

Introduction

Purpose of the study: Investigate the impacts of Deaf Mentors on hearing families as well as d/Deaf individuals.

Deaf Mentors are often contacted to connect with families who have a child diagnosed with hearing loss. These professionals support the child and the family in their acquisition of American Sign Language (ASL) and their knowledge of Deaf culture. Deaf Mentors have demonstrated a positive impact on hearing families regarding social, personal, and emotional factors (Hamilton, 2017).

Benefits of Deaf Mentor programs have been researched from the Deaf Mentor and the family perspective, but few studies have investigated the perspectives of d/Deaf individuals. For many d/Deaf individuals, the Deaf Mentor relationship was provided during early intervention services, and was discontinued after the individual aged out of such services. For some individuals however, the Deaf Mentor relationship continued to be beneficial after early intervention services were discontinued.

Method

Research Questions:

- 1.) How have Deaf Mentors impacted hearing families regarding emotional, social, and personal factors?
- 2.) How have Deaf Mentors impacted d/Deaf individuals regarding emotional, social, and personal factors?
- 3.) What are some difficulties that negatively impact the Deaf Mentor experience of families? How can we collaborate to remedy these difficulties?

Procedure:

A survey was distributed to families with d/Deaf children who were paired with a Deaf Mentor via schools for the Deaf and early intervention service providers. Along with demographic information, the survey asked two important questions:

- What was the primary benefit you experienced from working with a Deaf Mentor?
- What were some difficulties you encountered that negatively impacted your experience working with a Deaf Mentor?

Another survey was distributed to d/Deaf individuals whose families had worked with a Deaf Mentor past the early intervention period. Along with demographic information, the survey asked one important question:

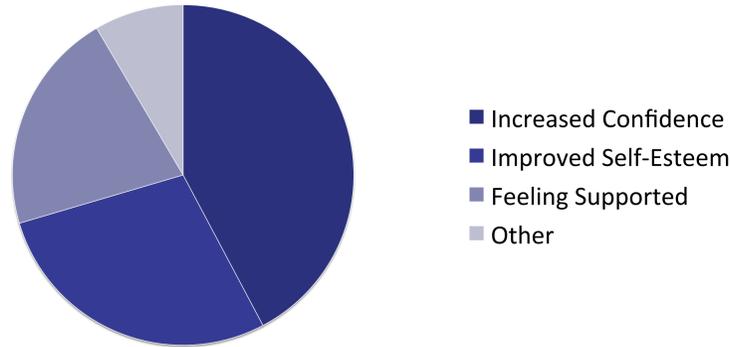
- What was the primary benefit you experienced from working with a Deaf Mentor?

Participants answered the questions by writing a response of no more than 300 words.

Responses were sorted based on similar characteristics as well as key words that were shared between responses.

Perspectives from Hearing Families

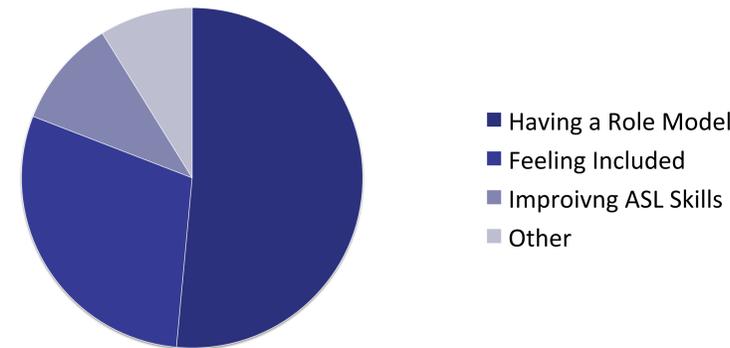
Identified Benefits of Deaf Mentors



“Early intervention visits weren’t so scary anymore, because I knew that I had someone on my side.”

Perspectives from d/Deaf Individuals

Identified Benefits of Deaf Mentors



“As a kid, whenever I felt alone, I reminded myself that there was at least one other person in the world who understood me”

Identified Difficulties

Communication Breakdowns Between Service Providers

In responses to the survey, families described situations in which disciplines contradicted, or even argued with each other. Tension between disciplines was detrimental to the family’s experience working with a Deaf Mentor.

Learning ASL

Families described difficulties accessing ASL courses to continue their education. For some families, their Deaf Mentor was the only educational resource that they were able to access. Limited access to learning ASL led to families feeling insecure about their ability to provide language for their child.

Family Involvement

The third barrier to a successful Deaf Mentor relationship was identified to be family involvement. Like any other language, ASL requires continuous exposure to promote learning and generalization (Mayberry, et. al., 2002). Some families experienced difficulties convincing family members to learn and use ASL.

Discussion & Implications

Overall, families and d/Deaf individuals identified many benefits of working with a Deaf Mentor. Families praised Deaf Mentors for connecting with their family and listening to their priorities. For families, the majority of participants reported increased feelings of confidence when completing therapy homework, interacting with their child in a natural environment, and promoting language exposure and usage in the home. For the majority of d/Deaf individuals the presence of a successful d/Deaf person was the primary benefit of working with a Deaf Mentor. With the Deaf Mentor as their role model, many d/Deaf individuals expressed feelings of confidence in their ability to become successful, regardless of their hearing loss.

In this study, Deaf Mentors provided families and d/Deaf individuals with positive experiences overall. However, more research is needed to determine the efficacy of Deaf Mentor programs across the United States. The families involved identified multiple difficulties that they encountered when working with Deaf Mentors. Further research and education is needed to determine the best way to facilitate collaboration among disciplines and provide solutions to the identified difficulties. Further research is also needed to investigate the benefits of having a Deaf Mentor after early intervention services are completed.

Deaf Mentor programs are demonstrating success in supporting families through the early intervention process as well as the acquisition of ASL.

Selected References

- Hamilton, B. (2017). *The deaf mentor program: Benefits to families and professionals*. Lamar University-Beaumont.
- Mayberry, R.I., Lock, E., & Kazmi, H. (2002). Linguistic and early language exposure. *Nature* 417,(6884), 38-38. <https://doi.org/10.1038/417038a>
- Petersen, A., Kinoglu, S., Gozali-Lee, E., & MartinRogers, N. (2016). Lifetrack’s deaf mentor family program. wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/LifetrackDeafMentorProgram_8-16.pdf

Limitations

I had targeted individuals from across the country however, my included participants were from limited regions of the country and did not represent the nation as a whole. Further research is needed to determine efficacy of Deaf Mentor programs and best practice for their implementation.