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Reflections: Codas and Cultures

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CODA: Psychological Implications
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About Dr. Yeager

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CODA: Psychological Implications

I was asked to speak to you about the psychological implications of being a child of deaf adults. What I hope to do more than anything else is to give you some food for thought. I've worked in the field of deafness about 15 years now and one of the things I've discovered is that when people talk in generalities they often get into trouble. This happens because for any group generalizations can be helpful but they also don't always fit everyone in the group.

To make a point, I want to tell you about an orientation program I attended. The program began by having everybody in the room introduce themselves and a book of matches was passed around to everyone in the circle. Each person would light one match and talk about themselves until the match went out. You had to immediately stop talking even if it was the middle of a

sentence in your self-introduction. When we were finished, the person directing the activity asked: “Well, what have you learned?” What we learned was that we are all unique individuals and that we play with matches.

It’s the same kind of thing with deaf people. They are all very unique individuals but there is something wrong with their hearing. I’m using this story to illustrate that we are going to talk about some things that may fit some of you and won’t fit others because you are all unique individuals who have had a lot of very different experiences. However, you all have definite similarities in background in that you all had parents that were deaf.

Now, I think it is important to consider what it means to you as an individual to have parents that are deaf. Whenever there is something different about a family, that’s going to give the members different life experiences. Bruno Bettelheim is a well-known psychologist who works in Chicago. He has done a lot of work with autistic children. I attended a conference where people were asking him questions. After the second or third question, I was amazed that anyone would continue to ask questions of him at all because he was so critical of every one that was being posed, even the working of the questions. At first, he sounded like he was being awfully picky and nasty to the audience. But later, it began to make a lot of sense to me. For example: someone asked a question like, “Well, I have a single parent family...” and he would stop them right there and say, “There is no such thing as a single parent family. There are single parents and there are families. A family is a mother and a father and children.” At the time that seemed awfully picky to me.

But as I considered his statement psychologically, I thought about the implications: if there is only one parent, what does that mean for the children? It means they’re not going to have the same experiences as in a traditional family. You can now consider what happens to a child of deaf parents: they are going to have a different experience. I can’t tell you what that experience would be like. You are all so varied in your backgrounds. Some of you probably are children with deaf parents who work in a profession or even work as employees of NTID. Some of you may have deaf parents who are factory workers, and some of you may be children of parents who are on welfare. So, you are all going to have a very different experience depending on your specific background. You are also going to

have a different experience than you would if you were from a traditional family.

You can also look at your experience as parallel to what a hearing parent goes through when they find out they have a deaf child. That is, if you're a hearing parent with a deaf child, you're going to experience something different than you would being a parent of a hearing child. You're not going to have a traditional child. You're going to have a different child. That often leaves some kind of feeling of loss. Along the same line I think when you see a hearing child with deaf parents there is a good likelihood that you may have dealt with or will need to deal with feelings of loss. Some of you probably have dealt with that very successfully, and others of you may not have dealt with it at all.

Maybe I can say more about what those feelings of loss might be like. The sense of loss comes from the fact that your parents were not the same as parents of the other kids in school. Your parents may have had a different ability to communicate. For some of your parents the ability to communicate may have been minimally different, and for others of you it may have been vastly different. That may have made a difference in how your parents were able to represent you at school or it may have made a difference in how your parents interacted with your friend. There are many things about being a hearing child with deaf parents that are going to be different.

When you experience a loss there are a few different kinds of feelings that are often experienced. It can be much like the feeling you have when someone in your family dies. It can be much like the feeling a hearing parent feels who has a child that is deaf, when someone has a serious injury, loses a hand or a leg, becomes blind or experiences another kind of handicapping condition: there is a feeling of loss. Typically, one kind of reaction to that sense of loss is denial – pretending it didn't really happen. You might make excuses for your parents: "Well, they're deaf and they couldn't be any different." Maybe the denial is demonstrated by avoiding bringing friends home, or avoiding having your friends meet your parents. Many different behaviors can be expressions of the denial concept.

Another response to this sense of loss can be anger...and sometimes there can be a lot of anger. How do you deal with your anger? You can deal with it in a lot of different ways: you can run away from it, or you can try to hide it. You can try to replace it with different kinds of actions like becoming

overly involved or maybe doing a lot of work in the field of deafness. (Millie asked earlier for a show of hands of people who are and are not working in the field of deafness. Sometimes dealing with that sense of loss might drive you away, one of the two. It depends on how you deal with that sense of loss. So, I think two of the kinds of feelings you may have dealt with, may be dealing with now, or may yet have to deal with are anger and denial.

Another issue with implications for people who have deaf parents is that of dependency. Perhaps you have experienced the struggle between dependence and independence in a variety of ways. It can become more confounded when you have deaf parents. Dependency can start out with being called upon to do a lot of work in helping to facilitate communication, or by helping to get things accomplished for your parents.

Let me share a little of my background as a clinical psychologist. Probably most of the experiences I hear about come from families that aren't functioning so well. Hopefully, all of you came from wonderful families that functioned beautifully and you haven't experienced the kinds of things I'm suggesting might happen. I have seen an over-dependence between parents and children in that children can become the family's mouthpiece to the world or to the community.

That has happened anywhere from helping out in times of need to some pretty serious and unfortunate over-dependence on the children. One situation I dealt with included two hearing children and their deaf parents. The parents had a very bad relationship and were getting divorced when I met the family. The kids were teenagers and there was a complete split in the family: the mother and one son against the father and the other son. One son had been particularly called on to do a lot of interpreting for his parents and other people. (It's not just the parents that can put children in some of these awkward positions.) In this case, there were some questions about who would get custody of the children. There was a probation officer who was reviewing the case. And what did she do? She interviewed one of the children but then also used that child as an interpreter to interview the parent. Often, it is outside agencies that constantly call on children of deaf adults to serve the communication function even if the parents aren't requesting it at that point in time.

Dependency can become a real problem especially during those adolescent years. During adolescence the biggest struggle that everyone has is with

dependence and independence. I don't know what all of you did during those years but if you were in a situation where your parents needed you frequently for help in communication then that alters how you resolve your struggle with dependence and independence. It goes both directions as well: parents play an equal part in gradually giving you up as their children during those years. If a parent needs to rely and be dependent on you, that may confuse the whole issue of independence and dependence.

Another thing I have observed in a number of situations is kids who have grown up before their time: they have been put into adult situations. They've been placed in very adult interpreting situations or helped with communication in much more grown-up ways than would normally be expected for their age. This can put the child in a position of growing up faster or learning things that normally wouldn't have been experienced.

When you have deaf parents there can be times of embarrassment. If your parents don't have a lot of ability to communicate with the general public sometimes children are embarrassed. Your parents may have difficulty understanding what's happening and as a result, their responses or actions may be embarrassing to you. Again, the implications for Codas are that you are dealing with a situation or different set of experiences that most people don't have while growing up.

Another implication of having deaf parents is that you are, in a way, quite often a bi-cultural person...facing two different cultures. That experience can be a real difficult thing, especially during adolescence. Which culture are you more like? Which culture do you fit in? How do you fit in both cultures and how does that change over time? A lot of your unique experience means facing this bi-cultural issue, working through it and the different aspects of each culture. I would imagine Codas probably start out feeling very comfortable with their parents' culture, especially if it is more of a deaf culture. But as you grow older, you would often move more and more toward the hearing culture. That is something that must be resolved within you.

Summary

I wanted to make my remarks fairly general but also to share some basic thoughts I had about the psychological implications of being a hearing child of deaf parents. For some people the implications of dealing with two

cultures would result in denial or running away from one culture. Another reaction is to find some kind of situation where you try very hard to be a part of both cultures. I believe that you can successfully become a part of both worlds. These are the basic ideas I wanted to share with you this afternoon.