“What works for your child is what makes the choice right.”

One Mom’s Evolution

Hearing Impaired? Hard of Hearing? Deaf?

By Marjorie Madsen Keilers

“Oh, your daughter is deaf,” says a woman who walks up to me in a fabric store, gesturing with her hands while speaking. I scoop up my 18-month old baby, hearing aids flapping against her ears. “Oh no,” I replied. “She’s not deaf—she’s hearing impaired.”

Hearing impaired is how the audiologist described my daughter’s hearing. I desperately wanted my daughter to only be hearing impaired and not deaf. Deaf implied a whole new can of worms—one that I was not ready to open.

I think back to that day occasionally, and realize that the woman was trying to be kind, and was in fact signing to my daughter and me. At the time of this incident, my daughter had only been wearing hearing aids for about two weeks and my family had only been living with her diagnoses for about two months.

We clung to the hearing impaired label like a life preserver in a turbulent storm. We started aggressive speech therapy, for at that point, we did not know whether her hearing was deteriorating, or whether she was born with the hearing she had. “Do you want me to sign with her?” asked the speech therapist. “No,” I say. Part of my rationale was to jam as much auditory stimulation in her ears, should her loss be progressive. The other part niggling at the back of my mind, was that signing would tip the scales from hearing impaired to Deaf.

We continued on this semantic journey, while literally moving from one state to another, then another, all before my daughter was four. Luckily, we had fabulous early interventionists, who connected us from state to state. Four years later, when the time came to transition from home to school, from IFSP to IEP, we were fairly confident in our choices. We continued to get outreach from NMSD and speech therapists. We learned that hearing impaired as a descriptor had fallen out of favor in the Deaf community. The term “impaired” implied something damaged or in need of repair. Hard of hearing was now considered politically correct and we began to use that phrase.

Thus we began our next journey into learning more about Deaf culture with our hard of hearing daughter. While we opted for a mainstream education, we actively engaged in the Deaf community in our state. We started to learn ASL. We went to ASL immersion camps. We sent our daughter to camps designed for deaf and hard of hearing children, so she could see she was not alone, even though she often felt alone in our small community.

As we got better at explaining our daughter’s hearing situation to friends, family, and teachers, we came across many who, upon learning that our daughter was hard of hearing replied, “oh yeah, I don’t hear well out of my left ear either.” Hmm... not really the same thing. There’s a big difference between someone who gradually loses hearing over time to someone who has never heard certain sounds. Hard of hearing just didn’t seem to adequately convey the severity of the communication challenges my daughter faced everyday.

Continued on back

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We love good news!
My daughter, who is hard of hearing and wears hearing aids, just finished 1st grade at Hodgin Elementary School in Albuquerque, NM. One of the most important situations arose when one of her classmates approached us and asked a very important question. She asked me, “Is she deaf”? I was caught off guard for a moment by the question because up until that day no child had asked me directly if my daughter was deaf or not.

I tried to think carefully how to answer that question, when I realized, “hey, wait a minute--my daughter is standing right here beside me.” The question was an important question, but not as important as whom should have been asked that question. I quickly realized that the question is not one I should answer.

I informed the inquisitive young girl that what she asked was a really good question but told her that she needed to ask my daughter directly—I can’t talk for my daughter. Some questions are hers to answer.

This was a great opportunity to teach something to a young child in this situation. I am grateful to her because I also learned a valuable lesson myself. That lesson was to recognize an opportunity to let my hard of hearing child become a stronger, more confident young lady by answering questions about her own hearing.

*Shout out to Lina for advocating for herself with classmates about her hearing!*