

Children of Deaf Adults:  
An Exclusive Assessment of Family Communication

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore family communication through children of deaf adults' perspectives. More specifically focusing on the question how does parents' deafness impact family communication with their hearing children? This study will analyze family communication as a whole, children of deaf adults, and eldest children of deaf adults. If this study were conducted, ethnography research, interviews, and focus groups would be the methods used.

Multiple studies (Miller, 2010; Åsberg, Vogel, & Bowers, 2008; Jackson, 2011) have been conducted regarding children who are born deaf to hearing parents. The studies identified how parents coped with this unexpected change in life and how they made decisions for their children that did or did not best accommodate their special needs. However, very few studies (Buchino, 1993; Singleton & Tittle, 2000; Filer & Filer, 2000) have been conducted for children who are born hearing into deaf families. The positive benefits of being born with two different cultures, the hardships of learning two different languages, or the adversities children of deaf adults face have not been illuminated in research studies. In fact, 90% of deaf parents have hearing children (Moore & Lane, 2003), yet these children have not gained the attention compared to those who are born deaf into hearing families.

Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) are a unique group that deserves research recognition. CODAs might feel more responsible when it comes to communication in family life than hearing children of hearing families because of the language differences. In fact, it is also an assumption that possibly CODAs feel the need to act as interpreters in public situations. This situation can cause an enduring amount of pressure and responsibility for these children. These feelings could cause negativity and hardships for the family. With these assumptions in mind, this study was conducted to better understand how and why CODAs communicate in their family. By understanding more about CODAs, researchers can help strengthen family communication in addition to providing outsiders with a better understanding of these unique families. The purpose of this study is to gain research understanding in family communication through CODAs' perspectives. This study will first explore family communication with exclusive emphasis on expressiveness, family

satisfaction, and motivation, then identify how these concepts relate to CODAs through the roles of interpreting and protecting, and finally more specifically reveal how it relates to the eldest CODA.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Family Communication**

There are no set rules that families obey concerning family communication because of the complex nature associated with this type of communication. By examining two communication theories, one can help identify family communication within a CODA's environment. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) developed a model of family communication by analyzing relational schemas. Through these analyzations, they created a general theory of family communication that addresses families who have a high degree of "conversation orientation." These types of families created environments where the families communicated openly and freely about any topic. This type of open communication then led to high family satisfaction within these families. This theory discusses how each family creates the environment around them, and the family members themselves defined the satisfaction of the relationships in the family. In addition, this theory aids the idea that each family situation is unique, and it is the responsibility of the family members to define how and what type of communication will be used in the family unit.

In addition to a satisfying environment, the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems identifies three other factors in creating satisfying family relationships. Olson (2000) used conceptual clustering to create this model when researching the relationships. Pertaining to family relationships, cohesions, flexibility, and communication are the key variables to creating a balanced family. One can describe a balanced family as healthy,

happy, and satisfied with their relationship to others in the family. Communication is a pertinent variable in this theory because without proper communication, cohesions and flexibility would not exist. Without communication, a family would not be able to reach the balanced level in the model. Thus, families need to be allowed to express to one another about their ideas and opinions.

**Expressiveness.** As identified in both theories, family members being able to express their ideas and opinions is important to maintain positive family communication. Combining the two theories discussed earlier, Schrodts (2005) conducted a series of surveys questioning young adult children about their family communication schemata. The findings commented, “perceptions of family expressiveness have a sizable, direct association with perceptions of family cohesiveness and flexibility” (p.370). In a later study using survey participants, Schrodts (2009) expressed the belief that when family members learn how to communicate effectively, it not only lowers stress within the family unit, but also helps lowers members’ stress levels outside the family unit as well. Cohesiveness is formed when family members commit to the idea that they are going to communicate with one another about the positive and negative things pertaining to themselves as individuals and within the family structure. In addition, flexibility is also achieved when family members have to learn how to deal with the topics that are being communicated. When families can express themselves to other members, family satisfaction can be achieved.

**Family satisfaction.** Communication can positively or negatively affect the satisfaction rate family members have towards one another. Pertaining to this topic, Burns & Person (2011) conducted an online survey where at least two members from the same family answered questions. The results divided family communication into joking around,

recapping the day's events, and relationship talk. The study then concluded these three categories were predictors of the family's satisfaction towards their relationships with one another. When families positively communicated with one another using these three categories, a sense of unity was formed, thus leading to higher family satisfaction.

However, each family is unique, and different members of the family keep different standards in mind for how and what they want to communicate with their family. In a study conducted by questionnaires surveying undergraduate students, Caughlin (2003) mentioned how important it was to keep these differences in mind when maintaining positive family communication. A family's satisfaction rate can be measured only by the family members' standards they have set for themselves and their family as a unit. Thus, highlighting the fact that all families are different and although can be generalized through the previous mentioned theories, their unique situations should also be taken into account during analyzation. In addition, each family's motives for communicating are different as well.

**Motives.** For the purpose of this study, the reason why children communicate with their parents will be the focus when mentioning motives. There are many reasons why children communicate with their parents. Barbato, Graham & Perse (2003) surveyed parents whose children were 17 or younger. Their findings identified inclusion and control as two important variables when children communicated with their parents. Children want to be included in the conversations their parents are having, so they learn how to communicate with their parents. If children did not learn how to communicate with their parents, they would not be able to explain the ideas they had, ask questions about the environment around them, or feel a sense of belonging. In addition, children want to feel in

control of what is going on around them, so they communicate to gain a sense of certainty. By communicating to parents about how they feel and events that are occurring, children gain control within the family environment. This research also concluded that children were influenced by the way their parents communicated. In fact, interesting enough in the study many adopted the same patterns of communication as their parents displayed. For example, if parents were very conversation oriented, there was a greater chance their children were as well.

### **Children of Deaf Adults**

As discussed earlier, CODAs are truly unique individuals because of the bilingual bicultural environments they face. For clarity purposes, in the rest of this review D and H will be used when concerning the cultural aspects of deaf and hearing environments. Not all families with Deaf and Hearing cultures communicate in the same ways. Singleton and Tittle (2000) focused on the bilingual aspect of CODA families. When exploring how they communicated, the authors noted that there were multiple ways these types of families communicated, such as American Sign Language, fragmentary speech, other types of signing, or combinations of each. Not every family communicated the same way because the comfort level and preference of the parents and children decided what communication methods were used in the family to ensure a healthy communication climate.

These communication patterns can be analyzed even further to compare the difference between Hearing families and Deaf-Hearing families. An observation study conducted by Jones & Dumas (1996) to analyze communication patterns between fully Deaf- and fully Hearing-parented children found “very few overall differences in Deaf-parented and Hearing-parented children’s communication patterns” (p.282). Just as in

Hearing families, Deaf-Hearing families learned how to communicate with one another in order to form a cohesive unit. One way that cohesiveness is formed is through interpretation.

**Interpreting.** As discussed earlier in the motives section, children communicate with their families in order to feel included. Filer and Filer (2000) researched CODAs to provide counselors guidance when advising the CODAs in therapeutic sessions. They found that one way CODAs included their parents into the communication of the Hearing environment was to take on the role of an interpreter. A child may take on this role in public places such as the bank, restaurants, doctor's office, or even the child's own parent-teacher conference where communication barriers are evident.

Interviews with twelve participants conducted by Hadjidakou, Christodoulou, Hadjidemetri, Konidari, and Nicolaou (2009) captured CODAs' opinions on interpreting. There were both positive and negative attitudes when asked about taking on this role. The positive attitudes included feeling needed, becoming more mature, and learning how to be responsible. However, many felt frustration for needing to interpret for their parents because they had no choice. Without them interpreting, their parents were not included in the surrounding environments. CODAs not only learn how to communicate with their parents in order to feel included in family conversations, but they also must help their parents feel included in the Hearing world through communication.

**Protecting.** Another role that CODAs use communication for is the protection of their family. In an event of an emergency such as a fire alarm beeping or evacuation announcement, CODAs are responsible for communicating this event to their parents. Not only do CODAs feel responsible for protecting their parents physically, but they also feel

they must protect them emotionally. In the previously mentioned interview (Hadjikakou et al., 2009), CODAs felt the need to “protect their parent’s from hearing people’s comments, looks, and other difficult conditions” (p. 491). Unfortunately the majority of the hearing population is not educated in the Deaf way of life. “Deaf and dumb,” “deaf mutes,” and “retards” are common labels that CODAs feel the need to protect their parents from. As inferred from the interviews, when hearing people made fun of the CODAs’ parents, many CODAs felt the need to say something to the mockers.

In addition, CODAs might protect their parents by refusing to communicate something in a conversation. When a CODA is interpreting between their parents and hearing people, CODAs might purposely leave out information or change the sentence to avoid confrontation (Filer & Filer, 2000). A CODA taking on the role of the protector reflects back to the previous notion that children communicate with their families to control the situation around them. Some CODAs took this control to a new level when the need for protecting their parents grew so strongly they worried about leaving their parents alone because they did not feel that their parents could communicate effectively without them (Hadjikakou et al., 2009). Interpreting and protecting are two types of communication aspects that CODAs use when partaking in family communication.

### **Eldest Child of Deaf Adults**

Before discussing eldest children of deaf adults, it is important to analyze research pertaining to oldest children and birth order in general. In a research study, questionnaires were given to multiple oldest, middle and younger children. In reference to this study, Pulakos (1987) noted that eldest children more often filled the responsible role compared to middle and younger siblings in the family. Thus, the eldest children have more

responsibilities than the younger siblings. Interestingly enough, eldest children of deaf adults also feel they have more responsibility within their family structures. CODAs not only feel more responsible for communicating for their parents, but also they feel responsible for communicating to their younger siblings.

Eldest children of deaf adults are unique individuals because they are the first children to be exposed to the communication barriers they have with their parents. Not only do they need to learn how to communicate with their parents, but also they set examples of how to communicate to their parents for the siblings that follow them. Singleton and Tittle (2000) remarked, "the eldest children sometimes even facilitates communication between their Deaf parents and later-born siblings" (p.228). Verified also in the research above, the eldest child felt the need to protect the younger siblings. The eldest child is the first child that the parents learn how to communicate with effectively. This level of comfort causes them to rely on this child for communication within the family as well as outside the family.

This reliance on CODAs outside the family is demonstrated by the interviews conducted by Hadjidakou et al. (2009). These interviews revealed a common theme of dependence on the eldest child compared to the other siblings. The parents relied on the eldest child more to interpret for them when in public environments. One participant who is the eldest of his siblings remarked, "[his father] doesn't ask his younger children to do the interpreting for him" (p.493). In another study, Buchino (1993) compared the difference between hearing children born to hearing parents and hearing children born to deaf parents through the use of family and individual interviews and surveys. Buchino concluded that the oldest child communicated for the parents in many situations and took

on different tasks within the family without asking for the parents' help. When the oldest children communicate for their parents independently, they take on more responsibility than do younger siblings.

The responsibility that many of the eldest children take upon themselves causes difficulties within the family. Common themes of negativity such as frustration, loss of independence, early maturation, pressure, burdens, and inconvenience were highlighted in the different research studies (Buchino, 1993; Hadjikakou et al. 2009; Filer & Filer, 2000; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). However, these children still communicated for and with their parents despite these negative feelings. The feeling of being responsible and wanting unity in the family took precedence over their own comfort level.

Although somewhat different from the Hearing family structure, Hearing-Deaf families have the same motivation to have strong communication within a family. Relating back to the general theory of family communication by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002), it can be inferred that CODAs take on the responsibility of trying to create open communication in their family environment. In addition, CODAs illustrate the three factors identified in the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems to create a balanced satisfying relationship with their parents. By learning how to communicate with their parents, they help form a cohesive unit. Then by forming a cohesive unit, flexibility is achieved by adapting to their parents' language barriers.

Inclusion and control were also variables that Barbato, Graham & Perse (2003) identified as motivation factors for children to communicate with their parents. CODAs demonstrate these variables within their family unit by taking on the role of interpreter and protector. It is shown that these roles can provide a large amount of responsibility for

CODAs, especially the eldest child. However, CODAs still partake in these roles because they want to have satisfying family relationships. Through these assumptions, the research question can be advanced:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How does parents' deafness impact family communication with their hearing children?

## **Method**

### **Method Choice**

If I were to conduct this inductive study, I would attempt to answer my research question by using qualitative methods. The reason why I would choose qualitative methods is that I am not really concerned with looking for how much parents' deafness impacts communication in families, but instead how it effects the family communication as a whole. In addition, I am looking for the relationship between parents' deafness and family communication with CODAs. I want to be able to study this phenomenon by analyzing the actual participants it effects in the communication environment where it is occurring.

In an attempt to assure credibility in my study, I would use three methods to form data triangulation. The three methods that I would use are ethnographic research, one-on-one interviewing, and focus group research. Ethnographic research would be used because it studies the families within their original environment. This provides a unique perspective concerning child to parent communication. In addition, I would use one-on-one semi-formal interviewing with CODAs to capture and understand their feelings and motivations. I would also conduct focus groups with CODAs to allow any new opinions to emerge.

### **Sample Selection**

For my sampling frame, I would contact the Florida Association for the Deaf to get a list of hearing-deaf families within a 40-mile radius of the Pensacola area. Then I would call and email the different families stating who I was, the purpose of my study, and informing them that they had the option to participate in the study. My final sample would be a nonrandom purposive sample because the participants must meet three criteria. First, the CODAs need to be between the ages of 10 and 18 to be able to fully answer the questions. Second, CODAs must live within 40 miles of the Pensacola area. Finally, both parents of the CODA must be deaf. The number of families I would observe depends on the number of children in each family. The minimum number of families to observe would be four. In all, I would like to interview between 15 and 20 CODAs of different genders. However, I would want to conduct small focus groups consisting of between five and seven children.

### **Procedure**

In the ethnographic research, I would choose to be a complete observer in this study. I would observe participants in their home and in public, while keeping in mind participants might act differently because of my presence in the beginning of the study. I would observe each family for at least two months. For the interviews, I would have a set of questions already typed up, but would ask new questions that might emerge during the interview. The interview would last between 30 to 60 minutes. An example of a question that I would ask is, "Do you feel more comfortable voicing or using sign language when communicating with your parents?" In the focus group, I would have a facilitator who is a CODA. I would take notes as participants answered questions that the facilitator asked concerning communication with their parents. I would take special note of any ideas that all the CODAs agreed or disagreed upon. I would have refreshments for the guests and

ensure that the group discussion does not last over 90 minutes. After I collected my data, I would analyze and interpret it to draw my conclusions to answer my research question.

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