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for information and fellowship deaf club eases isolation

By Karen Lindeman

Teachers of deaf students have similar goals, objectives, and needs. We need to meet the academic needs of our students. We need to support families as they make choices about their children's learning. We need to provide ways for our students to meet each other and experience authentic socialization. At the same time, we need to stay informed about the ever-changing fields of cochlear implants, technology, and research. However, for those of us who work in rural areas,

where deaf and hard of hearing students are scattered throughout a variety of programs across a wide geographical area, the most severe challenge we face is that of isolation. I have always worked as a rural itinerant teacher. I served six different school districts in Pennsylvania. I was the only teacher of deaf students in Northern Minnesota. I have worked as an educational interpreter. Today I am the only teacher of deaf students on staff in my district in Chautauqua County, the westernmost county in New York. In this county, each deaf or hard of hearing child not only attends a different school, but each is in a different school district. Isolation is a problem for all of us.

Getting Together The Idea

In 2007, I attended the Educational Support Services Personnel Conference in Buffalo, New York, where I talked with other teachers of deaf



Photos courtesy of Dennis and Leah Lefler

students. We expressed the same concern and the same desire: It was important to get our students and their families together. Shortly after the conference, I contacted the Optimist Club of Jamestown, New York, and discussed the need for a social group that also supported parents and professionals. The club was supportive. The Jr. Deaf Club was created. We identified three main goals:

- To provide deaf and hard of hearing children and their families with a monthly opportunity to socialize;
- To provide a support network for families
- To create a not-for-profit group to apply for financial support to enable our deaf and hard of hearing children to attend national and regional events for deaf students, e.g., summer camps, contests, the science fair at Gallaudet University, the Deaflympics, and visits to St. Mary's School for the Deaf; this group would also enable us to sponsor special events and speakers in our area



Let Them Come! The Implementation

Soon afterward we had our first meeting, and now we meet once a month. Local teachers of deaf students, interpreters, and other professionals organize the meetings. Children of all ages and with a variety of levels of hearing loss come with their families to enjoy the activities and each other. One mother of a child with bilateral cochlear implants said, "He has such a good time running around and talking back and forth [with the other kids]. I like to see him get this chance. There is no one at his school like him."

Since our group began in the summer of 2008, we have had a wide variety of events, including hotdog cookouts, playground visits, bowling games, and swimming parties. In addition, over 30 deaf and hard of hearing adults from the Jamestown, New York and Warren, Pennsylvania Social Deaf, a club that uses two town names since deaf adults travel 30 or more miles to attend, have joined

us to socialize with our students and their families. Several deaf adults have agreed to share with us their stories of growing up.

In addition to providing fun and friendly contacts for the students, the Jr. Deaf Club has benefitted parents, too, as they network with each other and the professional community. The networking is so successful that newly identified babies and families have been invited to our club by local speech therapists. These families never would have met without the group and the meetings, and the experience may prove of special value to them as their children are so very young. One mom with a 16-month-old child said, "When you have a newborn baby who is diagnosed with a hearing loss, you have to come to grips with so many questions and worries before you even get to know your baby. The Jr. Deaf Club gave us reassurance by meeting other children and families who have been simply wonderful."

Another mom noted the affirmation

that the club gave her as the mother of a deaf child. "Other people don't have a clue what it's like to live with a child that can't hear," she said. "People look at me weird for stomping on the floor or flicking a light, but it is just how I get his attention." "It was great to find people that 'get' hearing loss," agreed a third parent.

To encourage and support the parents, our group has become an affiliated member of the American Society for Deaf Children, the national organization founded in 1967 by parents of deaf children. Through partnership with this high quality organization, our families connect with other families across the United States through newsletters and conferences.

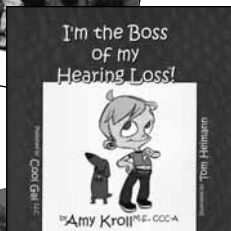
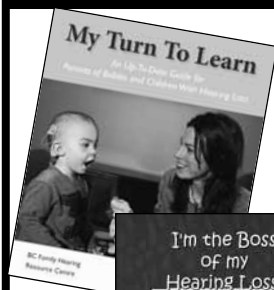
As I sit back and look around the bowling alley, the site of one of our recent gatherings, I see children clustered in one lane signing and chatting. They discuss whose turn it is, offer opinions on good bowling positions, and even dispute over their favorite ball—all without an interpreter. This authentic socialization is priceless, especially when compared to the stiff conversations they endure at school where they are only able to talk with their classmates through an interpreter. As I continue to look around, I see their parents sharing a table in the back, also in easy conversation and companionship. I overhear their

discussion, which moves from audiologists, to insurance, to hearing aids.

As I listen, I am overcome by the success of our small group. Students, parents, and teachers like me have found our Jr. Deaf Club to be a source of information, support, and fellowship. We are not isolated anymore.



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