

Gabrielle Hill is the mother of three children, the boys Christian and Dylan are both profoundly Deaf. The boys use Auslan as their first language. Watching their language acquisition and road to literacy inspired Gabrielle to study, gaining a BADipEd majoring in Linguistics. This paper is a personal journey with many delightful anecdotes, strategies and stories relating directly to the boys' early language and literacy development.

This talk is a snapshot, albeit a glossy one into our lives with two profoundly Deaf children. It is from a mother's perspective and highlights the very significant people who worked with me on both the boys' road to literacy. This paper is not an academic work, or intended to set myself apart from other parents. Rather I struggle, like all parents with Deaf children and will share some of these experiences with you. I have sought permission from all adults and children mentioned in this paper to tell some of their stories.

Literacy is our connection to the world, a tool to express our ideas, to meet our needs, to conduct business and to share a common language with all the intricacies that that involves. Deafness posed a huge challenge to me as a mother - all that was familiar such as reading stories aloud, singing nursery rhymes, telling jokes; in fact thirty two years of experience with spoken language was null and void.

My early advice was mixed and conflicting. The first woman involved in the early intervention advised me not to meet a Deaf person. This made me determined to meet a Deaf person and ultimately lead me to two Deaf home visitors Mary, and Bev. They were my lifeline, and I began learning New Zealand sign language (NZSL) as the boys were born in New Zealand.

My son Christian, (CJ) and I had well established communication, which included eye contact, pointing, smiling, laughing and a very strong loving bond. These visitors built on these language prerequisites and gave my first son, in his first year of life, an introduction to a native sign language. Prior to Bev arriving on the scene, CJ had started inventing his own signs, such as an iconic looking sign for door.

Therefore I believed in my little baby, expressing himself in a different way. We followed his lead and changed our life to become a signing family. Mary and Bev's visits gave CJ much confidence, and connected him with the world. His language flourished along with his cognitive, emotional and psychosocial development. CJ pointed at things a lot. I would always follow his lead show him things and then we would both burst into a spontaneous grin. Bonding was also very strong with his father and older sister.

Bev had progressively gone deaf so we were able to communicate quite well with speech and my basic signing. Bev introduced numerous stories, signs, and strategies which helped us all, including my older hearing daughter Louise. I credit Bev with my daughter's strong and dedicated ability to communicate with her two brothers, with this superb early start. Bev was family orientated and non-patronising. Together we rejoiced over CJ's new signs and approximations.

Bev worked closely with Mary, our other Deaf home visitor. They were incredible. They made signing books on video, and Mary patiently taught me NZSL. Mary also taught me the importance of facial expression. I still remember Mary with her theatrics. We had plenty of laughs as I learnt to use more expression with my sign language.

I believe literacy sits on a foundation of love, an acceptance of deafness and holding a strong belief that your child will succeed. Your child forms beliefs about themselves based on your attitudes and other peoples' attitudes towards them. A secure base is imperative. Many learning theories demonstrate that the most successful learning comes from a base of intrinsic motivation, where the child feels good about their identity, has a natural curiosity, which when

fostered, leads to learning and success. This security is initially nurtured by the child's parents, caregivers and extended family.

Our next angel in the house was Sonia. A Deaf girl from a prominent Auckland Deaf family. Sonia acquired NZSL at home with her Deaf parents and her sister. She was 14 nearly 15 the same age my daughter is now. I admired her confidence, her tremendous sense of humour and her stability. She would take CJ and Louise to the park, boost CJ's and our language and made us feel so good about ourselves. Deafness under these circumstances seemed natural and easy. Even though my language was still pretty basic we managed to have some great conversations, and lots of jokes. This was invaluable for us because we could see a really happy, secure, highly literate and successful teenager. - Our own aim for our son. Sonia is now studying at Galladet University and her sister is a Deaf teacher of the Deaf.

Sonia was a great inspiration to us, her intelligence and her worldly maturity for a young girl, we were really blessed with her wisdom. Sonia fitted in so well with our family we even took her away with us once on holidays to Rotorua. There were some really key elements here, we had linguistic role models in the house, supporting and encouraging the whole family.

At about this point our second son was born, another beautiful baby boy. "Your son has perfect hearing", the audiologist told Louise and myself at his hearing test when Dylan was one month old. We knew we could have had another Deaf baby but that didn't concern us, we now had a hearing baby.

CJ was always on my mind. His literacy was always my number one concern - unfortunately this anxiety hasn't left me! CJ started pre-school in New Zealand at two years of age with a Deaf volunteer. This was a marvellous opportunity, especially with a new baby. My now ex-husband got itchy feet, and as he is from Sydney, we talked about returning to Australia. I liked the look of Thomas Pattison School and so we decided to return to Sydney.

Funny but our second son was starting to act very much like a Deaf child. He started signing "daddy". I watched him as he signed it over and over looking very pleased with himself - was he deaf? Yes. The audiologist had made a mistake. - On re-examination of the Auditory Brainstem Response it was admitted that a mistake had been made. Dylan was now one year old and was also profoundly Deaf. I had thought those tests were infallible, but obviously not!

Life was now definitely in top gear as we got ourselves re-established in Sydney. CJ settled into Roberta Reid bilingual, bicultural preschool and we were enrolled in the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children's home visiting programme. This was fabulous - we were visited by some excellent people and this was a great support. Dylan eventually followed in his brother's footsteps and started at Roberta Reid Preschool.

There they both established and have maintained strong friendships with other Deaf children, giving them one of life's richest opportunities - to share and to grow together. They do not feel isolated, lonely, undervalued or excluded. They bounce off each other emotionally, mentally, socially and quite literally physically. They now even have a Deaf soccer team thanks to their manager Sean Sweeney.

At pre-school I met Chevoy Brown who also had a Deaf son, Jarrod. Ironically, Chevoy was already a professional Australian sign language interpreter. Jarrod was a phenomenal signer, a lively peer and a brilliant language role model for my two sons. Chevoy was a great support and teacher, and helped myself and other parents with signing skills and confidence in our signing.

Chevoy showed me how to sign in Auslan one of my favourite books, "Alexander's Outing", by Pamela Allen. I very timidly offered to sign it to Jarrod, who at three years old was an

extremely bright and alert child. Jarrod sat up attentively watching me as I somewhat nervously began to sign the story. I signed the first page where Alexander and his brothers and sisters were following the mother duck, when I got tapped on the arm and asked quite seriously with all the naivety of child, "Which were the brothers and which were the sisters"? I was flummoxed. How did I know which were the brothers and which were the sisters!! I was expecting a question, probably something I couldn't answer, but not on the first page!

This demonstrated that Jarrod was aware that the brothers and sisters were separate to the main character, Alexander, and separate to the mother. This indicated an understanding of family groupings, a sense of belonging and gender difference. Jarrod had followed the sequence of the story by joining all these concepts, and had the confidence to interrupt. His turn taking was well established, knowing this would be no threat to his story continuing. It is easy to assume that a Deaf child is somehow missing details and that they may not have a grasp of the finer points, subplots, settings, character development etc. Jarrod certainly was not missing anything because he had a strong language base which was completely age appropriate.

Most hearing parents wonder how their Deaf child will achieve high levels of understanding when the parent is working in a second language. The first way is to make a complete fool of yourself. Children love it when you pull faces and use plenty of expression and dramatics. Expression underpins Auslan. Consequently signing Deaf children will read the tone of your face and other peoples' quite accurately for their emotions. They also easily perceive at quite a young age if a person, familiar to them, or a stranger to them, can be bothered to make an effort to communicate with them or not.

Start children with easy naming books. Initially children identify mainly with books that align directly with their lives, such as books about other babies and commonly used items. These books involve a lot of nouns. For a Deaf child especially, this involves a lot of pointing to familiar things such as nappies, dollies, spoon, fork, doggy, mum, dad etc. This is essential for children to begin to build a vocabulary around these familiar everyday items. Pointing is a really important aspect of sign language, and among other things gives children a lot of confidence and security with objects in their everyday world.

Good quality literature is really important. Quality children's literature is complex in its range of characters, settings and plot, although this is not always immediately apparent. The story usually has some sort of complication, a resolution or a moral. I would always read a book first to determine if it had the right qualities before I attempted to sign it to the boys. The first and most important quality a book needs is lots of action. Even if you don't know all the signs you can dramatise the action and children love this.

Action means lots of verbs. Children love exciting verbs and they can also identify with these. Take Alexander for example there is walking, straying, daydreaming, disobeying, which ultimately results in Alexander falling down into a pipe and then his eventual release. It also shows what all the other people in the park are doing around Alexander. Who, what, where, and why are very easy signs to use, and these signs are well used by young Deaf children.

Choose books that have some relevance, e.g. you can take children to the Archibald fountain in Hyde Park where Alexander's Outing is set. I did go to these lengths and this could also be combined with a visit to the Australian Museum.

Museums are a fabulous place for Deaf children, they are usually interactive and concrete. Children can read the information bullets, or you can point to the display and then to the information so that they can make the correspondence themselves. Some museums cater specifically for children such as the Australian children's museum at Merrylands. Also the Rocks have interactive activities organized in the school holidays. These often need to be organized well in advance. The Schoolhouse Museum at North Ryde is also fantastic and

interactive. These visits need to be organized through your school. The children can actually see how children learnt, and under what conditions over 100 years ago.

As they get older you can choose books that deal with major life events such as “Old Pig”, by Margaret Wild. This is a gorgeous story. Again I wasn’t completely confident in my signing of this story as it has many complex concepts in this book. However, at the end of the story Dylan let out a huge gasp and just burst into tears. Yes he had received the message without any shadow of a doubt that the old pig had indeed died. This book would be good to use if you were expecting, or had had a death in the family.

I remember a very strange comment that was made to me when CJ was three years old by a senior teacher at another service. “Don’t teach him to write, because he will have nothing to do when he starts school”. I was absolutely flabbergasted. My son wanted to write and surely this would only be of benefit to him. When the boys were three and five respectively I started University to study Linguistics as I had become so fascinated with the acquisition of sign language. There my suspicions were confirmed. There are very interesting correlations between reading and writing, in other words they are dependant on one another.

The boys were both early and avid writers. I have kept many of their samples. I believe self-expression in writing gave them tremendous confidence and ultimately has boosted their literacy. It is interesting both began not only writing their own names, but those also of their Deaf friends. Dylan could reproduce his list of friends independently i.e. without copying at three years of age. He even adopted a brother. His friend “Will” became “Will Hill”. I have witnessed that this strong sense of brotherhood and Deaf culture starts very early, as they organize their own sense of identity through their Deaf peers.

Dylan was a very easy child and quite self-contained. He loved to potter in the garden and on a few occasions I noticed that he would totally escape into his own world, signing away to himself, completely oblivious to the outside world. Vygotsky called this private speech. In this case of course it is “private sign”, and is again a very important stage of language and psychosocial development for young children.

I had definitely not forced them along, but there were always pencils, paper and plenty of books available. Both boys were also excellent at reading environmental print, and Dylan was reading ice cream signs and then signing ice-cream very optimistically, very early. I would always point out environmental signs. The train network is excellent for this, and I have always pointed out information on the overhead screens, the static time boards and timetables. In fact we were on a train once, CJ was four years old and he pointed to Macquarie Fields and signed “University”. Well I was staggered. “Yes I said that is the same name, but it is a different place”, and CJ nodded knowingly.

I had cooked homemade hamburgers one night for dinner and CJ rushed off with such urgency down the hall. He returned with a big “M” that he had drawn on a piece of paper. He then proceeded to tape the paper to the table. We were having McDonald’s for dinner according to CJ. We seized this opportunity, acknowledged his efforts and signed as much as we could about his imaginary experience.

Language opportunities are never-ending and the best are those where the motivation levels are high. These include planning a birthday party from start to finish. There are numerous details such as an invitation list, party food, looking at recipes, choosing a cake to make, making shopping lists, shopping for the food and baking. Christmas is also a wonderful opportunity with letters to Santa and a wish list. Dylan at 4 years of age wrote on an envelope, “Dylan Nintendo” and gave it to his father Peter. He was well aware of the power of print, and the

vulnerability of his parents. He did not however receive that gift, but he nevertheless had a good try.

Another mum Lyn was working very hard with her Deaf son Olwyne. Lyn told me that she used a combination of gesture and finger spelling to bridge the gap between her first language English and Olwyne's first language Auslan. Lyn reports that these strategies have now given Olwyne strategies to use in his life with hearing people. Lyn also labelled everything at home, and they used home signs for things that they were unsure of, and fingerspelt most other nouns that they didn't know signs for. Lyn also photocopied signs out of a sign language dictionary and pasted these onto the Macquarie First Dictionary.

Interestingly a lot of the words that Lyn pasted signs next to were verbs. Instinctively Lyn had labelled the concrete items at home, the nouns, and was now teaching Olwyne the verbs. This is the beginning of the order of language, or syntax, were they were both joining sentences in a sort of English Auslan fashion.

Lyn and I both agree quality sign language instruction that is accessible, is fundamentally important for hearing parents. These classes are now available, as Lyn as I lobbied for these, however, parents need to attend for these classes to continue to be provided.

At home, educational activities are very important such as jigsaws, other puzzles, UNO, monopoly, cluedo, scrabble, yahtzee, fish, memory games, ordinary playing cards etc. All these activities assist children with their literacy and some help develop vocabulary. Join mailing lists so they can see their name in print, frequent flyer programmes, if you are lucky enough to belong, the Art Gallery, the local Council's holiday programmes, Museums, the Deaf Society etc. Make friends with your local librarian, she will keep you informed of school holiday events and help you find captioned videos and wonderful books.

I once submitted Dylan's drawing of a giraffe after a visit to the zoo to Parent Council for Deaf Education and they printed it on the front cover of Sound News. Dylan was then three years old and had copied the giraffe off the front cover of the Good Weekend magazine. Again he was making links - giraffe zoo. Dylan saw it the publication recently, and at eight years of age was quite chuffed with it.

I realize my sons were early writers. Some children don't start writing until they start school, even then they need an awful lot of encouragement. This is fine if they progress well after that. I have only emphasized their achievements to illustrate the connections the boys have made with the world, and how they have translated these connections into writing or drawings and how this has affected their literacy outcomes.

These links all place a value on literacy making it important, including them and connecting them to the world. Connections gives children confidence, praise gives children encouragement. Mix this with heaps of repetition, and the magic ingredients, experience, experience, experience and your children will be happy literate and well-balanced. Have fun!