

SOME SOCIAL ASPECTS OF DEAFNESS

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Helen Keller once said: "I am just as deaf as I am blind. The problems of deafness are deeper and more complex, if not more important, than those of blindness. Deafness is a much worse misfortune. For it means the loss of the most vital stimulus—the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir, and keeps us in the intellectual company of man."(1)

There is considerable truth in these few lines. Deafness strikes deep in the social roots of the individual who is so handicapped.

It is the purpose of this paper to present to you briefly some of the social aspects of deafness; this is with particular reference to the deaf as distinguished from the hard-of-hearing. To differentiate between these, the hard-of-hearing are those in whom the sense of hearing, although defective, is functional with or without a hearing aid; the deaf are those in whom the sense of hearing is nonfunctional for the ordinary purposes of life. The term "deaf and dumb" is no longer used as too frequently it implies stupidity which is not true of the group. Neither is the term deaf-mute an acceptable designation. The child who has been deaf from an early age does not speak because his deafness prevents the acquisition of speech in the normal imitative manner. Organically his organs of speech are normal. Deaf babies cry, coo, and babble, much as other babies do. While the average deaf child can be taught speech, he does not acquire it unless he is given special instruction.

Deafness not only acts as a barrier to speech but blights the child's language. The little hearing child hears words repeated scores of times and early begins to link these words to objects or actions. In place of language a system of crude gestures is built up for the deaf child. These are necessary for the child to make his wants known. The means of communication is so limited that it seriously retards his progress. Explanations are difficult to make and are seldom or inadequately made. Parents finding that they cannot reason with the child or make explanations, give him what he wants. Of course if he doesn't get it, he frequently resorts to tantrums. The gestures used generally relate to the child and not to others. This tends to make his world a self-centered one, with little consideration for others.

While some parents indulge their deaf children as far as they possibly can, others err in the other extreme by punishing them for misbehavior that resulted from a lack of understanding on the part of the child.

It is apparent that little deaf children must experience a feeling of frustration in not being able to express themselves or inquire into the how, what, who and why of the world about them.

Such characteristics have been commented on by others. I refer you to Brunschwig, "A Study of Some Personality Aspects of Deaf Children,"(2) and also Ewing and Ewing "The Handicap of Deafness."(3)

It is perhaps worthy of mention here of the weary and often painful rounds on which these children are taken in the hope that their hearing will be restored. Frequently after the family physician has attended them for some time they are referred to an otologist. Though the otologist may tell the parents that the child is irrevocably deaf they continue to go from doctor to doctor, to charlatan and quack, administering pills, salves and worthless nostrums. Two or three years ago we had a boy return to school with a box full of pills to restore his hearing. There were seven different kinds of pills in the box, and he was to take one of each after each meal. While faith cures are not to be regarded as painful experiences, it is not uncommon to have children kept out of school for long periods of time awaiting such cures to take effect.

Unfortunately most parents do not require what they reasonably could of their small deaf children. Swayed by sentiment, they think of them as poor little deaf children who are unable to do anything for themselves. A year ago we had a six-year-old boy enter school whose grandmother still gave him his milk in a nursing bottle. While this is unusual it shows the extent to which "babying" can be carried. Each year we find that a large proportion of our beginning children can neither feed nor dress themselves properly, yet they could easily have been taught these things had their parents approached these problems sensibly. Through a lack of understanding, and proper handling, behavior problems appear and grow unchecked. The mother of one of our small boys, who caused his parents no end of annoyance and despair, told me that she had taken the child to a well known surgeon, and asked him to open up the boy's head to see what made him so mean. At school—after he has settled down from a home visit—he is a nice little fellow.

Paralleling a statement by Druschba (4), it is as true of deaf children as it is of hearing, that they are neither good nor bad originally. The character and behavior problems that arise, come not from their deafness, but from faulty or ineffectual methods of training. It is pertinent to observe at this point that little deaf children whose parents are deaf are quite generally more normal, both in behavior and achievement, than deaf children from hearing families.

When the deaf child reaches school age he comes to another social turning point. Occasionally such children are not sent to school at all; more frequently the parents delay sending them for two, three, or more years. In 1937 we admitted a girl who was then twenty years of age. The girl appeared to be of good mentality but her mother had simply kept her at home. It was on the insistence of a sister that she was finally brought to school. She could not answer such simple written questions as "How old are you?" and "Where do you live?" This girl is now doing work on the level of pupils who have been in school six years and the outlook in her case is good. Sometime ago I received a letter from a woman concerning her deaf sister who was then forty years old. The mother had taken care of her during her lifetime. After the death of the mother, the deaf woman lived with her sister. The letter stated that while she was quite intelligent, she was unable to read or

write. It was evident that she was proving to be an unhappy burden on the family. Of course this woman was beyond the reach of our school. While these are exceptional cases, they show how dependent the deaf are on proper instruction.

Today practically all educable deaf children are sent to some school. It is true that some of them are to be found in the class rooms of regular public schools. This comes about because the parents are either unaware of facilities for special instruction or because they are unwilling to let them go away to school. Through a lack of discernment or indifference on the part of public school authorities they are allowed to remain. Sometimes intelligent deaf children are kept in these classes and both regarded and treated as feeble-minded. Socially their deafness isolates them from other children. Usually their hearing schoolmates ignore them, occasionally they are teased or made the butt of practical jokes. If they remain in a school for the hearing for any length of time, it is a common practice to push them on every year or two without regard to educational achievement. In the last few years several children have come to our State School after having an experience of the type described. One girl, whose father was a member of the local board of education, had been promoted year after year until she reached the eighth grade where she was failed by a teacher who had just come into that school system. The father had had some misgivings over the school promotions of his daughter. These misgivings were not without foundation; we found that the girl's educational level was around the second grade. Socially and educationally maladjusted, children of this type enter our schools for the deaf, literally broken in spirit and with a defeated outlook on life. While there is a sufficient number of these children to justify mention, the percentage of them is small. Most deaf children enter schools for the deaf without long delays.

For the little child who is profoundly deaf there are two principal means of instruction; he may be instructed either orally, or he may be instructed manually. Each of these approaches has its shortcomings as well as its advantages. The social aspects of both are such that they should be discussed here.

The oral approach consists of teaching the child speech and speech-reading (or lip-reading as it is frequently called) and also using this means of communication in regular class-room activities. To appreciate what this involves it is necessary to know something of the procedure.

Speech instruction begins with the teaching of the elementary English sounds, the consonants and the vowels. Some of these are easily taught, others are much more difficult. One of the first consonants taught is H, which is simply an expulsion of the breath through the open glottis. The child readily learns this sound by imitation. Usually the first vowel taught is Italian A or AH. In producing this sound no modification by the lips is necessary; the tongue remains flat in the mouth. Contrary to popular belief, it is not difficult to get voice from a deaf child. Usually they understand by watching the teacher and feeling the vibration in her throat. However the quality of the voice is another matter. The child, not hearing the sound he is producing, may give it in an unnatural and displeasing voice. Considerable

effort is made to obtain a good quality of voice in teaching the first vowel. The development of other vowels and consonants is more difficult, the formation of some of them being quite complex. These are taught in a variety of ways, such as comparing or contrasting them with sounds already learned; by manipulating the child's tongue; or drawing diagrams showing the required position of the tongue and other vocal organs. The child is taught to put these sounds together to form words, to syllabify words and accent them, and to phrase sentences.

The companion of speech is speech-reading. This is developed from a simple beginning. The child is shown some small toys such as a ball, a fish, and a car. The names of these present a dissimilar appearance on the lips and the average child is soon able to select the proper toy by watching the teacher's lips. Speech-reading is gradually extended to include familiar objects and actions. The level of attainment sought by the end of the first year, in the majority of cases, is some 150 nouns and 25 to 35 verbs. These he can recognize by speech-reading, can speak them orally and can write them.

For children who make poor and what is judged inadequate progress orally, some schools provide manual instruction. The manual means of conversation includes the use of the one hand manual alphabet by which words are spelled out letter by letter, A, B, C, D, etc.; it also includes the use of conventionalized signs. Common words may be either spelled or signed, for example, light is spelled (demonstrated) or it is signed (demonstrated), the placement and motion of the fingers, indicating the rays of light. For classroom purposes finger spelling is given decided preference over the use of the sign language.

While the above is a very brief presentation of the oral and manual means of instruction it is probably sufficient to serve as basis for discussing some of their social aspects.

Oralism seeks to make the deaf child a participating member of the hearing world. In this connection one frequently hears the phrase "Make the child normal." The fact that the practical accomplishments of oralism fall considerably short of this ideal does not materially lessen the appeal of such phrases to the majority of parents and the general public. This appeal combined with the desire of parents to have their children live at home and attend a special school, accounts for the large number of day schools for deaf children, all of which are purely oral schools. Oralism occupies a definite and useful place in the socializing of deaf children. The child who becomes adept in speech-reading and achieves clear speech enjoys an advantage over the child who is not so fortunate in these accomplishments. It is a fact, however, that most hearing people would find only a very small percentage of deaf children with understandable speech and good speech-reading. The large majority find conversation with anyone but close acquaintances difficult and will ordinarily resort to pad and pencil. In considering the social aspects of oralism this must be taken into account for it means that the general public will find that conversation with the ordinary deaf person must be carried on by means of pad and pencil. Furthermore, even the few who do have good speech are often reluctant to make use of it in talking to strangers. Some fear that they will mis-

pronounce words. They know of course that hearing people frequently mispronounce words, but fear that their mispronunciations will not be of the ordinary variety. Thus a deaf man may make three syllables of the word Chinese and call it Chin -e-see; there is nothing in the word itself to guide him. Right here, let me say that it does not take much of a defect in speech to distract ordinary listeners; when this happens their attention focuses on the defect rather than on what is being said with the result that the sentence has to be repeated. If the deaf person is sensitive about his speech, he becomes more reluctant to use it in public after a few such experiences. An acquaintance of mine is a capable and intelligent deaf woman. She is an excellent speech reader. Her speech is easily understood and therefore when she was a student in Gallaudet College, the national college for the deaf in Washington, she was frequently called on to address hearing groups. On one such occasion when she was addressing a group of hearing teachers she happened to look down into the front row and see one woman say to another, "It's remarkable, but isn't her voice peculiar?" She said that it took her years to get over that remark.

Speech-reading is regarded by the ordinary individual as something akin to another sense. It is not surprising therefore that usually too much is expected. There are of course the few whose speech-reading ability is amazing and such cases have been dramatized and publicized. Because a man is a good speech-reader, people expect him to be able to sit in a dimly lit church, at a considerable distance from the minister and understand what is said. Several profoundly deaf people have attended Ohio State University. Usually they get very little from the lectures through speech-reading. The instructor paces back and forth, or draws a diagram on the board, explaining it as he draws. Scattered student discussions in large classes are equally impossible to follow. As might be expected under such difficult circumstances, the percentage of deaf people who are able to attend colleges for the hearing is small. Those who do generally have some one take notes for them. Through conferences, assigned readings and reports they are able to cover the courses. The majority of the deaf who attend college go to Gallaudet College, a federally supported institution in Washington, D. C.

Some speech formations are relatively easy to read; others are quite difficult. Because a speech-reader has understood a greeting such as "How are you?" most hearing people assume that he will understand whatever follows it, even if it happens to be a sentence like "It's a nice day, isn't it?" The latter expression will try the best of speech-readers as many of the speech formations involved are not discernible to the eye.

There are numerous other stumbling blocks for the speech reader. About half of the words used in ordinary conversation have other words of similar appearance but different meaning. As an example the following words present practically the same appearance: main, made, mate, bait, bayed, paid, pain, pained, paint, pate. He depends on the context to determine which word has been used. If you were to use the cliché "sweet sixteen," it would be read as such because of the context rather than "sweet sixty," which presents the same appearance.

Another pitfall for the speech-reader is the effect of modulation, which he misses entirely. By modulating the voice we can change the whole thought of a sentence.

It must be remembered that speech movements are fast, some of them are concealed and the differences between many of them are fine. Furthermore, no two people speak alike. Placed in a group of hearing people, the speech-reader finds himself at a decided loss, because of the rapid shifts in conversation and the fact that he must pay close attention to get what any one of them is saying.

In spite of these difficulties speech-reading is of inestimable value and the social advantages apparent. In our schools for the deaf these social and educational advantages are given full consideration. Speech and speech-reading can be of real value to an individual even though he may not be able to converse with every stranger through these media. If oral conversation is sufficiently intelligible for home and school use it is of practical value. Through it a child becomes a participating member in the life of a hearing family. The probability is greater, at least in most cases, that his parents will talk to him in complete and connected sentences. Otherwise the tendency is to write or laboriously spell out with the manual alphabet clipped phrases or single words. Generally speaking, hearing parents do not acquire a facile use of the manual alphabet or the sign language. This matter of unrestricted conversation in the home is an important factor in the child's acquisition of language, which is a major problem with deaf children.

Educationally there is a sharp difference of opinion as to the extent to which oral training should be pursued. Some schools hold that all deaf children should be orally taught and offer nothing but oral work in their schools. Generally these schools contend that a child will progress as satisfactorily by oral means as by any other; if they make poor progress in an oral class, their progress will in any case be poor and the end values of oral training will be of greater value.

Other schools hold that while oral instruction is both desirable and advisable in the majority of cases, that there is, never-the-less, a sizable number of children for whom it is not a practical approach to either their educational or social problems. The majority of the residential schools for the deaf in the United States are in this group. These schools offer both oral and manual types of instruction, that is they have classes that are orally instructed and classes that are manually instructed. They contend that when it is clearly demonstrated that a child's speech-reading ability is so inadequate that he can get only random words and his speech is unintelligible, even to those who know him well, then it is time to substitute some other means of communication. Of the two considerations, more weight is given to his speech-reading ability. In such cases these children are transferred to classes that are manually instructed. For instructional purposes the manual alphabet is given preference over the sign language because it involves extensively the use of language. While the sign language can be used to convey ideas it does little for the individual in terms of a reading or writing vocabulary. A person may know a number of signs without being able to manually spell or read the written equivalent of a single

one of them. A few years ago an illiterate deaf woman called at our school. While she could neither read nor write she could carry on an intelligent conversation through the medium of the sign language. For the child who sits bewildered in an oral class, the manual class, through the use of the one-hand alphabet, provides an easily understood means of communication. These schools hold that they will educate children orally if possible; if it is found impractical to do so, further insistence will defeat both educational and social purposes.

The oralistic view-point is that through speech and speech-reading the social field of the deaf person is so widened as to bring him into normal or at least more acceptable relationship with the hearing world; the manualistic viewpoint grants that this is true in some cases but contends that since free social relationship with the hearing world is denied to the majority of deaf people, because of the inadequacy of their speech and speech-reading, they are automatically isolated from the hearing. Therefore, they believe that the social field, in such cases may best be enlarged through the medium of the manual alphabet and the sign language, for it brings normal relationships within the group, whereas none would be possible otherwise.

Manual conversation is a mixture of signs and finger-spelling. Signs are used for the common words; finger-spelling for proper names, technical or unusual words, and sometimes short words. The speed of manual conversation is only slightly less than that of normal speech. For a sizable group of the deaf it is a living and fluid means of communication; it gives spontaneity to their social events and is a necessary part of their lives. As it is clearly distinguishable at a distance, it is used for lectures, sermons, and plays. It is commonly used at social gatherings of the deaf. At any such gathering may be found a number who have had oral training but for social purposes, find fuller participation and greater social satisfaction in group activities through the medium of signs and finger-spelling.

With respect to both the oral and manual methods of communication it must be remembered that each has its function and each contributes to the happiness of a large group.

The acquisition of language is a major problem for the deaf. From childhood through adult life they struggle with the idioms and irregularities of the English language. A little girl who had gone home for the summer wrote of the good time she was having. In her letter she said: "I am hot water in the face," which was her way of saying that it was warm and her face was covered with perspiration. Not hearing words and phrases used countless times, it is not surprising that the deaf are at a disadvantage. The fine distinctions made in language are difficult for them, hence they may express themselves rather bluntly. The peculiarities in the written language of a deaf man attract more attention than the grammatical mistakes of a hearing man. Because of these peculiarities in English, hearing people sometimes underestimate the deaf individual. However, language difficulty is undoubtedly one of the most burdensome concomitants of deafness and its effect is more profound than is generally realized.

One of the commonest misconceptions about deaf children is that

they are a morose and unhappy group. This concept is fundamentally untrue. The little deaf child is isolated and feels it when in the company of little hearing children. He is naturally bored and unsocial in such circumstances. Brought to school and associated with other deaf children he is soon a happy and participating member of the group. These children meet on an equal footing and in the give and take relationships, self-reliance is developed. School life with its more normal associations brings about a change from a self-centered little child to a more social individual. Under such conditions many of the pre-school behavior problems disappear. It is frequently observed by teachers who have taught both deaf and hearing children that as a group the deaf children are better behaved. Recently a hearing survey (5) was made in the Boys' Industrial School. In over 700 cases we found not one profoundly deaf boy and only the normal incidence of hearing defects. From this it appears that hearing disturbances do not precipitate gross behavior problems.

Schools for the deaf, like schools for the hearing, have children who in mentality range from superior to dull. While Pintner (6) places the I. Q. of the deaf as being close to 80, on the average, the fact remains that it is much more difficult to establish I. Q.'s in the case of the deaf than in the case of the hearing. From the standpoint of adjustment and ability, it is significant that the adult deaf population is largely self-supporting. With the exception of those who teach in schools for the deaf, very few enter any of the professions. Occupationally, large numbers of them are to be found in the skilled and semi-skilled trades with good industrial and employment records.

In this day of governmental benefits for various classes, it is noteworthy that the deaf neither seek nor want pensions for their group as such. In this state they maintain and manage their own home for the aged and infirm deaf. They resent any gesture of charity. Beggars professing deafness are almost always impostors. The deaf make good citizens and contribute to the general welfare. They neither feel, nor want others to regard them as an unfortunate group.

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