

# Reading To Deaf Children

## *Bonding, Communication, and Literacy Development*

BY JULIE AINSWORTH

### Reading to Children

This process is seen as the single most influential factor in a child's literacy development. Read and sign books at the students' age-level to improve visual skills, build vocabulary, aid reading comprehension, and have a positive impact on students' attitude toward reading.

**I**t is Monday evening. Lucy, our family dog, is barking, and my two older sons are teasing their younger brother. I'm tired from a busy day. We've completed dinner, homework, and baths—and the most important half-hour is about to begin.

Scrubbed and in their pajamas, Jonathan, 9, and Charlie, 8, sit with me on the bed, our knees touching. The book is propped on a pillow so my hands are free to sign. On the floor, Michael, 5, who is hearing, plays with his trucks. We are on chapter three of our

library book. The fourth sentence includes the word *govern*. I'm not sure what the sign is, so I fingerspell *g-o-v*. Jonathan knows the sign though. Before I can finish, he forms his thumb and pointer finger into the letter *g* and lifts the letter to the side of his head. Charlie's face lights up. *J-e-s-s-e*, he fingerspells gleefully. For emphasis, he stands up on the bed and flexes his muscles.

"Jesse is my favorite," he signs.

Jesse Ventura, the former body builder who swept to an unexpected victory in the last gubernatorial election, has been in the news regularly throughout Minnesota.

Jonathan and Charlie tell me they watched the



ABOVE • SHARING READING NIGHTLY ENCOURAGES CHILDREN TO READ BOOKS ON THEIR OWN. PHOTOS BY VIK ORENSTEN PHOTOGRAPHY

JULIE AINSWORTH WAS THE REGIONAL COORDINATOR FOR THE GALLAUDET PRE-COLLEGE NATIONAL MISSION PROGRAMS SHARED READING PROJECT IN ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA. SHE IS THE MOTHER OF THREE SONS, TWO OF WHOM ARE DEAF.



ABOVE • JONATHAN, MICHAEL, AND CHARLIE EXPLORE A BOOK WITH THEIR MOTHER.

inauguration at school.

"What does inauguration mean?" I ask.

"Something to do with swearing in," replies Jonathan.

"Cindy swore today and was sent to the principal's office," chimes in Charlie.

I laugh and explain the difference between the terms *swearing* and *swearing in*.

Then Jonathan continues.

is the *government* that creates the laws of the state. A *governess* can be a woman who is hired to live in and help raise children. To *govern* is to control, direct, or influence behavior.

I ask my sons what *govern* means to them. They respond with words like *power*, *boss*, and *rules*. Then we return to the book. How does the word apply here? I

I am amazed at how sharing a story opens up a whole conversation...and gives me the opportunity to learn about their lives.

"Jesse represents a third party. Did you know that mom?" he asks earnestly.

Charlie picks up the word *party*, and wants to know who's having one.

I explain that in this context *party* means a group of people who organize together to support common views. When I move into the difference between a *political party* and a *birthday party*, a whole new conversation opens up.

After a few minutes, I direct the conversation back to the story and the word *govern*, which is the source of many different words. I walk through some of them with Jonathan and Charlie. First, a *governor* is the boss of a state. Then there

ask them. They are ready with responses and we discuss the word in context briefly before we move on.

While they talk, I sit back and marvel at the beauty of my sons' language. I'm amazed, too, at how sharing a story with them opens up a whole conversation about our state's new governor, and gives me the opportunity to learn about their lives.

Initially when I encountered the 15 principles of reading to deaf and hard of hearing children identified by David R. Schleper, literacy coordinator in the Pre-College National Mission Programs at Gallaudet University, I had to think

## 15 Principles for Reading to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

- Deaf readers translate stories using American Sign Language.
- Deaf readers keep both languages (ASL and English) visible.
- Deaf readers elaborate on the text.
- Deaf readers re-read stories on a "storytelling" to "story reading" continuum.
- Deaf readers follow the child's lead.
- Deaf readers make what is implied explicit.
- Deaf readers adjust sign placement to fit the story.
- Deaf readers adjust signing style to fit the character.
- Deaf readers connect concepts in the story to the real world.
- Deaf readers use attention maintenance strategies.
- Deaf readers use eye gaze to elicit participation.
- Deaf readers engage in role play to extend concepts.
- Deaf readers use ASL variations to sign repetitive English phrases.
- Deaf readers provide a positive and reinforcing environment.
- Deaf readers expect the child to become literate.

© 1996 by David R. Schleper; Pre-College National Mission Programs, Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C.

# Reading to Deaf Children

each time about their application. Among Schleper's principles: Follow the child's lead; make explicit what is implied; do not be constrained by text. After four years, incorporating these principles is second nature to me. Communicating is much easier; sometimes my hands flow effortlessly. I no longer feel I must find the one sign to provide the perfect translation for the English text. I use more facial expressions, gestures, and mime. I don't get caught up with covering a specific number of pages during a specified period of time.

While applying Schleper's principles in sharing reading with my sons always made sense to me as a step toward literacy, now I also see this as a way to expand the bridge of communication between us. Sometimes we don't understand each other, but almost always persistence pays off. Jonathan and Charlie have a broad vocabulary and

understand complex concepts. They crave information and conversation.

The benefits of reading are not only to my boys, but also to their father and me. We know our children better. We know more of their likes and dislikes, what makes them sad, what makes them happy. We are better at explaining the world to them. We tease, laugh, help them with their homework, and talk about the new governor.

Reading with our children has opened the door to communication and deepened a beautiful relationship with our children. For little boys who run, jump, and climb through their day, reading together in the

evening has meant sitting still and close to each other, if only for a few minutes.

This evening, 35 minutes pass and we cover two pages of text. Jonathan and

Charlie want to continue. But

I am tired, and there is still Michael to tuck in. I kiss them good-night and get ready to leave.

I know that we will read again together tomorrow.



ABOVE • PROVIDE A POSITIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT, AND EXPECT THE CHILD TO BECOME LITERATE.

## *Issues in Access: Creating Effective Preschools for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing Children*

By Gail Solit and Angela Bednarczyk, Ph.D

*Issues in Access* shares the work of Project Access, a federal training grant that resulted in the creation of preschools in which deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing children could grow and learn together.

Gallaudet University's Child Development Center (CDC), recognized for its years of experience and collaborative study in developing its own innovative integrated school program, worked throughout the U.S. to provide support and training to other sites

that wished to provide this much-needed service to parents of deaf or hard of hearing children in their local areas.

A follow-up to the authors' earlier book and video, *Access for All*, this new book clearly describes the issues, goals, challenges, and common themes that emerged in the widely varied venues that were undertaking this work. Chapters elaborate on the needs of parents, staff, and the children themselves, as well as the collaboration between agencies necessary for a successful integrated preschool.

*Issues in Access*, No. B599, \$25.95 (Text and Appendices)

To order, call toll-free 1-888-257-5160 (Voice), 1-800-582-9237 (TTY), or Fax 612-906-1099.

**NEW** from Pre-College National Mission Programs



# A Literacy Program

*continued from page 5*

American Sign Language and English, interact within each practice and to how teachers and education professionals use ASL to cultivate and nurture students' development in the English language.

All nine practices apply to all levels of students, from the high achieving, to those in the middle, to those at the lower end of the literacy development spectrum. These practices respect and respond to the process of human development.

If schools continue to pass students through course requirements in math, science, life skills, home economics, and social studies but graduate students who lack fundamental literacy skills, they have failed in their most basic responsibility.

Teachers know each student's current level and the next level each must attain.

Dialogue journals, for example, can be done with children of all writing levels, from emerging to advanced. Students whose writing skills are just emerging, regardless of their age, typically draw pictures and use some writing to complement the drawing. With a journal entry like this, the teacher would respond by using the drawings to help build basic English vocabulary and sentence structure. A teacher with an emerging writer uses the dialogue journal to encourage growth in basic literacy skills. At the other end of the spectrum, students who are fluent writers benefit from dialogue journals too. They write about topics important to them and gain important skills like logical thinking and persuasion from dialoguing with an adult.

Reading to students provides another example of how these practices apply to all learners. At the elementary school age, young children who are reading picture books with their teacher's assistance benefit from having this teacher read aloud beginning chapter books, which represent their next reading level. When beginning chapter books are read aloud to them, they formulate an understanding of where their reading

is headed and become motivated to reach that level. Likewise for a fluent reader at the high school level, reading to students becomes a literary society event where teachers introduce students to Chaucer, Shakespeare, poetry, short stories, and other great works.

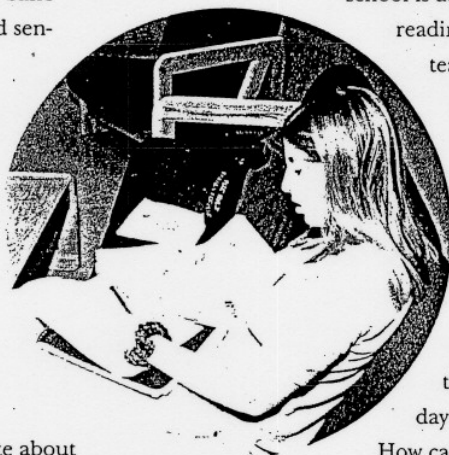
## FITTING IN THE PIECES

When asked how much time in school is actually dedicated to reading and writing, teachers consistently answer "not enough." In one high school for deaf students that I visited, a teacher estimated that students spend no more than 15 minutes a day reading and writing. How can we improve the

literacy skills of our students when we don't even work on these skills in school for more than a quarter of an hour? How can we expect students to do homework by reading and writing when we don't give them all the skills to do so? Schools that are serious about their commitment to developing the literacy skills of students who are deaf or hard of hearing must enable the daily classroom schedule to reflect that, without diminishing the importance of the core content areas.

At the middle and high school level, if traditional scheduling is followed, it will be almost impossible to enable students to get enough literacy instruction within the school day. For those students who have a pressing need to enhance their reading and writing skills, enforcing such a traditional schedule is almost unconscionable. If schools continue to pass students through course requirements in math, science, life skills, home economics, and social studies but graduate students who lack fundamental literacy skills, they have failed in their most basic responsibility. Any school with a serious literacy problem among its student body has to provide a schedule that devotes a substantial portion of the day to reading and writing skills. A school schedule should support, not thwart, the achievement of outcomes the students need.

Fortunately, most programs recognize the importance that needs to be placed on literacy development. The excitement and enthusiasm I've seen at different schools around the country arise from the fact that each of the nine literacy practices really works. For the whole picture of literacy to emerge in all its colors and shapes we need to put all the pieces together, to fit them all into the school day. The result is a very beautiful picture indeed.



ABOVE • A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM SUPPORTS STUDENTS OF ALL AGES AND ABILITY LEVELS.