

Essential Links

Parent Links

Natural Environments for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

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“Communication is at the heart of everything human beings do; it defines and gives meaning to our emotions, beliefs, hopes, creativity, and life experiences. Without communication, a child is lost. The effective development, understanding, and expression of language are fundamental to any educational experience and are particularly crucial for deaf and hard-of-hearing children. Because of their unique communication needs, deaf and hard-of-hearing children are distinct from all other children with disabilities...This distinction is fundamental and separates deaf and hard-of-hearing children from others in the educational world.” Communication Access and Quality Education for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children: The Report of the California Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Education Advisory Task Force, California Department of Education, 1999.

California’s Deaf and hard of hearing community is concerned about the implications of “natural environments” for infants and toddlers who are deaf and hard of hearing. Many deaf and hard of hearing infants are currently served in center-based programs with other deaf and hard of hearing students. These center-based programs provide deaf and hard of hearing infants and toddlers with intensive language intervention and with direct communication access

to staff and peers. Without access to these rich language environments, many deaf and hard of hearing children will suffer communication isolation and language delays that will negatively impact their ability to succeed later in life.

In 1992, the United States Department of Education issued a policy statement regarding Deaf Students Education Services (Federal Register at Fed. Reg. 49274, October 31, 1992), stating “...the communication nature of the disability is inherently isolating, with considerable effect on the interaction with peers and teachers that make up the educational process. This interaction, for the purpose of transmitting knowledge and developing the child’s self-esteem and identity, is dependent upon direct communication. Yet, communication is the area most hampered between a deaf child and his or her hearing peers and teachers. Even the availability of interpreter services in the educational setting may not address deaf children’s needs for direct and meaningful communication with peers and teachers. Because deafness is a low incidence disability, there is not widespread understanding of its educational implications, even among special educators. This lack of knowledge and skills in our education system contributes to the already substantial barriers

to deaf students in receiving appropriate educational services.”

Both California Education Code (E.C. 56345(e), 1994) and IDEA '97 (Sec. 1414(d)(3)(B)(4)) contain special consideration language regarding students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and require the IEP team to consider the unique communication needs of the student when determining what constitutes the Least Restrictive Environment for that child. This special consideration language was necessary in order to protect the right of deaf and hard of hearing children to receive educational services in an environment that provides them with appropriate, direct, and ongoing language access to special education teachers and language mode peers. The requirement that educational services be delivered in the regular education setting unless a “rationale” is written into the IEP to explain why services are provided elsewhere, did not provide adequate assistance and direction to IEP teams in determining Least Restrictive Environments for deaf and hard of hearing students.

It is highly unlikely that the authors of these laws intended that only deaf and hard of hearing children three years of age and older have the right to have their unique communication needs met. Just as it became necessary to write special considerations for deaf and hard of hearing children into both state and federal law, to clarify what constitutes the Least Restrictive Environment for deaf and hard of hearing students ages three to twenty-two, it is important that the same special considerations be taken into account when considering what constitutes a “natural environment” for an infant or toddler who is deaf or hard of hearing. In fact, the Deaf and hard of hearing community has urged the federal government to redefine the term “natural environment” as it applies to these children, rather than requiring the IFSP team to write a justification explaining why services for a deaf or hard of hearing infant or toddler are being provided outside of a

“natural environment”. Both the American Society for Deaf Children and the California Deaf Education Coalition have requested of OSERS that the special consideration language for children who are deaf or hard of hearing be applied to the definition of natural environments for infants and toddlers.


The unique needs of deaf and hard of hearing infants and toddlers were supported by Thomas Hehir, United States Office of Special Education Programs. During the 1999 national teleconference IDEAs That Work, he stated, “Natural environments is not necessarily the home. It can be any number of environments. For instance, once someone asked me if a program that is all deaf children, is working on language development with deaf children, so that deaf children have peers that they can communicate with, is a natural environment. *I would clearly call that a natural environment for those kids under those circumstances.*”

Dr. Alice Parker, California Director of Special Education, has also supported the need to consider the unique communication needs of infants and toddlers who are deaf or hard of hearing. In a letter to Thomas Irvin, OSERS (April 9, 1999), she stated, “For children who are hearing impaired, the acquisition of language is linked to the environment in which they have constant exposure to and interaction with a variety of individuals who are fluent in their language and language mode. This may not be environment ‘in which children without disabilities participate’ but it is the natural environment for the hearing impaired child...We would suggest that the justification that will be written for these children, consider that there are “special factors” such as in 1414(d)(3)(B) of IDEA, that may require some children to be in specialized environments without children who are not disabled and remain in that environment until three years of age. The special factors clause should apply to children with low incidence disabilities under three as well as those children over three”. No environment that is communicatively isolating, and does not pro-

vide a child with the quality and quantity of linguistic input necessary to become linguistically competent, can humanely be considered “natural.” The deaf and hard of hearing community will continue to advocate that both state and federal laws and policies on natural envi-

ronments contain special consideration language regarding the unique communication needs of infants and toddlers who are deaf or hard of hearing.

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