

IMPACT OF SENSORY LOSSES ON ATTACHMENT, COMMUNICATION, AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

What does it feel like to have limited, or no, vision and hearing? What does this mean in terms of how one learns to communicate?

Deafness:

How might an inability to hear affect how a person connects with those around him?

Feeling of Powerlessness in Parents:

A deaf infant with normal vision will not have the same trouble developing early bonds with his caregivers as an infant who is blind because the eyes are a main avenue for these early bonds. Smiles can easily be exchanged and body language can communicate affection and connection when a child is hearing impaired and has intact vision. It can happen, though, an early diagnosis or suspicion of deafness may instill in the parents of a baby who is deaf feelings of powerlessness and/or depression that may affect their rapport with their child. The most typical effect these feelings of powerlessness are likely to have, is to cause the parents to become “over-directive” in their attempts to communicate with their children; that is, their communication with their children more resembles a monologue than a dialogue. They take more turns than their children do, and most of these turns are commands, requests, and directive questions. This over-directiveness may have the effect of causing the infant to be less communicative, less spontaneous, and less socially adept. These inhibitions may affect his later language development. Because language skills grow out of active engagement with the world, they do not flourish when a child is a passive reactor to an over-directive environment. When parents could be helped to feel less anxious and more powerful, they help their children who were deaf to be better, more spontaneous communicators.

Language Development in a Hearing/Speaking Environment:

Deafness most significantly affects communication in the development of language. People need to have language input in order to learn language. Without accommodation, a child who is deaf in a hearing world does not have access to enough language to significantly activate his own innate capacities to develop language. The innate capacities for language seem to be most flexible and active during the early years of life. If a child does not receive language stimulation when young, he is at particular risk. A child thus deprived may never be able to be fluent in any language.

Hearing persons receive most of their language input through their ears. Before a child can say his first words, he has heard thousands of words and sentences thousands of times, and has somehow begun to make sense of them. A child without hearing or with severely impaired hearing does not have access to language input unless it is provided to

him through special means. Even certain kinds of relatively moderate hearing losses that allow a person to hear at speech levels can greatly restrict the useful linguistic information a child receives from his environment because many significant sounds are obliterated.

A child who is deaf or severely hearing impaired and who grows up in a hearing world is at a distinct disadvantage for learning language. His eyes must serve as the sole receptors not only of words, but of sentences, intonation patterns, and emphasis; they must also take over the “antenna-like” function that the ears serve for hearing people, scanning the environment on all sides, picking up indications of movements that would tell of danger.

The eyes alone will miss many of these things. Lipreading, even at its best, is a very inefficient way to receive language. Estimates are that an intelligent speech-reader, with good visual access to the speaker’s face, and with good contextual clues, understands with certainty only about 40% of the words spoken to him. Given this fact, one can begin to imagine the limitations of a person who is deaf and what they must live with when spoken language is their only method of communication. If visual impairments and/or any other impairment are added to the deafness, the communicative isolation becomes profound indeed.

Language Development in a Signing Environment:

Research shows that children who are deaf and have deaf parents, and who are also raised in an environment where sign language is the primary medium of communication, do not have trouble learning language in the ways that children who are deaf and have non-signing parents do. Children who are deaf and who are exposed to sign language from birth “babble” with their hands. At the same age their hearing peers babble with their voices. They also produce their first recognizable signed words at the same age as their hearing counterparts produce spoken words. They also make two and three-word sentences earlier than peers who are hearing do. Children who are deaf and have signing parents who are deaf, tend to fare better socially later on, probably because of their increased self-esteem, ease with communication, and the availability of appropriate role models for them.