

Take the time to talk to us

My name is Debapriya Ghosh. I am a student at GSS Girls' School in Kolkata. I have written this paper with my friend and the co-author of this paper, Sneha Dasgupta, who studies in Patha Bhavan.

When I was very young, I used a body-worn hearing aid. People who didn't know me were very curious and asked many questions. I resented that. Now I use behind-the-ear hearing aids. They are not easily visible so there are fewer questions from people. Sneha says that people ask questions because they don't know what a hearing aid is. But people don't ask questions about spectacles! This year I moved from B.D. Girls School to GSS Girls School. This is the first time that most of the students here have ever seen a hearing aid so they keep asking, "What are you wearing? Why are you wearing it?" I have to give everyone the same answer, "It's a hearing aid. I have a difficulty in hearing that's why I use it." But I realise the benefits of the hearing aid. I speak well because I have used hearing aids very early in life. If I didn't hear speech, I wouldn't have been able to acquire speech.

I would like to add that whereas a hearing aid does help us to hear, we don't always hear all sounds clearly. This is a problem which leaves us frustrated and disappointed. When a new teacher takes our class, it is often difficult to understand what is being said. Friends do help but sometimes they get annoyed. Even my best friends say, "Tell your mother to call me and I'll explain to her. I'm busy now. I have my own work to do."

It is difficult to follow a conversation when 2 or 3 people are involved. When my parents speak to each other, I find it difficult to follow them. My brother understands them perfectly but I require someone to explain the conversation to me, before I can make sense from it. In the same way, when

my friends chat with each other, I am unable to join them because I can't understand them clearly. But when friends talk to me one at a time I enjoy the conversation because I can understand what is being said. When my parents or friends have long conversations, I want to know what they are talking about. They explain the long dialogue to me in just two or three sentences and I feel very unhappy, I know I am missing something.

Sneha pointed out that we find it difficult to hear clearly when watching television or seeing a play in an auditorium. When children perform on stage, we can hear the various sounds in the environment but cannot hear speech sounds clearly. When someone calls us from a distance, or in a noisy environment, we may not hear and therefore do not respond. People do not understand this. Once one of Sneha's friends called out to her several times from a distance. Sneha didn't respond because she hadn't heard her friend's call. The friend was very upset as she thought that Sneha was ignoring her.



Parties and weddings can be very embarrassing for us. People talk together and there's so much sound everywhere that we can't hear anything clearly. We have never really thought about these

difficulties, but have just been trying to cope. Some of our friends, too, have some difficulties, but we study together, play together and are growing up together. Apart from studies, I paint and swim. Sneha learns - odissi, an Indian classical dance form. We have no difficulty at all in participating in these activities.

Sneha and I talked to our mothers about our difficulties. They said that everyone has some difficulty or the other. The important thing is to overcome that difficulty and move ahead. They also said that we need to talk about these problems to create awareness about the difficulties that persons with disabilities may have. We can sensitise the community and the society at large about our strengths and the challenges that we face and how we eventually overcome these.

Debapriya Ghosh and Sneha Dasgupta are young deaf girls studying with hearing children in regular schools.

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VAANI, Deaf Children's Foundations newsletter for families of deaf children

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Introduction

A village school teacher decided to pay a visit to a pupil's house. Very excited to see him approaching the house, a little boy ran to get a gift to greet him with. He picked up a knife and chopped off a branch of a flowering plant. The mother, who saw the boy from her kitchen window, was furious with the boy for wrecking the plant, and rushed out to reprimand the child. The child was completely bewildered at the punishment being meted out by his mother, as all he was doing was welcoming his teacher. This little boy was deaf. He had not been able to yell out an explanation, and the mother, not knowing how to communicate with her child, had not understood. Misunderstandings like this happen very often in the daily life of a deaf child. Even with a lot of patience and willingness to know more, parents are not able to communicate with their own deaf children, because they do not know how to. No one has explained to them, or given them information, to understand the complexities of deafness as a disability, so they do not know how to help their children to communicate or develop language. A majority of deaf children grow up isolated within their families, as their emotional and social needs are ignored. Without proper nurturing, these children could grow up to become adults with many unresolved issues, unhappy and insecure.



This issue of Lakshana looks at issues around the emotional and social needs of deaf children. VAANI, Deaf Children's Foundation was earlier known as IDCS-India.



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VAANI, Deaf Children's Foundation
9D, Annapurna Apartments, 68, Ballygunge Circular Road, Kolkata-700 019, W. Bengal, India
Phone: 22892705/22892706, Email: vaani@vaani.in, Web: http://www.vaani.in

Social and emotional needs of deaf children

by Ms. Hasyalatha Mehta

The social and emotional needs of deaf children are the same as those of any other child but they may be realised in a different manner. Deaf children require the same things that hearing children do, although the means and process of providing/satisfying these may be different.

All children need love, acceptance, appreciation, a sense of belonging and feeling of security to grow up as self confident individuals. Control over their environment, guidance and independence are also equally important as the child grows. Primary groups such as the family, classmates, peers and friends in school, neighbours and teachers play an important role in the satisfaction of these needs. Interaction is the basis and medium through which these needs are realised.

Just as a seed grows into a plant only if it receives suitable soil, right amount of sunlight and water at the right time and proper care, a deaf child can grow into a self-confident, happy, courageous individual with a positive attitude, on receiving the right combination of the above. What is important is the right balance and combination. Often one finds a deaf child is over-protected or there is over-indulgence by parents resulting in limited exposure or lack of discipline.

It is important for the child to feel loved without any conditions and he accepted as a child with hearing impairment. Often parents have difficulty in accepting that their child is one with a disability and they are embarrassed by the child in public. All this has a negative impact on the child's personality development and self-image.

A sense of belonging is central to a deaf child's emotional well being. The child needs to get the feeling of being an important member of the family, a participating and valued member of the peer group, an individual wanted and liked by others. A child requires acceptance and appreciation by different groups for e.g. being part of a group of children playing cricket in the neighbourhood or class mates in the school.

In actual practice, many deaf children, though physically present in the groups do not feel part of the group or belong to the group in the true sense because of their communication problems. Their inability to hear and speak, inadequate language development limit their information and interaction. Deaf children often have difficulty in mixing with hearing children.

All of us need to feel secure, especially in child hood, with the reassurance that if one falls there are people to give us support to stand up again. Often even the parents fail to understand what the deaf child feels or wants to say because

of communication problems. In spite of their conscious effort, a deaf child may feel lonely and apart within the family itself. According to an estimate 80% of hearing parents have never learnt to communicate with their deaf children.

All the children need some independence and some dependence which should be induced by the parents. Parents need to make children understand their limits, powers, the difference between good - bad, responsibilities, do and donts, expected behaviors and norms of acceptable behaviour and others' likes and dislikes. The child will then be in a better position to take a proper decision and take on the challenges of life and face the world. It is of utmost importance that the parents should understand the necessity of developing a proper communication system with the child.

A strong need of the deaf child is to belong to the deaf community and be a part of the hearing world. This can be achieved by training the child in total communication, enabling the child to mix well with hearing children of the same age, and providing the child with lots of opportunities for different types of experiences. This can help the deaf child develop into a self- confident individual.

Hasyalatha Mehta is a professional with many years of experience in working with families of children with disabilities. She is one of VAANI's very valuable consultants



Learn to communicate with us

by Ms. Joyeeta Ganguly

My name is Joyeeta Ganguly. I lost my hearing at the age of five after an attack of encephalitis. My parents and the rest of my family helped to bring me up. I have passed my school leaving examinations with a lot of support from my

parents, friends and teachers. By the time, I had learnt lip-reading. I was a student of two classical dance forms – Bharatanatyam and Rabindra Nritya. I am also a member of The Action Players, a group made up of children, both deaf and hearing. I started doing a computer course at the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy, Kolkata. There I had very supportive teachers and apart from my course, I also learnt many things that girls of my age should know - things like self-respect, self-confidence and the ability to take care of myself.

It was when I became an adolescent that I started feeling left out and the fact that I had a "Disability" was pointed out more often. Later, on entering the job world, I realised that hearing people are apprehensive about our capabilities. They are not ready to give us a chance. Currently, I am working with "SILENCE" – an NGO working with deaf persons, in their export and data entry departments.

I can do many things. I can travel by that metro, tram, bus, taxi, etc., but I also use a special identity card issued by the Government for persons with disabilities. I also know many people do not understand my words, because my speech is not very intelligible. Therefore, I always carry an exercise book with me and when people do not understand what I'm saying, I write it out.

I can do everything that hearing people can do. However, I do have difficulty in understanding what people say, especially when they speak fast. When many people talk at the same time I do not understand everything, so I ask them to repeat what they have said. Very often they are impatient and do not want to take the trouble to tell me or they tell me very briefly. This makes me angry with them.

Sometime when a group of people are talking and a deaf person enters, they immediately stop talking. This makes the deaf person suspicious. If people discussed matters with us, we would not feel left out and our relationships would stay healthy.

I feel that if some of the people with whom we have to interact frequently either at home or at office learnt to communicate with us, whether through sign language or gestures, then we would be much happier people.

Joyeeta Ganguly is a young deaf adult in Kolkata, married to a young man who is also deaf. She is a strong role-model for deaf children with her impressive achievements.

A parent's view point

by Mr. Kamalendu Bhattacharjee

As a father, it gave me tremendous joy when my child was born. We were full of enthusiasm and joy. But after one year and four months, the sky over me fell straight on our heads when I came to know that my child was deaf. It left my wife

and I shocked and we broke down mentally and physically and felt very much helpless and worried about his future. We also spent sleepless nights, as I had no idea or knowledge of



deafness. Many questions came to our mind about our son - What would his future be? Will he speak? How will he cope? Will he be able to call Mummy – Papa? How will he learn? Who will guide us? How will the society accept him? And in our absence how will he spend his life? Or who will look after him when we are gone?

To collect information I met many doctors here, but finally I went to All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysore. I met different doctors who examined my son, gave us various suggestions with demonstrations and recommended various guide books. However, due to lack of proper training facilities, speech therapists and proper school facilities here, I could not achieve fully what I expected.

Somehow we told ourselves to be strong and tried to face a lot of problems bearing a lot of pain. My friends and relatives treat my son like any other child as I had created an awareness among them. Our child is never left out in anything. We are sending him to Maria's Public School because we felt that even if he does not excel in his academics, he will develop in other aspects as a child and he will learn with the help from his hearing peers – he needs friends to help him too.

Like any father I have a dream that my son will become successful in life and lead a life like any other child. From my experience, I feel that all parents should come forward together on one platform so that we may exchange our views for our deaf children. Our families need support from every corner of society as well as from all well-wishers of various organisations and heads of institutions to discuss various problems that we face every day. If families like ours receive good quality support and information, we can take our problems as a challenge to establish our child's life and I am sure we will finally succeed in bringing up healthy children who grow up to become successful adults. Together, we can fight, put forth our legitimate demands and highlight the problems that we face at every step, and make a successful and meaningful lives of our children.

Mr Kamalendu Bhattacharjee is the father of a deaf boy and is based in Guwahati, Assam.