms, strobe fire alarms and doorbells), accommodations for extra-curriculars or priority registration for classes are all possible.

The Deaf Baby Instruction Manual by Will Fertmann

A Book Highlight by Sara Kennedy, H&V Headquarters, FL3 Center

In his book, *The Deaf Baby Instruction Manual*, parent and author Will Fertman offers a candid, refreshingly direct, and occasionally irreverent guide for overwhelmed parents navigating the early period after a child is identified as Deaf. The book reflects a clear ASL-first perspective and takes strong positions on other communication approaches. Within a world where differing perspectives exist and families must make decisions within complex systems and widely varying levels of access, Fertman's work brings an accessible and unapologetically prescriptive voice to conversations about language, development, and early decision-making.

"My experience of that first year was anxiety... I regret not just enjoying

him more as a baby," said Fertman. That "don't panic, but use this time wisely" message drives the book, offering information he wishes he had known from Deaf researchers, educators and lived experience. The book features a "Quick-start" section, designed to get the sleep-deprived parents through the first hurdles, and then dives into a ringside seat to vignettes of family life, (including an older sibling who doesn't always want to sign in the moment). Practical tips are offered about how to start signing, dealing with hearing tech, how to share books and start playgroups, and even reminders about reconnecting as a couple while navigating the occasional nonhelpful professional or extended family member's

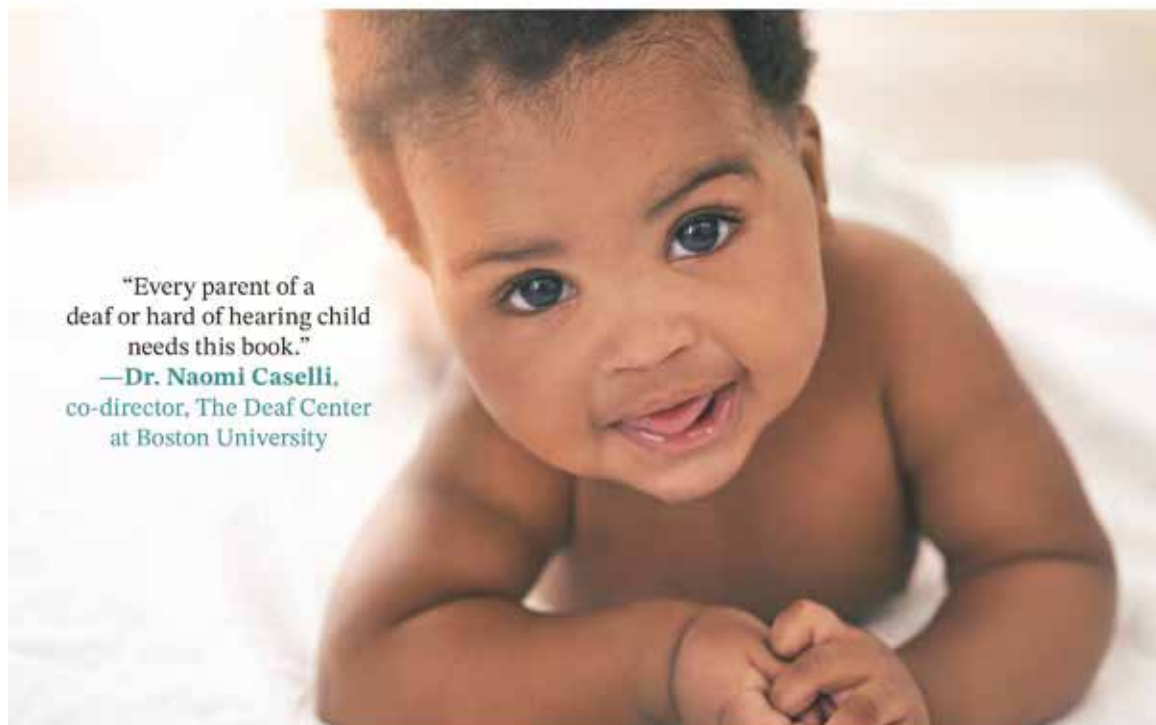
comments.

Sprinkled throughout are Deaf professionals across many different lines of work or ethnicities, a brief overview of deaf education in the U.S., and explanations of concepts like dinner table syndrome, alongside honesty and humor (including encounters with faith healing.) Fertman balances the urgency of language access in the critical early years with veteran parent's perspective. "Look at your baby as an adult", Will reminds us. What will they need to get a date, get a job, and perhaps move out of the basement? That perspective—seeing your child as the adult they will become—offers families much to explore as they find their footing in these early years. ~





THE DEAF BABY INSTRUCTION MANUAL



“Every parent of a deaf or hard of hearing child needs this book.”
—Dr. Naomi Caselli,
co-director, The Deaf Center
at Boston University

*A Guide for Parents of Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Children from Birth Through Kindergarten*

WILL FERTMAN

FOREWORD BY DR. WYATTE HALL AND DR. KIMBERLY OFORI-SANZO

B L O O M S B U R Y



Honoring the DHH Community with the Power of Public Art

By Heather Perkins, Connecticut H&V

Connecticut's chapter of Hands & Voices is very proud to share an exciting and historic project happening in our state. Right in downtown West Hartford, a new permanent mural is being developed to honor the history, pride, and culture of the deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) community. The inspiring mural will be titled *Voices in Color* and located on a prominent wall at the entrance of the Noah Webster Library, a highly visible spot in a popular area downtown.

This powerful public representation of the DHH community is designed to educate and to foster pride and inclusion. West Hartford plays an important role in deaf history, and continues to be home to a vibrant DHH community with many educational and community organizations.

To make the mural a reality and raise roughly \$20,000 in funding, the West Hartford Public Schools' Deaf Services department mobilized and garnered support from Connecticut DHH organizations, the Town of West Hartford, local businesses, and others. Renowned artist Michael Rice has been chosen to collaborate with members of the DHH community to bring



Recent work by the muralist titled: Reawakening Wonder (2023) by Michael Rice

their valuable and inspiring stories to the piece. The mural will be unveiled this summer. It is expected that its message will focus on communication access as an integral theme, as well as recognition of the experiences and contributions of the DHH community. This permanent public installation demonstrates respect for DHH people

in the broader community and will serve as a powerful symbol for all to see.

We are so grateful to the organizers and collaborators in our state who brought this important and inspirational work of art to life, and we absolutely cannot wait to see it unveiled. Watch for more details to come. ~

FL3 Center Year 2: Strengthening Connections, Support, and Systems

By Terri Patterson, H&V Headquarters/FL3 Center

As we enter Year 3 of the Hands & Voices FL3 Center cooperative agreement, we're excited to highlight key accomplishments from Year 2. FL3 continued to strengthen its support for state and funded jurisdiction EHDl programs and family leaders through responsive, relationship-centered technical assistance and practical resources—expanding opportunities for collaboration, learning, and connection.

A standout addition was **DHH Office Hours**, a twice-yearly drop-in space for EHDl Coordinators, family leaders, and partners to connect with FL3 staff. These sessions offer real-time problem-solving, peer connection on identified topics of interest, and accessible support around DHH leader engagement and family support.

FL3 also launched a **comprehensive onboarding process for new EHDl Coordinators**, featuring curated resources, orientation materials, and guided support to build confidence, clarify roles, and foster early connections

with national partners.

Ongoing, **individualized technical assistance (TA)** remains central to FL3's work, supporting EHDl programs, family-based organizations, and family leaders in areas such as family engagement, cross-system collaboration, and leadership development, while ensuring both professionals and families are equipped as partners in systems change. In Year 2, the FL3 Center responded to 457 individual technical assistance requests from over forty states and territories. Responding to these requests included sharing resources, coaching/mentoring, individual consultation, and group training. For EHDl programs we may not have had direct requests from, the FL3 Center TA Advisors also proactively reach out twice a year to state and EHDl territories to ensure ongoing communication with stakeholders.

The **Leadership Webinar Series** offered three targeted sessions on project planning, the importance of effective feedback, and Powering El so Families Can Thrive. All



are recorded, accessible, and available on the FL3 website as ongoing resources.

Additional tools and resources you may be interested in include:

- Guidelines for Family-to-Family Support Programs
- A Case for Direct Referrals to Parent-to-Parent Support
- DHH Leader to Family Support Self-Evaluation Tool
- The Virtual Waiting Room

Need support? Connect with your TA Advisor: <https://handsandvoices.org/fl3/request-ta.html>

Across all efforts, FL3 remains grounded in relationship-driven, real-world support, strengthening not just programs, but the people who lead them. ~

A Secret Party Too Good Not to Share

By Beth Jones, Nevada H&V

Nevada Hands & Voices hosted their annual in-person event in Las Vegas in January with the extra help of an anonymous donor. This year's theme was *Secret Pizza Party*, with more than 100 people in attendance, including families and Deaf/Hard of hearing (DHH) adult leaders at this fun filled, literacy-based event based on the book of the same name by Adam Ruben. (Ruben also wrote the popular *Dragons Loves Tacos*.) Families attending each received a copy of the book, individual presents for every child donated by our DHH community allies, with crafts, games, and of course, PIZZA!

Secret Pizza Party was also projected on a big screen and read and signed by board member Randi King.

Do we keep secrets? Secrets vs. Surprises

Another resource given to families that night was inspired by the [H&V O.U.R. Children's Safety Project](#). While our theme was "secret" pizza party, our leadership team wanted to emphasize that some secrets for kids are *not* okay. A flyer was provided to every family with a QR code to access the Hands & Voices child safety project, a list of resources our GBYS and ASTra teams provide on neglect and abuse prevention,



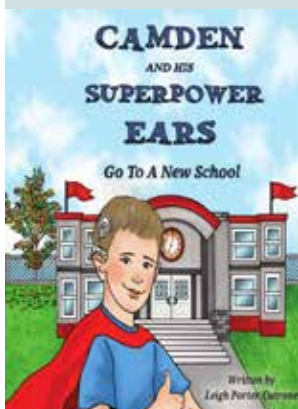
Pictured on the panel of DHH Guides and teens: Skylynn Brown, DHH Guide with her hearing dog Kalen, Ethan Emerson, Grace McAlpine, EJ Pineda (also known by his breakdancing name Fresh-2Deaf) and Tiffany Sartin, with Jewel Eldridge, moderator, and DHH Guide Lead

as well as an article from *Kidpower* entitled *What Kinds of Secrets are Okay for Children to Keep and What Kinds are Not?* (Surprises are fun and safe to keep secret because we'll tell eventually. Secrets that break the rules or hurt people are never okay to keep. Talk to a trusted adult if someone asks you to keep a secret. Read the article for details.)

The highlight of the event for both kids and parents were our DHH Panel, in which two of our DHH Guides and four DHH teens shared their lived experiences with families and professionals. From discussions on hearing dogs, break dancing and playing drums to their experiences in self-contained classrooms, mainstreamed settings, and charter schools, all the panelists were able to share their successes, interests, and tips with the audience. One parent commented that the panel was very informative and touching. Another family member shared that the panel "was great exposure for us as hearing parents to try to be more involved and immersed to support his journey as a child who is Hard of Hearing." ~

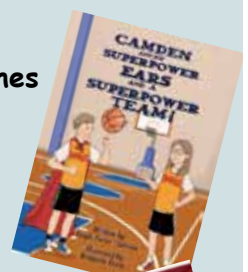


Board member Randi King with Secret Raccoon (Honey Houston, ASTra Advocate) and attendee Lennon



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When Access Is There... and It's Still Hard

By Heidi Klomhaus, Arizona H&V

As parents of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) children, we are taught early that access is everything. I believe that deeply. My daughter learned early how to advocate for herself. She knows her equipment inside and out. She understands the importance of the Roger microphone. She can explain her own audiogram. She has proudly told teachers, classmates, and even adults, "This is how I hear." She has enjoyed being the "expert" about her hearing difference and teaching others about it.

For years, I have watched her confidently own that part of herself, and I have felt relief. I would think to myself often, "She's totally got this." She has an incredible Teacher of the Deaf who checks in regularly with classroom teachers. We meet. We collaborate. We remind teams that DHH children don't always know what they've missed. We reiterate that access must be prioritized.

I have done all of that. And yet, middle school has arrived.

Now, some days she forgets to hand over the microphone. Some days she says the classroom is too loud anyway. Some days she shrugs and tells me, "It's fine, Mom." And lately, her grades have been slipping. If I'm honest, that's where my anxiety creeps in. My mind immediately goes to access. Is she missing something? Is the system failing her? Did I miss something? However, when I slow down, I know something else is true.

She is twelve.

She is navigating friendships, shifting social dynamics, independence, mood swings, and the deep desire to not stand out. Middle school changes things. Suddenly, being "the expert" on your hearing difference

doesn't always feel empowering, sometimes it feels like one more way to be noticed. And I struggle with that as her parent.

I struggle with watching her choose not to use the tools she knows are important. I struggle with the tension between protecting her access and allowing her to own it. I struggle with wondering whether a lower grade is about missed information or about being a preteen who would rather focus on friends than homework.



Access is foundational and should be non-negotiable. However, access alone does not prevent adolescence. It does not supersede the very human desire to blend in. It does not eliminate...the growing pains of independence.

There is a narrative many of us quietly carry "If I advocate enough, if I secure every accommodation and educate every teacher then everything will fall into place." But our DHH children are still children. Access matters, of course. Access is foundational and should be non-negotiable. However, access alone does not prevent adolescence. It does not supersede the very human desire to blend in. It does not eliminate executive function challenges or the growing pains of independence.

Then realization settles in...

Sometimes when grades dip, it isn't a systems failure. Sometimes it's growth.

Sometimes it's learning that forgetting the microphone has consequences. That not asking for repetition affects understanding. That effort and outcome are connected. As a parent, that is hard to sit with. I don't like watching her learn the hard way. I don't like the knot in my stomach when I see a lower grade. I don't like questioning whether I should step in or let it ride.

I am starting to realize something humbling. Part of raising a confident DHH child to be a confident DHH adult means gradually letting go. Shifting responsibility. Giving her the space to choose whether or not to use the microphone. Letting her decide when and how to advocate rather than me reminding every teacher. She knows how and I know this because I've seen her do it.

I share this because I know many of us feel the pull between standing up as our child's biggest advocate and stepping back so they can step forward in their



Izzy

own voice. Sometimes their struggles are about systems. Sometimes their struggles are about being twelve. And sometimes they are about the complicated crossover of both. The middle school years are teaching me that

advocacy is not a straight line. It evolves. It gets quieter. It shifts from our voices to theirs.

And that transition, even when we've done everything "right," is still hard. ~



Practicing Self-Advocacy with BAHAs

By Hilary Thomas, Idaho H&V

Nothing makes me prouder as a mom than seeing my son thrive. He is now seven, and is a smart and funny first grader. He was born with bilateral microtia/atresia with a moderately severe hearing loss. He has been wearing bone-anchored hearing aids (BAHAs) on a soft band since he was six weeks old.

Over the years we have had many professionals, teachers, and Deaf/Hard of hearing friends help us teach him how to begin to advocate for himself. That hard (and sometimes fun) work is paying off.

Here is what self-advocacy has looked like for him as he grows:

Babyhood

From the very beginning we wanted him to know HE was in charge of his hearing aids. He got to choose when and how often he wore them. If he took them off, we would say “oh! You do not want to hear. Let’s put these over here.” We would give him a break and switch to (the very little) ASL we knew at the time. When we would put them back on a few minutes later, we would say, “you can hear!” We have never had to fight over “wear time” and he has developed such love for his hearing aids. I believe this freedom to choose when to wear them from the very beginning made all the difference.

Toddler

As he developed into a busy toddler, we put that energy to work. He became responsible for finding them in the morning and putting them away at night. He learned how to turn them on and off. Over time, he learned how to put them on his head by himself (although I still had to adjust the fit most days). But most importantly, he learned to be gentle with them. He learned to give them to someone if he took them off rather than throw them on the ground. He also started



ABR at three days old



Changing a button battery with supervision, age 3

to have an opinion about what color soft band he wanted, and we encouraged him to pick each morning.

Preschool

In preschool, his self-advocacy skills took off. Two self-advocacy goals on his IEP each year definitely helped. We started teaching him the intricacies of how his BAHAs worked. He learned how to put them on correctly, what all of the lights and sounds mean, and even how to change his own batteries. If there was a problem, (battery dying or feedback was present) he learned to notify an adult. He learned to take them off during rough and tumble play, and that they could not get wet.

He also learned how to explain what they were to others. We role-played at home and he learned to respond, "I am Deaf and wear hearing aids," when asked.

School-aged

All the hard work we put in during preschool really paid off when he entered a mainstream elementary school classroom. He was completely independent with his hearing aids by kindergarten. He confidently managed them without assistance from a busy teacher. He is now also responsible for finding his mini mic in the morning, connecting it to his hearing aids, and making sure the teacher (or substitute) is wearing it.

At home and school, we are trying to teach him to recognize his own signs of listening fatigue and helping him realize he might sometimes need to take a break from his devices or spend time in quiet.

The Future

Basic conversations around the option of a surgical implant started young. He has always known that decision is



At seven, confident and thriving

ultimately his choice. As he has grown, the conversations became more detailed and his understanding of the pros and cons solidified. So, this summer we are pursuing a bone-anchored surgical sound processor for him. We are all excited about extending his self-advocacy skills to understanding and adapting to his new technology.

I am constantly amazed by his capabilities and the confidence sparked from consistently encouraging self-advocacy. More and more often he leads the way and I get to sit back and enjoy the remarkable kid he has become.

Thomas serves as the Eastern Idaho Regional Representative for Idaho Hands & Voices. ~

The 12 Key Rights Project

A Family-Friendly Early Intervention Resource

By Christine Griffin, Washington State H&V

What are the rights of families in early intervention?

The 12 Key Rights Project began with Washington State Hands & Voices and was developed through a PDSA improvement process led by the organization. What started as a simple flyer has grown into a meaningful, family-centered resource designed to support parents, caregivers, and providers working with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The project was created by a collaborative team that included Christine Griffin, Kerianne Christie, Jessie Phillips (a parent), and E. Renae Atalan. Together, they focused on making early intervention information easier for families to understand and use during what is often an overwhelming and emotional time.

At its foundation, the 12 Key Rights are based on national best-practice guidelines from the Joint Committee on Infant Hearing (JCIH). These guidelines describe what children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families need during early intervention from birth to age three. While these standards are essential, they are often written in technical language that can be difficult for families to access and understand.

To bridge this gap, the team reworked the guidelines into “rights.” This shift in thinking to “rights” helps families clearly understand what they can expect, what they can ask for, and how they can actively participate in their child’s early intervention services. It also creates a shared language between families and providers, making conversations clearer

and more collaborative.

Early childhood is a critical period for brain development, especially for language and communication. During this time, children learn at a rapid pace, and access to consistent communication—whether spoken, signed, or both—is essential. Early communication supports bonding, learning, and overall development, making timely and effective early intervention especially important.

Why This Project Was Created

Families often ask questions such as, “How will I know my child will be successful?” The 12 Key Rights Project was created to help respond to questions like this in a clear, supportive, and practical way.

When families first learn their child is deaf or hard of hearing, they often receive large amounts of information at once. This information can feel overwhelming, overly technical, or inconsistent across providers. In addition, families may struggle to find specialists who are experienced in supporting children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The 12 Key Rights tool was designed to address these challenges by offering clear, simple information that families can use during real conversations with providers. Rather than being a document to read once and set aside, it is intended to support ongoing dialogue and shared understanding.

The tool was also reviewed and approved by the Washington State EHDDI Advisory Board, which helps guide early hearing detection and intervention efforts across the state.



The 12 Key Rights tool was designed to help families:

- Get a visual understanding of all of their rights in early intervention for their DHH child.
- Better understand their child’s early intervention services
- Feel more confident asking questions and sharing concerns
- Work in partnership with providers as part of a team
- Receive more consistent information across professionals
- Access the same quality of information regardless of where they live in Washington
- Overall, the tool is meant to support real conversations between families and providers and ensure everyone is working from the same understanding.

Improving the Tool Through Collaboration

After the first version of the tool was developed, it was shared with the Washington State EHDDI Advisory Group. Members provided feedback to help improve clarity, usability, and consistency.

Additional meetings were also held with leaders from Early Support for Infants and Toddlers programs. Together, they reviewed and refined the language to ensure it was accurate and easy to understand.

One key area of focus was **Key Right 2: Service Coordinators with Specialized Knowledge**. This right emphasizes that the person supporting a child’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) should have training and experience working with children who are deaf or hard of hearing. This helps ensure families receive informed, appropriate, and supportive coordination of services. ↪



Visual tools for the 12 Key Rights in EI



This shift in thinking to “rights” helps families clearly understand what they can expect, what they can ask for, and how they can actively participate in their child’s early intervention services.

is needed to expand and refine its use, this project represents an important step toward making early intervention more accessible, consistent, and family-centered across Washington State.

Moving Forward

The project is now entering its next phase, which includes sharing results with statewide advisory groups, expanding use of the tool across early intervention programs in Washington, providing training and support for providers, and integrating the tool into everyday early intervention practice. The 12 Key Rights is also available in both English and Spanish to ensure more families can access and benefit from it.

Families and providers can find PDF copies of the 12 Key Rights flyer and supporting documents on the Washington State Hands & Voices website: <https://wahandsandvoices.org/guide-by-your-side-program/>

The 12 Key Rights Project was created to help families feel more informed, supported, and confident during early intervention. By turning complex guidelines into clear, family-friendly language, it makes it easier for families and providers to talk, plan, and make decisions together. ~

Trying the Tool in Real Life

A three-month pilot of the tool was conducted from October to January. During this time, providers—including audiologists, early intervention specialists, and DHH professionals—used the tool during visits with families.

Families volunteered to participate, and providers were given a support packet to guide conversations. They also received ongoing support to help ensure the tool was used consistently and effectively.

After each visit, both families and providers completed brief surveys to share their experiences and feedback.

What We Learned

The results of the pilot were very positive.

Families and providers reported that:

- Conversations felt more meaningful and engaging
- Providers felt more confident using the tool
- Families had a clearer understanding of their rights
- It was easier to discuss advocacy and next steps
- The tool felt less overwhelming than traditional materials
- The information was clear, simple, and easy to use

In addition, families shared that they felt more included in the EI process. Providers noted that the tool helped structure conversations over time and made it easier to explain complex ideas in a clear way.

Kerianne Christie noted “When we developed this and took data on the process, the findings were clear.” “We want this information in the hands of families - early, clearly, and in language that affirms their role as decision-makers in their child’s journey,” said Christine Griffin.

Early results show that the tool improves communication, increases confidence, and helps families better understand their rights and options. While continued work



Kids using device to help them learn to skate.

Constant Changes Keep the Minnesota Team Hopping!

By Brenda Hommerding, Minnesota H&V

Two of our team members have stepped down in their positions, thus we are hiring! We greatly appreciate Yodit Amare (Metro Parent Guide) and Suzanne Iwainat (Central Region Parent Guide) for their service and support to families, and we wish them luck on their next adventures. The hiring process gives us opportunities to review job descriptions and learn updated hiring processes (job posting, interviewing, recruitment, onboarding, training). We are looking forward to having new parent guides with vast experiences to join our team.

We recently learned that duplicate downloads were happening when mass emails are sent out weekly which has caused an increase in fees. A checkbox improvement in

our database will eliminate duplicates. This process is also helping us with clean-up due to transferring information over into the new process and will reduce fees once again.

Four of the MNH&V Team were unable to make it to the 2026 EHD Conference due to the weather. However, the team members have been busy reviewing the posters and will continue to review the presentations as they are uploaded to learn as much as they can.

Twenty-five families attended the annual Roller-Skating event in February. This included 48 adults and 59 children. In addition to this in-person event, four online events took place between January and March with a total of ten families in attendance. ~





Families at last year's Beach Day 2025

Beach Day is Coming in Connecticut

By Heather Perkins, Connecticut H&V

At Connecticut Hands & Voices, summer brings one of our favorite traditions - Beach Day! Harkness State Park offers a quiet, fully accessible beachfront location where we host many families of deaf and hard of hearing children every year, and it is always a great time. Kids and families connect, board members are available for any questions or resources, and it's just a really fun day to spend together. This year's Beach Day is July 11th. CT families are encouraged to follow our Instagram or Facebook accounts for the details.

Check back often for many other social and educational events we host or post! There are also helpful resources that may spark your interest or help answer questions. Don't see what you need? Reach out directly to us on social media or hello@cthandsand-



Fun in the sand

[voices.org](https://www.voices.org). In just one example, Fairfield County families reached out wanting events in their region, and now we are looking to replicate our educational workshop this fall down in that part of the state. ~

Colorado H&V: Educational Advocacy Workshop is Coming

By Jami Fries, Colorado H&V

In February, our Chapter held our first Parent's Night Inn, in Ouray, CO. We had moms and dads drive from all over that state to connect, learn, and enjoy the hot springs.

In July, we will be hosting one of two Virtual ASTra Level 1

educational advocacy trainings for parents and professionals. In August, we will be hosting a Collaborative Summer Festival with our state D/HH programs. To see a full list of events, please visit our [website](#).



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ASTra Level 1

Educational Advocacy Training

ASTra content is derived from years of direct advocacy experience working with families in schools, attending advocacy trainings from legal experts, providing trainings, and the Hands & Voices Educational Advocacy Guidebook.



The ASTra Training from Colorado Hands & Voices is intended for families, advocates, and professionals who work with children who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH). It is designed to empower these individuals with the knowledge, confidence, and community support they need to advocate effectively for their children and families.



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July 15th
-A question of eligibility
- Assessment and Evaluation

July 22nd
-Special Considerations
-IEPs

July 29th
-Procedural Safeguards
-IEP Meeting Planning, Tools and Strategies

July Virtual ASTra Training



Preverbal Skills: The Foundation Your Baby Builds *Before* the First Word

What every parent of a child with hearing loss should know about the communication journey that starts at birth.

By Jill Cimino, M.S CCC-SLP

Before your child ever says “Mama” or “Dada,” something remarkable is already happening. From the very first weeks of life, your baby is learning to communicate—not with words, but with glances, gestures, sounds, and tiny moments of connection that lay the groundwork for everything that comes next. These are preverbal skills, and for children with hearing loss, understanding and nurturing them is one of the most powerful things a parent can do.

What Are Preverbal Skills?

Preverbal skills are the communication behaviors children develop before they use words. They include:

- Joint attention — looking at an object and then back at you to share the experience
- Turn-taking — the back-and-forth “conversation” of coos, smiles, and gestures
- Intentional communication — using a behavior (reaching, pointing, vocalizing) to deliberately get a message across
- Imitation — copying sounds, facial expressions, and actions
- Vocalizations and babbling — experimenting with sounds as a precursor to speech

These skills are not “pre-communication.” They ARE communication. And they matter enormously. Research consistently shows that a strong preverbal foundation is one of the best predictors of later language development — whether a child communicates through spoken language, sign language, AAC, or a combination of all three.

A Milestone Worth Knowing: 16 Gestures by 16 Months

One of the most powerful and often overlooked preverbal milestones, is gesture use. The [FIRST WORDS® Project](#) at Florida State University has identified a key benchmark: children should be using at least 16 gestures by 16 months. This isn't just a fun fact, it's a meaningful predictor. Research from this project found that gesture development between 9 and 16 months predicts language ability two years later, and preschool language skills in turn predict academic success.

Between 9 and 16 months, children should be building a growing repertoire of social communication skills, including:

- Using eye gaze and facial expressions to share emotion—both enjoyment and frustration
- Using eye gaze and gestures to share attention, interests, and ideas with others
- Communicating at an increasing rate using gestures, sounds, and eventually a few words
- Using a variety of actions with objects in play and everyday activities
- Showing early understanding of spoken words and familiar routines

For children with hearing differences, some of these milestones, especially those tied to sound, may look different or develop on a different timeline. But many, like eye gaze, gesture use, and shared attention, are fully accessible and can flourish with the

right support. Even small lags in these areas can compound over time, which is exactly why tracking them matters.

The FIRST WORDS® Project's free [16 by 16™ Lookbooks](#) offer a beautiful, photo-based guide to each of these milestones, available in English and Spanish. They're a wonderful resource to explore alongside your early intervention team.

Earlier Is Better

Brain development research is clear: the first three years of life are the most critical window for communication learning. Neural pathways are forming rapidly, and the brain is at its most sensitive to experiential learning. By age 3, most major brain circuits are mature, making early identification and support not just helpful, but essential. This is the science behind why early intervention works, and why paying attention to preverbal milestones from birth is so important for children with hearing differences.

Why This Matters for Children with Hearing Differences

Children with hearing differences may experience gaps or delays in the development of preverbal skills, not because of any limitation in their capacity to communicate, but because the auditory input that typically drives early communication may be reduced or absent. The good news? Preverbal skills, including visual language such as ASL can be actively supported, and early intervention makes a tremendous difference.

We now have a better sense of how preverbal skills should be developing. This empowers us to move away from the “wait and see” approach. Modeling, encouraging and responding to our child's communication attempts are some of the most powerful tools we have in our toolbox.

This is also where Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) enters the picture – and earlier than many parents expect. AAC isn't just for children who “won't” talk. It's a bridge. Ronski and Sevcik (2005) found that introducing AAC during early intervention supports – not replaces – the development of spoken language. In fact, a randomized study by Ronski et al. (2010) found that toddlers who received augmented language interventions made significantly greater gains in communication than those who received spoken language intervention alone.

One of the most persistent myths surrounding AAC is that using it will prevent a child from learning to speak. The research says otherwise. As Beukelman and Light (2020) emphasize, AAC supports participation in communication from the very beginning, giving children a way to express themselves while their speech and language skills are still developing.

What You Can Do: Nurturing Preverbal Skills at Home

You don't need a therapy room or special equipment to support your child's preverbal development. Some of the most important work happens in everyday moments: ↪

The science gives us confidence, too. Research is clear that children with hearing differences who grow up in warm, responsive, communication-rich environments – the kind you are already creating – thrive.

- *Make time to interact with your baby.* Read, cuddle, sing, comment on current events – whatever works! Screen time for both of you should be limited while together with your baby or young child.
- *Follow your child's lead.* When your baby looks at something, look at it with them and comment. This builds joint attention.
- *Pause and wait.* Give your child space to respond during interactions. Turn-taking requires time.
- *Respond to all communication attempts.* Whether your child points, reaches, vocalizes, or uses a gesture, respond as if it's a conversation. Because it is. Try saying/signing what your child is trying to get across. See where that takes you.
- *Use visual cues and gestures consistently.* For children with hearing loss, pairing gestures, signs, or symbols with spoken words builds richer communication pathways.
- *Talk with your early intervention team about AAC.* The American Speech Hearing Association (ASHA) guidelines support introducing AAC tools – from simple picture symbols to speech-generating devices – as early as infancy when appropriate.

Is your child making a month's progress in a month's time?

It is important to regularly discuss your child's rate of progress with your early intervention team and identify any adjustments that could help- whether it's altering the listening environment, getting a child's attention before communicating, or adding another communication tool to your toolbox; there are many small adjustments that can make a big difference.

A Free Tool Worth Bookmarking: The Communication Matrix

If you're wondering where your child currently is in their communication development, the [Communication Matrix](#) is an outstanding free resource. It's designed for families and professionals to assess the communication status, progress, and unique needs of anyone functioning at the early stages of communication – including children who use forms of communication other than speech.

The tool walks you through simple questions about your child's behaviors – from the earliest reflexive responses all the way to symbolic communication – and generates a profile of where your child is and what the next steps might look like. It's available in multiple languages and is free to use. You can try it as a guest or create a free account to save progress over time.

Fostering Joy

Celebrating Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children
A Reflective Journal



handsandvoices.org/resources/products.htm

Wilcox et al. (2006) found that many providers feel uncertain about recommending assistive technology and AAC for very young children. The Communication Matrix helps bridge that gap by giving families a concrete, research-based way to understand their child's abilities — and to advocate effectively within their early intervention team.

You Know Your Child — That's Your Superpower

Here's something the

research won't tell you, but every experienced parent and clinician knows: *you are already an expert on your child.* You notice the way their eyes light up at a certain toy. You feel it when something clicks. That intuition is not nothing — it is one of the most powerful forces in your child's development.

The science gives us confidence, too. Research is clear that children with hearing differences who grow up in warm, responsive,

communication-rich environments — the kind you are already creating — thrive. ~

Ed. Note: Cimino is a coordinator with the Colorado Home Inclusion Program for children who are Deaf/ Hard of Hearing (CHIP), part of the statewide outreach department at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind (CSDB). CHIP celebrates and empowers all families and children who are Deaf / Hard of Hearing throughout their early education journey.



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The O.U.R. Children's Safety Project

Recognizing Grooming: What Adults Need to Know

By Sara Kennedy, H&V Headquarters

A parent recently sent this question to the H&V O.U.R. Project (**O**bserving, **U**nderstanding, and **R**esponding to Child Abuse and Neglect): *What is grooming? How can I describe it to others?* Grooming isn't easy to talk about, but it is a topic that parents and schools need to grapple with to ensure kids' safety.

You may have heard the term. In child abuse prevention, grooming refers to actions taken by people towards children trying to gain trust, to gain affection from your child, and to gain alone time with the child. Grooming can happen to kids of all ages as well as adults. Adults in positions of power, adults who are known to the child, or older kids can all be "groomers."

This is a complex, deceptive process. Grooming can look like "being a good friend" "mentoring" or "showing an interest in a child" early on. These relationships will turn abusive without someone speaking up. It's not easy. People who engage in grooming are often well-liked members of the community, making



a good first impression on others. Grooming is hard to detect in the early stages because there is not much difference in a kind adult or older child offering to spend extra time with a child or young person. What's behind the motivation to be "kind" is what is different.

The harsh truth is that victims are targeted by people who hurt children

when kids are vulnerable, easier targets. Maybe there is no strong family support, a single parent, or a disability, or a hearing difference. Maybe a child is far from home. A child may be lonely, or the family may be going through a tough time. However, grooming can happen to any child, even those with strong support systems and no obvious vulnerabilities.

A perpetrator will try to gain the trust of the family, coach, or teacher or staff at a youth-serving organization to get alone time with a child.

Mostly, the focus is on the child. They give the child treats, affection, and atten-

tion. The child is made to feel understood and appreciated. As trust develops, they get more alone time with a child. Perhaps, next, they give a gift or make a mistake with a bad word and ask the child not to tell. It is a test to see what the child will do. Will they tell? “Let it be our secret, just between us,” says the perpetrator. If the child does not tell a trusted adult, more grooming occurs. The abuser is often very skilled at hiding what’s happening.

Next, desensitization to physical and then sexual contact or other exploitation occurs. The child doesn’t realize what is happening, and they did already (perhaps) promise not to tell. The abuser might touch the child in front of trusted adults to show this is “normal.” And the acting out gets worse. The child is told they are special to the abuser. When abuse happens, the perpetrator’s main goal is to avoid detection and continue the abuse. Statements might include “you wanted this to happen,” or “this is what everyone does to show love,” keeping a child confused and ashamed. Some children are actively threatened, or their family or pets are threatened if they tell on or abandon the abuser. They must also tell the child that they will not be believed if they tell.

One red flag listed in the signs of grooming may be an innocent, well-meaning gesture by adults who genuinely enjoy kids and want to expand their horizons. Two or three of the red flags below should be a major cause for concern and the motivation behind the actions must be questioned. Here are some tips to recognize grooming and stop it early.

Signs to watch for:

- Is an adult showing unusual favoritism toward a child? Special gifts, private outings, tutoring, more time alone together?
- If online, is the person trying to get time along with the child or text/message outside of a game or platform?
- Are there secrets? These may start as small but escalate in number and frequency.
- Is the child being isolated from peers or family? Again, this starts small but might include encouraging the child not to trust adults or talk to others.
- Overstepping boundaries: unwanted hugs, back rubs, fixing clothes, or “accidental” touching, contact outside of their usual role.
- Sexualized jokes or conversation, subtle and disguised as “education” at first.
- Watching a child undress, asking them to undress, or exposing themselves.
- Introducing drugs, porn, or alcohol and soliciting pictures from the child.
- Using power and control over the child so that abuse occurs and continues.

Can you tell what a perpetrator looks like? No. They look like you and me. 90% of abuse is by people the child knows and somehow has entered a circle of trust. 70% of sexual abuse is by “older kids” according to the Darkness to Light Foundation. We want to think a predator can be recognized on the spot but that’s only seems true in mug shots.

There was a recent case in Colorado Springs where a professor in ASL Studies ↪

Grooming isn’t easy to talk about, but it is a topic that parents and schools need to grapple with to ensure kids’ safety.

groomed a student starting in high school into sexual abuse over a period of months. That brave student eventually reported it to her family and then to the police, otherwise this may have gone on much longer. She said that she felt if she reported it, she would lose faith with the Deaf community and never get an internship that he had promised her. We all hope this courageous young woman finds healing and finds her life's work as she recovers from this abuse and that any other women come forward.

What can help? Checking in and keeping a strong connection with your child. Asking regularly if your child is worried about anything, or has questions

about anything, as we work to model healthy human relationships and healthy boundaries anyhow we can.

Does your child have five trusted adults? Kids often tell no one. Those good relationships are protective. We want the village looking out for our kids.

Asking systems to protect children through careful supervision of staff, no alone time with children (open doors, windows in classrooms and therapy rooms) and creating a culture where all adults look out for children's safety and ask the hard questions. That's schools, clubs, summer camps, and Sunday school.

Most adults are safe. Most would never hurt children. Still, *all* adults (and

older kids) need to earn their way into your "Circle of Trust," as Kidpower USA says, to get alone time with your child. Let's not ask "did my child behave at the sleepover?" to the adult in charge. Let's ask questions before, roleplay with our child about what to do if they feel unsafe for any reason, and ask your child privately if they had fun and if there was anything that worried them overnight. The same goes for camps, dorms, and field trips.

Childhood should be protected. Trauma is so difficult to work through and overcome, for kids and adults. Let's hold onto preventing abuse and cutting it as short as possible if it does occur. ~



References

- The grooming behaviors listed are based on a study by Elizabeth L. Jeglic, Georgia M. Winters, Benjamin N. Johnson, Identification of red flag child sexual grooming behaviors,
- Child Abuse & Neglect, Volume 136, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105998>
- For school and youth organizations, a [slide deck](#) on Improper Staff/Student Relationships: What You Need to Know About Sexual Grooming is an excellent resource, though older, from the Oregon School Board Association. https://osba.envisiams.com/docs/default-source/pace/resources/mandatory-reporting/improper_staff_student_relationships.pdf?sfvrsn=ca3b7ad7_2
- Video in ASL explaining child grooming, courtesy of DeafDove: <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DXxsldhuaqJ/>
- Join us at the Hands & Voices [O.U.R. Children's Safety Project](#) where we tackle these kinds of questions every day, and monthly in community meetings from October through May.



SAVE The DATE

SEPTEMBER 17-19TH, 2026
WESTMINSTER. COLORADO



HANDS & VOICES
LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

COME CELEBRATE OUR 30 YRS
AS AN ORGANIZATION!!!

2026 H&V Leadership Conference Registration Open!

By Janet DesGeorges, H&V Headquarters

[REGISTER TODAY!](#)

We are excited to celebrate 30 years of Hands & Voices at the Hands & Voices Leadership Conference. In 2026, we return to our Colorado roots for a national gathering of families, professionals, and leaders committed to supporting children who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH). This year's theme, **Many Trails, One Summit: Every Journey Leads Us Home** celebrates what many of us feel – H&V is not just an organization – it's a 'home.'

Our motto, *"What works for your child is what makes the choice right"*™ is not just a quote, but a real-life reflection of our journey with our own children.

For me, this annual conference not only fills my soul, but I also learn new skills and strategies for my own role at H&V. Our presenters often come from our chapter leadership that have forged new paths –

leading the way in non-profit management, leadership development, and thoughtful dialogue about the cutting-edge topics of the day.

The H&V Conference reflects our community – parent leaders, professional allies, DHH leaders, and anyone, from anywhere! You are invited to this gathering whether this is your first time or your 15th time, whether you are officially a part of the H&V world or not (bring your wisdom to share with us!). We particularly want to invite our professional partners in the EHDI system, who partner so extraordinarily with family leaders in EHDI. Make this the year that you come and celebrate our shared goals of supporting every family on their own journey of raising a child who is Deaf/Hard of Hearing.

Oh, and by the way.... It's in Colorado...who wouldn't want to be a part of that! ~

Knowledge Is Power: Understanding My Deafness Through Genetic Testing

By *Heidy Liz Nazario, Minnesota H&V*

I didn't officially learn I was deaf until I was around 17 years old, but the signs were there all along. The moment that changed everything for me was one day during high school. I was standing outside a classroom with a group of friends during a free period, laughing and talking. A teacher stepped out and asked us to quiet down because we were being too loud. One of my friends pointed at me and said, "It's Heidy! She's being so loud!"

I didn't think I was being loud at all, but that moment stuck with me. I started reflecting on all the times I'd felt like I was missing something in class — moments when other students reacted to instructions or comments I hadn't heard, or when I'd realize too late that I wasn't following along. I wasn't "distracted"; I just couldn't always hear.

That realization led me to schedule a hearing test. Sitting in that sound booth, pressing a button when I thought I heard a beep, I had no idea how much that appointment would change my life. When the audiologist confirmed I had a hearing loss, I was overwhelmed with emotions but also relieved. There was



Heidy with daughters, Zoe (left) and Maxine (right)

finally an explanation for my confusing experiences.

Even after that diagnosis, though, doctors couldn't tell me why I was deaf. I knew it ran in my family — my dad and several relatives also had hearing differences — but nobody could give it a name. I wanted that name, not because I thought something was wrong with me, but because I wanted clarity. I wanted to understand my own body, my family's history,

I also wanted to connect the dots for my family. So many of my relatives on my dad's side have hearing differences, yet no one had a clear explanation. Testing wasn't about fear or fixing anything; it was about honoring my family's story.

and what this might mean for my children one day.

Why I decided to get genetic testing

Years passed, and I carried that question with me. The desire for answers grew stronger when I became a mother. I wanted to be able to give my children knowledge I didn't have when I was younger. I wanted to help them feel prepared, confident and informed about their own health, no matter what challenges they might face.

I also wanted to connect the dots for my family. So many of my relatives on my dad's side have hearing differences, yet no one had a clear explanation. Testing wasn't about fear or fixing anything; it was about honoring my family's story. Getting tested felt like a way to show my daughters that curiosity is a strength, knowledge doesn't take away from identity, and understanding your body is empowering.

Another source of inspiration came from a dear friend and mentor, Karen Putz. At conferences, Karen often spoke about the pros and cons of genetic testing, and about how important it is to be emotionally and mentally prepared for the results. She encouraged

thoughtful reflection before pursuing testing, and her wisdom stayed with me. Her words reminded me that this journey isn't just medical — it's deeply personal, and it's okay to approach it with both courage and caution. That encouragement helped me feel ready when the time came.

The process and the results

The process itself was simple. After discussing my family's history with my care team, I provided a saliva sample that was sent to a specialized lab. Then came the hardest part: waiting. I thought about my father's hearing difference, the family stories I'd heard over the years, and the connection between all of us.

When the results arrived, they gave me exactly what I was looking for: a name. The test revealed a variation in the *ACTG1* gene, the likely cause of hearing differences across my dad's side of the family. As I read more about this gene, everything began to make sense.

One of the known traits of *ACTG1* variations is progressive hearing loss over time. This explained why myself and so many

of my family members discovered we were deaf or hard of hearing later in life rather than in early childhood. Having that scientific connection gave me validation and understanding in a way I'd never experienced before.

The results also brought practical insight: this gene variation carries about a 50/50 chance of being passed on to future generations. This new information has been invaluable for me as a parent. I've already had my oldest daughter tested, and she does not carry the gene variant. Learning about my daughter's genetic results brought knowledge about her hearing, but also a deeper appreciation for my own story. I haven't yet tested my youngest daughter, but knowing this option is available gives me peace of mind.

Embracing my story

Genetic testing didn't change who I am; I am, and always will be, proud to be deaf. What it gave me was understanding of my body, my family's health history, and how I could share this knowledge with future generations.

In the end, this journey wasn't just about science ↪

or health. It was about embracing my story fully – both the parts I live every day and the parts written into my DNA. Knowledge gave me confidence, not fear. It gave me tools to support myself and my children. And most importantly, it reminded me that every part of who I am, from my genes to my lived experiences, is something to be proud of.

Family Update – December 2025

Since writing this article, I learned that my youngest daughter carries the same *ACTG1* gene variant that my family and I have. This means there is a significant possibility that she may experience progressive hearing loss at some point in her future.

This news brought many emotions, but it also reinforced why genetic testing was important to me. Knowledge allows our family to be prepared, to monitor her hearing, and have the tools to support her with love and understanding no matter what her journey looks like. ~

About the author:

Heidy Liz Nazario is a deaf Latina woman living in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her husband, two daughters and dogs. She is Minnesota Hands & Voices' Deaf and Hard of Hearing Guide Program Coordinator.

Read the Spanish version on the Spanish page of the [H&V website](#).

TIDBITS

NCSA Publishes New Book

The National Cued Speech Association is pleased to announce the publication of *Our Chosen Path: The Transformative Impact of Cued Language*. The book contains almost 80 compelling personal stories and professional articles from 66 authors. This collection offers insights into the myriad ways cued language is used in families, schools, and communities, with numerous stories from deaf native cuers. Additional information can be found in the [NCSA press release](#)

Our Chosen Path: The Transformative Impact of Cued Language can be purchased as a hardcover and paperback from the [Cue College store](#) and online book retailers, and as an e-book from online book retailers only.

AG Bell Legislative Tracker

AG Bell's live legislative tracker contains all legislation relevant to AG Bell member interests (and is open to all!) across all 50 states and is updated regularly by the AG

Bell Public Policy team. Bookmark this [link](#) to stay up-to-date on legislative activities across the nation.

H&V Research Opportunities

Agencies, Organizations, Universities and others are often looking for participation of families and professionals for current research and survey projects. Each opportunity listed on [our site](#) has contact information if you would like to participate. Please contact the specific entity that is sponsoring each research/survey opportunity if you would like more information.

Late Onset Hearing Loss:

A book release is coming during Late Onset Hearing Loss Awareness Week, May 4-10, 2026: *Late to the Party: Extraordinary Stories of Hope after Late-Identified Hearing loss* was released by author and parent advocate Valerie James Abbott. The book features interviews with 16 families whose children were identified outside the window of newborn hearing screening.

Getting the Most Out of the Roger System: Real-World Tips from a Parent

By Zen Tharani, British Columbia H&V Board Member

Our child started using the Roger system in the classroom a few years ago, and while the benefits were clear, the learning curve was real. This wireless microphone system, often provided through the school and paired with hearing technology, can open up access for deaf and hard of hearing (dhh) students, especially in noisy classrooms or when teachers are moving around.

But it takes more than just turning the device on and clipping it to a lanyard. It takes collaboration, experimentation, and communication between families, teachers, audiologists, and the students themselves. If you're just starting out or looking to improve how it's going, here are some tips that have worked for our family and might work for yours too.

Start the Year with a Team Conversation

If possible, set up a short meeting at the beginning or before the school year with your child's teacher, the Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (TDHH), and anyone else on the school support team. Bring the Roger equipment and walk through how it works, and how to mute and unmute it. Discuss your



One especially tricky situation is when group work and teacher instruction happen at the same time.

child's equipment or hearing needs during different parts of the day.

This isn't about training anyone to be a tech expert but about getting on the same page and building confidence for everyone involved. A few minutes of hands-on time can help avoid weeks of frustration later.

Teach the Teacher about the Mute Button

Teachers often wonder if they must wear the mic all day. The short answer is yes, and it's also okay to mute it during private conversations or breaks. In fact, it's encouraged.

What matters is that the teacher remembers to unmute it when they begin speaking to the class again. Your child may not always feel comfortable interrupting, so creating a gentle reminder system like a hand signal or polite verbal cue can be helpful.

Involve Your Child Early

One of the most empowering things we've done is help our child understand how the system works and give them language to advocate for themselves.

Knowing what the different lights on the mic mean, when it's muted, or how to ask a teacher or guest speaker to wear it has helped our child feel more in control and less dependent. We are now at a point that our child is the one showing their teacher(s) how the system works. This has also helped build confidence for navigating real-world situations, like sports practices or community events. ↪

Plan for Substitutes, Gym, and Group Work

Some of the trickiest moments for DHH students are when routines shift: a substitute teacher shows up, there's a group activity, or gym class gets loud.

Explore creating a laminated one-pager that stays with the mic, explaining what it is, how to use it, and how it helps. Teachers can/should leave notes for substitutes about the hearing equipment, and another school staff member should be trained by the TDHH so they can check in to make sure it's being used properly.

One especially tricky situation is when group work and teacher instruction happen at the same time. For example, when the teacher is giving instructions to one group while others are working independently, it can be hard for a student using Roger mic to hear clearly and stay engaged.

Here's what worked for us: our child, who uses bilateral cochlear implants, worked with the audiologist and TDHH to connect only one CI to the Roger system during these moments. That way, they could still hear the group around them with the other CI. It's a small adjustment that gave our child more control and reduced



the feeling of being cut off from peers.

Daily Care Matters

Roger mics need to be charged every night and stored somewhere safe. Since the school-based system can't leave campus, we don't bring it home to charge. Instead, the teacher in collaboration with our child has found a consistent spot in the classroom to keep it charged and ready each day.

Label everything if possible and talk through a simple routine with your child and their teacher. When there's a clear plan, it helps everyone take shared responsibility for keeping the equipment working properly.

Stay in Touch

Check in regularly with your child and with the school team. Ask your child how things are going not just technically, but socially and emotionally. Are they able

to follow conversations? Do they feel left out during certain parts of the day? What works for them and what changes would they like to see?

When we notice something isn't working, we reach out to the teacher first and the TDHH to ensure they are in the loop also. Everyone's learning, and a spirit of collaboration makes a big difference.

Final Thoughts

The Roger system has helped our child access more of what's being said in the classroom and participate more fully. But it's not magic, it's a tool. And like any tool, it works best when people know how to use it and feel supported doing so.

If you're a parent just starting out, know that it's okay to ask questions, to tweak things, and to speak up when something's not working. It's even better when we encourage our kids to be advocates and that it's okay to tweak things and ask questions.

If you've found tips or solutions that helped your child, we'd love to hear them. The more we share, the better it gets for all our kids. Have ideas or questions? Reach out to us at info@bchandsandvoices.com. ~

Note from Author: This article is not sponsored or endorsed by Phonak or any manufacturer. It's based on our lived experience and shared to help other families.

Note from Editor: This article was reprinted with permission from BC Hands & Voices.

CAN YOUR OLD CAR ADVOCATE AT AN IEP? IT CAN IF YOU DONATE IT TO HANDS & VOICES



Do you have an old car just sitting out in front of the house? Are you dreading going through the process of putting an ad in the paper and then haggling your way to a sale?

Well, with one easy call you can:

- Donate your used car to Hands & Voices
- Receive a charitable tax deduction
- Have it towed away (if necessary) at no charge
- Provide support to Hands & Voices Programs

To find out more about Hands & Voices vehicle donation program, or to donate a vehicle **call 1-866-628-2277** or go to www.vehiclesforcharity.org and choose H&V as the charity of choice.

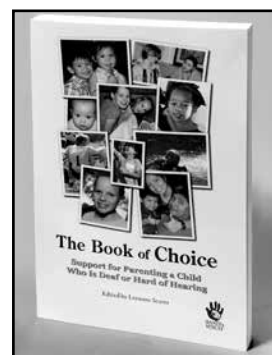
The Book of Choice

Support for Parenting a Child Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Now Available in Spanish

The Book of Choice is written for families by families with the deft and unbiased touch of Hands & Voices. Perfect for EHDl systems, Part C programs, Guide By Your Side and any agency or service provider that supports families with newly identified babies.

Here are thoughtful family stories from seasoned parents sharing insight about what they wish they'd known from the beginning about raising a child with hearing loss. Order *The Book of Choice* at www.handsandvoices.org.



Back to School: Behavior Tips for Families

By Kari Taylor, Illinois H&V

Back to school jitters or excitement? For students, it may be an exciting time to see their friends, see who their teachers are, using new class supplies, or just getting back into some kind of daily rhythm. For parents, they may be excited to have their child back on a regular schedule, or back to learning new things. However, both students and parents could have jitters regarding what their day will be like, especially in a new school.

Both parents and kids will have questions. Is my child getting the services they need? Will my child focus on the teacher? Who will my child sit with in class or at lunch? Will my child have a good relationship with others? Students may wonder who their friends will be, or will they be able to fit in and follow along with the rest of the class. All these worries and questions are common when starting school each fall. The following tips and strategies can help you reduce those jitters for both you and your child and help start the school year with less stress in your family.

Routines, Routines, Routines: Establish a morning and/or after school/evening routine. A routine can start with waking the child in plenty of time to have breakfast with you and discuss the expectations of appro-



Getting ready for back to school

priate school behavior. Once the child comes home for the day, have the child take their notebooks/books out and put them where you can look at them (on the counter or in a basket). Decompressing after school is especially important to deaf and hard of hearing students. They spend the school day focusing on spoken or sign language, so allow your child to relax their eyes and ears and have a snack. Set the timer for an hour of downtime. This also gives you time to decompress, too! Once the timer rings, then you can share with your child about the evening's expectations. Maybe they have

chores before /after dinner, homework before/after dinner, shower, or bath time, or helping with dinner. Decide together where and when homework should be completed. Most often, parents can sit at the table with their child catching up on their work (reading emails, looking through the mail) while their child is working on their homework. This modeling can set up positive future studying habits. Once homework is completed, then the evening is free for other activities. A good bedtime ritual helps kids settle into sleep and sets both of you up for a better morning, too.

Communication between school and home: Establishing a communication method between the teacher and your child could provide answers to the questions and concerns you may have throughout the week. Some teachers prefer to text, email, or write in a daily log. You can discuss with the teacher how you would like get communication, and ask their preferences, too. To make sure communication is clear on both sides, both the teacher and parent should mention how the child's day went, what services were provided and if there were any struggles/challenges (or positives!) that day. This

Decompressing after school is very important to deaf and hard of hearing students. They spend the school day focusing on spoken or sign language, so allow your child to relax their eyes and ears and have a snack.

helps you have an idea what kind of day your child to encourage them for tomorrow.

Conversation starter: If I ask my child, "How was your day?" I get the usual response: "Fine." Then I feel I'm pulling teeth to get anything else. One tip to really get the inside scoop on their day is to ask specifically by using a "tell me" approach. For example, you can say, "Tell me about science." or "Tell me who you sat with at lunch." Children/students will give more in-depth answers if they are given specific starters. This strengthens your child's executive functioning skills. You can model this yourself, too, discussing something you learned and something that was a challenge

First/Then: If your child struggles completing the work, use first/then to encourage your child to finish. The following conversation goes like this:

Child: "I don't want to do this" "I hate math." "I can't do this."

Parent: "First, let's finish this assignment, then you/we can (fill in the blank)." You want a highly preferred activity--playing games, going outside, or playing with toys; something your child really likes.

These are just four tips that can be used to help set a foundation for positive behaviors and reduce the challenging ones. ~

The author is the Treasurer for Illinois Hands & Voices and a Behavior Coach. For more information and resources on helping you and your child get through the day, reach out to her or others on staff at the [Illinois Service Resource Center \(ISRC\)](#). The center provides free behavior support and resources for children who are deaf and hard of hearing and/or have vision disabilities and their families across Illinois.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hands & Voices Releases Genetic Testing Resources Centering Informed Choice

April 15, 2026

Hands & Voices announces the completion of a comprehensive, multi-resource project supporting families and professionals in navigating genetic testing in the context of childhood hearing differences.

The project resulted in several key resources offering practical guidance for discussing genetic testing with families in respectful, balanced, and accessible ways. Perspectives from the Deaf/Hard of hearing (D/HH) community, diverse cultures, and families with children who are DHH Plus (with additional disabilities) were included.

Find these resources and more:

- [A Parent's Guide to Exploring Genetic Testing](#)
- [Keys for Discussing Genetic Testing with Families, A Guide for Professionals](#) (including "Say This, not That" guidance; forewords by Dr. Eliot Shearer and Dr. Dylan K. Chan)
- [What Should Parents Know?](#) – family-centered infographic exploring "Why Would You?" and "Why Wouldn't You?" genetic testing considerations
- [Questions to Ask Your Genetics Counselor](#) – an updated downloadable document

Each resource was developed with a strong commitment to centering the lived experiences of families, honoring the diversity of Deaf culture and the diverse lived experience of deaf/hard of hearing people, and supporting informed choice for families. Throughout the process, Hands & Voices engaged a diverse range of contributors, including parents, D/HH leaders, and



professionals, to ensure the materials reflect real-world questions, concerns, and decision-making factors.

"Families consistently tell us they want clear, unbiased information that respects their values and helps them make the best decisions for their child," said Janet DesGeorges, Executive Director of Hands & Voices. "As genetics and gene therapy move quickly, families are being asked to make complex decisions earlier than ever. Our role is not to steer them—but to make sure they have the balanced information and support to choose with confidence."

This work comes at a time of rapid change in the field of genetics and hearing differences. Current Joint Committee on Infant Hearing (JCIH) guidelines recommend offering genetic testing as part of comprehensive follow-up care. At the same time, Hands & Voices emphasizes the critical role of genetic counseling in helping families understand the process, explore what possible results could mean for their child and family, and even extended family members,

and have their questions answered—regardless of whether they ultimately choose to pursue genetic testing.

Gene therapy is emerging as a potential option for some children, including therapies targeting Otoferlin-related hearing loss, with additional studies underway for conditions such as Usher syndrome and Connexin 26 (GJB2)-related hearing differences. As these developments evolve, access to balanced, family-centered information and guidance for professionals will be increasingly critical. These tools are designed to complement clinical care by offering additional context around family and cultural perspectives, helping ensure families have the information they need to make informed decisions.

This project was made possible through funding from Lilly and Sensorion. All content was developed independently, without sponsor oversight or influence.

Looking ahead, Hands & Voices will be expanding this work through new multi-year

collaborations that will deepen education and training opportunities in genetic testing, genetic counseling, clinical trials, gene therapy, privacy issues, and effective communication with families. Additional details, such as translation of materials, will be announced in the coming year. These future efforts will build on the same foundation of honoring informed choice, cultural responsiveness, and family-centered support.

These resources are now available to Hands & Voices Chapters, family-based organizations, and professionals across Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) systems nationwide and internationally. ~

Find all genetics education resources here:

<https://handsandvoices.org/resources/genetic-testing/>

For more information, please contact: Sara Kennedy - Sara@handsandvoices.org



Some of the current jobs available now at Deafed.net

Job Location	Job Title
Denver-Cherry Creek	Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teacher
Massachusetts-Boston North	ASL Bilingual Specialist
Massachusetts-Boston North	Teacher of the Deaf – Site Based (Collaborative Program)
New York-Westchester	Director of Finance
New York	Superintender
Colorado	ASL Interpreter
Washington	Teacher of the Deaf

Go To Deafed.net to see more jobs



Celebrating our Teachers of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing

By Jerrica Maxson, North Dakota H&V

Back in 2015, our Hands & Voices Chapter decided to start an award for educators supporting children with hearing differences across the state. We call it the High 5 Award! We felt this would be a great opportunity to show our gratitude to those amazing professionals that go the extra mile to ensure children reach their full potential. Last year, we celebrated with our 10th anniversary of this award, and we are currently awaiting applicants for this year's recognition.

Nominators are encouraged to share details about how their educator supports families without a bias towards communication modes or methodology, provides families with resources/networks/information, advocates to ensure children reach their highest potential, and strives to understand the unique educational needs of children with hearing loss using creative and flexible methods of teaching.

Once nominations are received, our Board of Directors has a voting process to determine the winner. That professional is provided with



Nicole Swartwout, 2025 Awardee

a Certificate of Award and some spring themed goodies!

Here are our past recipients:

2015 Linda Koth
 2016 Jackie Heinz
 2017 Carol Lybeck
 2018 Tammy Iszler

2019 Paula Fitzgerald
 2020 Karla Kays
 2021 Nicole Harris
 2022 Tiffany Ahmann
 2023 Lana Zimbelman
 2024 Denise Marback
 2025 Nicole Swartwout
 This award has increased engagement with families

across our state. Parents who may not have felt comfortable attending family events still have an opportunity to participate and engage with our Chapter. In addition, it has raised awareness for our North Dakota Hands & Voices Chapter. We ask Audiologists across the state to share this with their families. When a teacher receives

this award, they are then more aware of our program and how we can support the families they work with.

We can't wait to read about the incredible professionals nominated this year. We hope everyone has a great end to the school year! ~
Maxson is a pediatric audiologist and serves as the treasurer of North Dakota H&V.

H&V Chapter Updates

Idaho H&V: Summer Family Camp Coming

Idaho Hands & Voices hosted a successful Library Social & Book Night in North Idaho and have been providing monthly Mom's Night Out with various themes in the Boise area. Our most successful theme so far was our December event with free gift-wrapping supplies while we socialized and snacked. We're excited to be planning a Family Camp July 31- August 2nd.

Watch our chapter [FaceBook](#) page for the coming announcement and [registration](#).

Iowa H&V: Partnerships Expand Support for Families

Iowa's chapter has been busy as of late! March kicked off with participating in a collaborative event alongside the Ulowa Pediatric Audiology Lab and Midwest Audiology at the Iowa Children's Museum in Eastern Iowa. The turnout was strong with 23 families and 25 Deaf/Hard of Hearing kids. It was a great day for partnership and connection!

Fundraising is also in progress through our [CauseTeam](#) page, where supporters can purchase their choice of two tee shirt designs or a set of thank you cards. Each purchase gives 40% back to Iowa Hands & Voices.

Newly diagnosed families will now receive two About Love and Language books: Colorful Ocean and Wonderful Woods, which include QRlinked videos that teach the signs featured in each story. This is all thanks to the roll out of the Prairie Meadows Community Betterment Grant project we received as a chapter.

We are proud of our efforts on these projects and plan to continue building on this momentum!

Maine H&V: Creating Community

Maine Hands & Voices has had a busy few months with events and planning, but the highlight of the first quarter of 2026 was Mom's Night Inn! We held this event at The Senator Inn, where we also host our yearly conference, because they also have a spa and pool. We had 19 moms attend this year and had a waiting list. Unfortunately, our funding was limited to 19 registrations. We spent time learning from each other, eating dinner and breakfast, chatting, enjoying the spa together, relaxing, and celebrating being the moms of deaf and hard of hearing children. One of the moms also hosted "Sunrise Yoga" which was a big hit as well! There have been MANY requests to make this an annual event and we are hoping to ↪

do it again next year. Want to get involved? Contact us at mainehandv@gmail.com or through our [website](#).

Mississippi H&V: Earned the “Star”

Mississippi is a newly authorized chapter, recently earning our star on the H&V map. We are all still very excited about this and suspect that we will be for a very long time. We are so proud to be a part of the Hands & Voices network, getting to learn from some

of the most amazing people, making friends in other chapters, and being able to do what we are most passionate about: supporting families of deaf and hard of hearing children.

Although we are a small chapter that is all-volunteer, we were able to attend a Deaf Awareness event on May 7th at Pearl, MS, where we had a table set up to meet families and members of the community. We are thankful to have been given this opportunity



by Mud Monsters Baseball.

Also, we recently welcomed Lisa Simon to our Board. Lisa is a Teacher of the Deaf who will bring a valuable perspective to our work. We are growing this chapter every day by some measure or another because of the special mentors and leaders that we follow. Contact us at handsandvoicesofms@gmail.com. Thank you all!

Tennessee H&V: Looking forward to Mom’s Night Inn

We recently welcomed two new parent board members who are motivated to provide support to families in Tennessee. Our recent event, Chandler Farm Train Day, could’ve been washed out from the rain, but we had more than 150 people come out to socialize and have fun even in the pouring rain. It was beautiful day of connection for new and experienced families alike.

We’re also busy planning our bi-annual Mom’s Night Inn event later this year. Stay tuned! ~

Is your child Deaf, DeafBlind, or Hard of Hearing — and age 7 through 18?
THEY CAN JOIN OUR RESEARCH TO HELP DEVELOP ACCESSIBLE TRAUMA-SCREENING TOOLS FOR THE DHH COMMUNITY!

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS:

- PARENT WILL FILL OUT A QUICK ELIGIBILITY SCREENING
- CHILD WILL COMPLETE OUR SURVEY (EMAILED/TEXED SEPARATELY AFTER SCREENING; TAKES ABOUT 30 MINUTES)
- RECEIVE A \$20 GIFT CARD AS A THANK YOU!

SIGN UP TODAY & BE PART OF THE CHANGE.

GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY Deaf and Hard of Hearing Child Resilience Center

This study has been approved by Gallaudet University's IRB. IRB-FY25-117
<https://gs.live/dhchrc> @dh.crc@gallaudet.edu

LORI DAY, PHD
 Center Director of DHHCRC



Pediatric Hearing Aids: Coverage Denied in CA

By Jen Jordan, California H&V

Did you know that pediatric hearing aids aren't required to be covered by insurance in every state? In California, families are responsible for funding their child's hearing aids.

I didn't know that either, until I was told by an audiologist that hearing aids would be part of my then two-week-old child's future.

Only 35 states require coverage of children's hearing aids through a state mandate, the state health insurance exchange, or both.

There was no family history—more than 90 percent of hard-of-hearing children are born to hearing parents—and I had a perfectly healthy pregnancy. He referred on his first hearing screen at a day old in the hospital, then a second at two days old, and we were told, "it's probably just fluid. He'll definitely show typical hearing at the next test at 10 days old." He was reacting to noise and making sounds. We weren't concerned.

Spoiler: He didn't show typical hearing.

We immediately jumped into advocacy mode, making sure he had what he needed to have as much access to

language—and to the world—as a typically hearing child. We just want to provide Will with an equal playing field to his peers.

We learned that pediatric hearing aids aren't covered by our—and most—insurance plans in California. Luckily, because he was identified through the Newborn Hearing

Screen, we were immediately connected to Early Intervention, who suggested we contact San Diego State University's School of Hearing and Language Sciences for his hearing aids, rather than Rady Children's Hospital, which had a three-month delay to even be seen. At 10 weeks, his hearing aids ↪



Baby Will



Will today

were fitted and ordered, and we paid \$2,550 for two hearing aids. At 15 weeks, he was aided.

The goal of the Newborn Hearing Screen—a federally-mandated program—is to have children identified by three months and aided by six. Because of our privilege as English-speaking folks who know how to navigate the system and

we have somewhat flexible jobs, Will was identified and aided within three and a half months. We met those milestones.

Meanwhile, 20,000 California families are waiting for hearing aid funding.

We know not every family can afford to pay for devices out of pocket. While there are state programs to help eligible families cover

the cost, a staggering \$30 million has been spent in a state program helping only 300 children receive hearing aids thus far.

I called San Diego State, Rady Children's Hospital, and his pediatrician so often in those early days that I was on a first-name basis with all of the receptionists. In the first two years, he needed new ear molds created and fit every eight weeks or so, saw his early interventionist and speech therapist every other week, and had hearing tests every three months.

What if I wasn't able to call constantly because English was my second language? Or if I didn't have a flexible job or the resources to afford the hearing aids? We know what would happen. My child would be facing significant delays in those critical early months of language learning and brain development.

I firmly believe that every state should cover pediatric hearing aids. To say they're not a medical necessity is a grave disservice. By the time he was a year old, my child was on track with his speech and language similar to that of a typical one-year-old. He was starting to sign and babble. Do you think he would if he hadn't been aided at almost four months old? Definitely not.

We're so lucky to live in



Family Camp 2025: Will you be there this year?

Hands & Voices of Oregon Celebrating Engagement, Access, and Future Events

By Courtney Hall, Oregon H&V

Our recent combined ASL Storytime and craft event with Washington Hands & Voices was a wonderful success, bringing together

nine families for an afternoon of connection, creativity, and shared experiences.

We also partnered with a local deaf adult group

to host a powerful screening of *Deaf President Now*, which drew an impressive 75 attendees and featured a thoughtful Q&A with a



Gallaudet employee and a student who were part of the movement during that historic time. Moments like these continue to strengthen our community, spark meaningful conversations, and build excitement for future gatherings.

Alongside these events, we're actively partnering with the Oregon Coast Aquarium

as they work to update their facility to be more accessible and welcoming to the deaf community. Planning is also underway for our annual fall family camp, a cherished opportunity for families to connect more deeply. Last year's event is pictured, with a huge turnout of 145 people.

Looking ahead, we're

preparing an end of school-year celebration event at the Oregon Zoo to kick off the summer. We can't wait to bring our community together again for another meaningful and fun experience.

Find Hands & Voices of Oregon on Facebook or see events on our [website](#) to learn more. ~

HANDS & VOICES:

Get cutting edge news from around the country!

We're a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting families of children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing with info & resources so they can make the best choices for their child. We are non-biased about communication modes or methodologies, and believe that given good information and support, families can make the choice that is right for their child. We also open our organization to professionals who are interested in a family/child-focused approach to service delivery.

As a non-profit organization, we are dependent upon subscriptions to our newsletter, registration fees at our sponsored events, grants and other donations in order to function. Therefore, we invite all our membership to donate a nominal, tax-deductible donation of \$25.00 a year/parent, \$40.00 a year/professional, to receive our mailings and newsletters, support the cost of our events, and to ensure that a non-biased voice remains available to families. Anyone who cannot afford the

Your 2026 contribution will go directly to your local Chapter if there is a H&V Chapter in your state/province.

annual membership dues but wishes to receive our mailings may check the box marked "Scholarship" on the registration form below. If you're not current in our database, please take a few moments to fill this out and send it in.

Name _____ Telephone # (_____)

Address _____ School Dist/BOCES _____

_____ Email: _____

Children (deaf/hh & siblings, ages) _____

Circle one: **Parent** **Professional** **Other**

Membership donation enclosed (circle one):

\$25.00/parent

\$40.00/professional

Scholarship

To Pay by credit card: Visa MC

Credit Card # _____ Exp. Date _____ Amount _____

Printed Name on Card _____

Signature _____

Mail this form to: Hands & Voices, PO Box 3093, Boulder CO 80307 or to the H&V Chapter in your State/Province (see www.handsandvoices.org for a complete listing)

