

IN PRAISE OF SIBLINGS

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The understatement of my life could be that “all kids are different.” Give my daughter a set of watercolors and brushes, and she’s happy all afternoon. Her brother’s idea of fun with paint involves camouflage, a CO-2 cartridge with a case of 500 high velocity pellets and a semi-automatic paintball gun. I should have seen this coming when my eldest first wielded his pork chop bone like a Walther PPK during Sunday dinner at the tender age of two. Only three men I know use a pork chop bone like that, and I gave birth to two of them (and married the third). Either brother would lay his life down for his sister, assuming she hadn’t gotten on his nerves that day.

But this is not a story about the usual gender distinctions. This is a story of the bigger differences between my kids—one who is deaf (now 18 years old), and two who are hearing (14 and 9, respectively, at the time of this writing). The deaf one has received a lot of attention, understandably. At a sibling workshop I recently attended, the other parents and I wrung our hands with concern about the effect this will have on our hearing kids. That said, deaf kids are siblings, too. One day they’ll be in a workshop recovering from the effects of growing up with hearing brothers and sisters! Will you all survive each other?! Existing research says almost nothing on the topic, and there isn’t a plethora of helpful news anecdotally. So I have decided to add to the literature myself. This is a chance for me to say thank you to Dakota and Makena for all they’ve taught their parents and their deaf brother...their big brother and protector, Dane.

DAKOTA: SHOCK AND AWE

My second son Dakota, or “Kody” as he’s usually called, would take me to task over that last sentence. Rather than enjoying the protection *of* his older brother (a varsity wrestler and football linebacker), Kody, who is four years younger and slender built, would say he’s usually needed protection *from* Dane. Indeed, it is part of our family lore that Kody’s first word was “ouch,” inspired in a most direct manner by his brother. While Kody never gained the upper hand physically, his words eventually packed the wallop his fists lacked. In a strange, symbiotic twist to the old maxim that lacking one of your senses strengthens those that remain, Dane’s inability to easily communicate in the hearing world served to empower his brother’s tongue—Kody’s vocabulary grew like biceps. And he’s been working out daily for 14 years now. (Be afraid.) Last June, he spent two weeks at an invitation-only trial lawyer summer camp at Johns Hopkins University, giving his parents some much-needed validation that he intends to use his power for good, not evil.

So I thank Kody dubiously for the early modeling of a fully-developed arsenal of muscle mouth and trash talk for Dane, who sorely needed it. Even I, his gentle mother, knew I’d failed Dane miserably in this regard when all he had to sling back at the third grade bully was, “You’re a rainbow nose!” (I’m not making this up.) Years of careful, intentional language and speech training flashed before my eyes as I watched Dane—full of hurt and defiance—defend himself as best he could with his parent/teacher taught and approved vocabulary. Not even our Deaf mentor (a.k.a., Henri...adopted as brother/uncle by the Seaver family) had anticipated this.

The realization of how much children learn *incidentally* about language use, relationship dynamics, and the human condition is an evolving one for most hearing parents of deaf children. We have to contrive situations to demonstrate some of the things that our hearing kids experience far more naturally. But teaching Dane the mastery of insults and fighting words never occurred to me. Or if it had, it was so counter-intuitive that I never genuinely acted on it. Remediation of this material is an unnatural exchange between parent and child. Although the theme presents itself often enough in the normal course of events, hearing children usually have far greater access to it than their deaf sibs. Frankly, if I ever exhausted my supply of expletives in a fit of road rage, I was glad Dane didn't hear it. Meanwhile, sitting next to him in the back seat, Kody was taking in every epithet, polishing it and mounting it in the display case of his mind, ready to wield at a moment's notice.

The "verbal volleyball" match on the school bus, in the lunchroom, during soccer practice, etc... plays out daily with teachable moments for those kids directly involved or even just overhearing what's happening around them. If deaf kids don't have those same opportunities, their access to this specialized communication is limited. This can create a gap in their social learning. (See "*Cognition in the Classroom*," Dr. Brenda Schick, *The Communicator, Hands & Voices, Winter 2004*.) It falls largely to the interaction of siblings and peers to develop the necessary linguistic capacity for argument and negotiation—critical life skills. As Dr. Schick's research on social cognition points out, we adults certainly don't appreciate our children trying out these skills on us. Not to suggest that this has been Kody's only contribution to his brother (far from it), but in retrospect, I've probably not appreciated it as much as I should. The next time I have the urge to clonk their heads together, I promise to stop, breathe deeply, and give thanks for the unique learning environment created by my sons when the fur is flying around our house.

MAKENA: EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE ALRIGHT

My daughter is the mom-whisperer. She has a calming effect on me with her happy-nature and lack of histrionics. Makena's outlook on life puts things in perspective for me. Like the time she told me how poorly she'd done in gym class because she couldn't hold on very long during "crack-the-whip." I could feel my talons stretch. My advocate-brain started analyzing: What kind of game was that for first graders? What if she'd gotten hurt? Did she suffer the humiliation of a long wait while some junior Olympian picked teams? Before I could call the school, her laughter brought me back. Without remorse or self-consciousness, she concluded, "Man, I really stink at that game!" Her ability to laugh at herself is an inspiration to me.

Imagine my surprise when she cried all the way home from our holiday shopping trip to the mall because she discovered that I preferred silver jewelry. She liked gold jewelry... and she wanted me to like gold, too. I explained that gold was ok, but I preferred silver. "But you look good in GOLD," she corrected. Yes, I have a few things that are gold, I agreed, but look at my wedding ring—it's silver. Personally, I prefer silver. This went on for a little while, amicably, I thought. Then I noticed tears on her face in the car. When we got home, she ran up to her room and slammed the door, and cried hard into her pillow for five long minutes. She stifled tears all the way to bedtime. "WE ARE DIFFERENT!" she sobbed to me...to the world. Yes, in some ways we are different, but in most ways we are so alike, I reassured her. And it's ok to be different, I added.

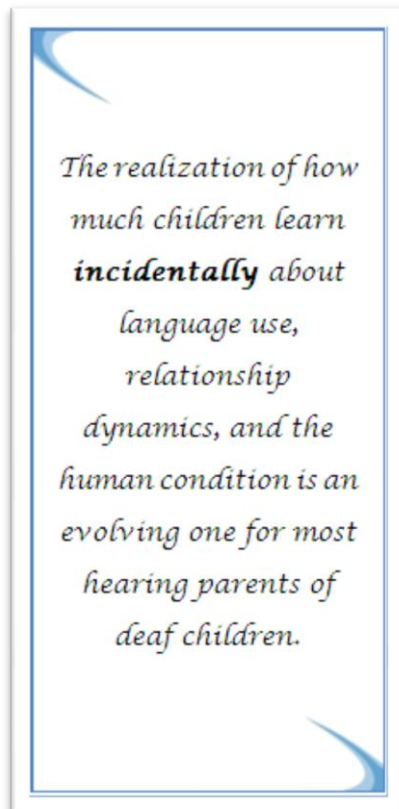
“BUT HOW CAN WE BE DIFFERENT?” she demanded. Nothing I said that evening could un-ring that bell, although I tried my best. In the end, we were different. But this definitely wasn’t about the relative merits of gold vs. silver jewelry. It was about her growing realization that we were indeed different, her fear that growing up would separate her from me...from the security and assurance of her comfortable, predictable childhood. This was a painful, but normal, realization, and a sign of maturation.

When Dane was that age, this process of individuation was just as real, but I’m not sure we recognized it. It presented differently. He was growing in his awareness that he was different from his siblings, mom and dad because he was deaf and we were hearing. It didn’t seem to matter much until early adolescence when he finally raised the topic that was weighing heavy on his mind. Why was he deaf? How come Kody wasn’t deaf? Did I take drugs when I was pregnant with him? WHY WAS HE THE ONLY ONE IN THE FAMILY WHO WAS DEAF? Nothing I said that evening could un-ring that bell, although I tried my best. In the end, we were different. But I wouldn’t know until Makena taught me so nine years later, that this was not just about the status of hearing or deaf. This was also about Dane growing up and becoming more aware of the risk of being an individual.

DEAF IS DIFFERENT

The experience of individuation and the realization of what it means to be an individual who is also deaf can raise lots of unique questions and anxieties if your parents are hearing. For both Dane and Makena, something triggered an awareness of their individuality at a point in their lives when the implications loomed large: *I am not just an extension of my parents, I am different from them. I will not remain in their cocoon forever. I am me. Will I survive?* The answers look different for deaf kids. Hearing parents may find themselves responding at two levels: 1) nurturing the child through the normal process of individuation, and 2) providing a deaf role model who can validate the child’s need to know there is a place in the world for deaf people...that deaf people are valued and respected, that “deaf” is just one of the many diversities among humans in the world. Hearing parents need to convey this message strongly, but it’ll come across more credibly if it’s reinforced by a deaf person him or herself. The life support our family drew from Henri as our deaf mentor/uncle at that time couldn’t possibly be calculated.

So I thank my hearing daughter for reminding me that growing up can be painful at times, and that’s normal. This will be true and typical even for deaf kids. If I had not observed this in Makena, I might not have been able to apply the insight (in hindsight) to Dane. Not to minimize the challenges Dane has faced, but being able to recognize the normalcy of pre-adolescent angst taught me that his pain did not necessarily or exclusively stem from being deaf in a hearing family. That helps.



LISTEN TO ME NOW AND HEAR ME LATER

My kids never read what I write, so I'm pretty safe telling their stories for now. But one day they may read this; Kody may sue me for breach of privacy, and Makena may say, "I used to like *gold*, you're kidding!" This is what I want you to take away from this: You'll never know how grateful your dad and I are to you both. Know that you are loved as deeply and matter as much as your deaf brother. And to Dane, who will be first to launch, I say thanks for letting us practice on you, our firstborn. I hope it wasn't so bad growing up deaf in a hearing family. No words could describe our pride in you all. Remember, you're going to need one another and will appreciate each other more when you're grown up. That's the way it works out for most siblings (you can ask Uncle Jack and Aunt Suzanne). Your differences will make all the difference. Not only will you survive... you'll *thrive*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leeanne Gillespie Seaver, MA, is mom to three kids, including Dane, her eldest son who is profoundly deaf.

She sits on the Advisory Board for the National Center on Low Incidence Disabilities, the American College of Educators/DHH Joint-Together Executive Advisory, the Quality of Life-DHH Research Advisory Board, and for AFB/Bridge Multimedia. She served as a founding Commissioner for the Colorado Commission for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing.

Leeanne's particular interests lie in advocacy and special education law. She worked professionally as a writer and television producer for 20 years, and won a regional Emmy for writer/producer of the 2004/05 "Parents Are the Power" campaign for KUSA in Colorado/Wyoming before joining Hands & Voices National full time in 2006. As Executive Director for Hands & Voices, she hopes to strengthen the voice and presence of the deaf and hard of hearing through an organization that unites all members of this unique community.