

# Deafness: The Sounds Of Silence

By JOANNE TAEUFFER, Register Staff Writer

When other children her age were crawling into bed with a teddy bear, Bobbi Barras was hunched under the covers with a flashlight and dictionary. The quiet child wasn't reading Webster's for pleasure. She was learning to talk.

Deaf from birth, Fountain Valley mother and teacher spent her life in a world of silence.

And learning to say those words with the help of a dictionary pronunciation guide is only one of Mrs. Barras' tricks to overcome the "invisible handicap." "If you act like a handicapped, you'll be treated like one," she said. "It's better to stand out for your accomplishments instead of your afflictions."

For a deaf child just learning to talk—something taken for granted by the hearing—can be a major accomplishment.

"The average deaf student has no native language," said Paul Culton, head of the Golden West College hearing impaired program. His parents didn't use sign language with him when he was a baby. And most experts

getting scolded, there's an advantage in having your "ears talked off."

"Deaf children see me talking," said Larry Newman, principal of Taft School for the Aurally Handicapped in Buena Vista, "and I tell them I need to hear."

"They think since I talk I am no longer deaf. They think when they grow up and learn to talk they will not be deaf either."

Newman, who has been deaf since a mastoid operation at age 5, said parents of deaf children should communicate with the baby. And he means more than the routine orders of day-to-day life.

By exchanging ideas and information with the child early, he said, parents can help prevent later information gaps.

But even a deaf adult who has conquered the language faces communication disadvantages.

John Hayes is a Golden West College student. Although he has little hearing, he uses hearing aids, reads lips well and speaks in a clear and understandable voice.

"One thing that bothers me is that when you talk to the hearing people, they don't talk like they talk with their friends," he said. "They just make it very short for the deaf."

"A bunch of hearing people will be talking to each other and say many things. Then a deaf person will grab one of them and say, 'What did they say?' And he will just say a few words."

It leaves Hayes, a tall, bearded youth, with a feeling of being left out.

Group discussions and conversations are like that, though. A lip-reader is at a serious disadvantage in such a group, Hayes said. The deaf person misses half of each comment while searching out the speaker and focusing on him.

And in the end, the disadvantages show up in educational deficiencies.

"If you graduate a deaf person with an eighth grade education, you've done a good job," Morvay said.

Culton said the average deaf college student reads at a fifth grade level. But some people, such as Mrs. Barras, say deaf children are held back by well-meaning teachers.

Mrs. Barras was different from most deaf children. Because her handicap went undetected until she was 14 years old, she learned to live in a hearing world without help. She learned to do things the hard way and enjoyed the challenge.

"I prize that part of my life," she said of the years before her deafness was discovered. "It gave me 14 years to say, 'I can do it' without someone putting their arms around me and feeling sorry for me."

She had learned to speak, lip-read and even sing in an off-key voice before her family moved to Southern California and school officials found the teenager had a type of deafness which made word discrimination nearly impossible.

After eight years in regular schools, officials told the young girl's parents, "She's straining herself."



Mike Olsen, 10, of Anaheim uses sign language to say, "Deafness: The Sounds Of Silence."



Today there are about 100 similar programs in the country.

But many deaf students with college potential are still thrust onto the job market with little education, Culton said. Only a tenth as many deaf students as hearing students—proportionally—make it to college.

And the job market for the deaf is not kind.

"There are very few things deaf people cannot do. Generally, they have been relegated by potential employers to positions far below their abilities," Culton said.

Bill Teel, a 37-year-old Golden West telecommunications student, is typical. Teel lip-reads only slightly and rarely utters a sound, although he talks fluently and enthusiastically in sign language.

"I've done everything," he said through an interpreter.

He worked as a printer, a painter and even sold deaf cards, he said.

Asked why he resorted to the near-begging of peddling the cards, he said, "I tried different professional things by going into different buildings. That way I could see what was going on in the world."

But he was uncomfortable in all these roles.

"Vocational training was not satisfying for me. At that time there weren't schools like this (Golden West) but when I found out there were I decided to come back."

Teel now has ambitions which please him. He hopes to transfer to California State University at Northridge, the only nearby four-year college with a

been developed for use by the deaf. It can only be used to call another station with such a hook-up.

So extra secretarial help is needed at Taft to make telephone calls for Newman and to help interpret for him during meetings which otherwise could be too confusing.

But outside his office, Newman runs against clerks and waitresses who do not realize he is deaf.

And that is a real complication.

"In a restaurant, the waitress comes around and asks if I want coffee," Newman said. "I say, 'Later, please.' So she comes back after and says, 'Newman moves his lips in an incomprehensible fashion.' I say, 'Yes, fine.' Thinking she has asked me if I want my coffee now. So she starts clearing away the dishes. It turns out she asked me if I was finished."

He laughed and shrugged as he told the story on himself but admitted that such incidents are a frustration.

"When I'm in a store and I ask a clerk how much something costs, if I think she said 50 cents, I give her a dollar. If I think she said \$2, I give her a five. At the end of the day, I end up with a pocketful of change," he said. "Not only do communication problems lead to frustration, Newman said. They also lead to social isolation."

Deaf people can often talk to others but are left out of conversations because lip-reading is a struggle for many, Newman said.

"I belong to a country club and the people there are nice but they don't know what to do with a deaf person," he said. "So they might gesture a lot or they talk so slow that it just makes it harder to understand. But mostly they just don't say anything."

He paused, then grinned. "That's all right. I like to concentrate on my (golf) game anyway."

Mrs. Barras said she has one real peeve.

"I'll be introduced as 'This is Bobbie Barras. She can't hear.' It's like saying, 'This is Jane. She has hemorrhoids.' And the vivacious woman says she doesn't know why some deaf people have so much trouble in the hearing world."

She has found hearing people—even strangers—are willing to help her by making emergency telephone calls. And waitresses are usually helpful when she explains she is a lip-reader.

Half the battle is attitude, she said. Her's is that others shouldn't be put out because of her problem.

So she goes blithely through life, missing a few words but getting the gist of most conversations and unafraid to ask someone to repeat a statement if it's really necessary.

Mark Apodaca, a darkly handsome 21-year-old deaf business student, said he isn't afraid to try to communicate, either.

"I feel free to go up and just talk to any person," he said. "If he can't understand me, I'll say it again and if he still can't understand me I'll write it down."

Apodaca did not become deaf until he was 5 years old and had already learned to talk. Although his voice now is flat and nasal, it is easily understood.

Teel communicates completely with sign language. Faced with hearing people who do not know the visual language, he said he "will struggle with people and he will keep struggling with them until they understand."

The communication block can lead to cliques of deaf people. And most deaf people end up married to someone who also has impaired hearing.

Part of the clamoriness comes from the social stigmas attached to deafness.

"It's okay to wear glasses but not hearing aids," Morvay said.

And a deaf person's voice rarely captures the attention and life of a hearing person's words. Sometimes the rhythm and emphasis are so lost that a hearing person cannot understand.

The biggest hang-up in sign language is how loud I'm talking and what my voice is like," Hayes said. Years of "tongue exercises that I hated" have helped him perfect his speech.

Despite the many problems of living in a hearing world, most deaf people manage.

Some triumph. Bobbie Barras said it's all a matter of attitude.

"My idea of a handicapped person is one who can see and hear and has a perfectly capable body and mind and just doesn't do anything with his life," she said.

"I just want to do everything they say a deaf person can't do."

She has modeled, reared a family, completed college courses unaided and can carry on a conversation without giving away her "handicap."

She admits being deaf has a sad side.

"I can look at this beautiful table," she said, pointing to an elegant glass coffee table in her living room, "but that doesn't make me happy. I can look at you, but no matter how beautiful you are, it doesn't make me happy."

"Communication is what really brings happiness."

"That's the sad side of it. But there's a happy side," she said brightly with a grin. "It's nice and peaceful and you can sleep so well at night. There's not a sound in the world."

"Besides, I enjoy the challenge of competing with the hearing world."



The REGISTER  
Sunday, August 17, 1975

think that after a child is 4 years old it is too late to develop that innate sense of language. Some say 7, but no older than that.

Most specialists encourage the use of sophisticated hearing aids for deaf children from infancy. They say such aids can help the youngster use any residual hearing.

Some specialists also believe deaf children should be taught sign language as babies so they can begin to communicate, if not to talk, early.

"The whole business of learning the language is so overwhelming," said Maynard Morvay, special education coordinator for Centralia School District, which houses deaf children from many of the county's other districts.

"It has been estimated that a child has to have 5,000 experiences with a word to learn it." With the deaf child, that is not easy.

"We start the children at 3," Morvay said. "We can have them reading before the hearing children are in kindergarten."

But that's the last time the deaf children are ahead.

Deaf children also are at a disadvantage because they lack the understanding gained by plain conversation. Whether it by eaves-dropping, listening to a cereal commercial or even

A skilled lip-reader, she can carry on a conversation without staring intently at the speaker, and her voice, while tinged with the flat nasal tones of the deaf, is clear and understandable.

But even the best oral schooling doesn't guarantee a deaf child will turn out to be another vivacious Bobbie Barras.

Many oral deaf people speak in a strained voice which at best draws stares and at worse is incomprehensible.

And some people think lipreading is a skill which cannot be taught and is chancey in use.

Total communication advocates admit signing is easier for deaf children and may slow their progress in oral skills.

But they say once a child can sign, he can learn about language and the world around him.

More deaf children from oral schools may speak clearly, Newman said, but "it's like robots," since they parrot what they have learned.

"You've got to have something to say before you can say it," said Maynard Morvay of Centralia School District, where parents choose between oral and total communication classrooms for their deaf children.

Others say communication at an early age makes for a happier child and family.

"It's the difference between a child who says, 'Aa-aa-un,' to his mother and one who can say—at least in signs—'I love you,'" said audiologist and Children's Hear More Society head Dennis Landesman.

Oral training depends on complex hearing aids to help children use what little hearing might be left and constant talking to teach speech and lipreading.

In total communication schools, similar hearing aids are used but sign language training is added to the curriculum.

Private oral schools and clinics, such as the HEAR Center, encourage early training for deaf youngsters.

Use of hearing aids and wide-range amplification equipment is encouraged for infants as young as 6 months or as soon as deafness is discovered.

With intensive early training, young deaf children trained orally can attend regular schools from kindergarten on, oralists say.

Perhaps as difficult as teaching a child to speak and use his residual hearing in the oral schools is teaching him to hear with his eyes.

For the very young deaf, lipreading is learned along with speaking. For the older deaf, lipreading is taught in some adult school classes in the country.

Although a third of the English language is not visible on the lips, Mrs. Barras said, "Lipreading is not guess work. It is definite. But it takes work and it takes determination and persistence."

Lipreading is more often called speech-reading among teachers of the deaf today. And there's a good reason for that label.

"You have so much more to work with (than just lip movements)," Mrs. Barras said, "context, body language, gestures, poises."

"It's becoming a good lip-reader takes more than relaxation. It takes time and practice."

But not everyone agrees with Mrs. Barras that lipreading can be taught.

"Apparently lipreading cannot be taught. Or if it can be taught, it is like teaching opera singing. Very few can be taught," Golden West College hearing impaired program head Paul Culton said.

"The problem with lipreading is that about 60 per cent of the sounds are not visible on the lips and many of those that are visible look alike," Newman said. "Such as 26 men and 20 sick men or 19 and 90."

Such look-alike words can usually be puzzled out from the conversational context, Mrs. Barras said. After all, hearing people have to cope with homonyms, words that sound alike but have very different meanings such as boy and buoy or meat and meet.

Because of these problems, total communication advocates say, deaf children should be allowed to learn sign language.

They deny oralist claims that learning to sign discourages learning to speak.

Deaf children fall back on sign language "only if the teacher will accept the signing," according to Morvay. "Our people insist on an oral response."

Another argument against the traditional American Sign Language—AmSilan—was that it lacks syntax and would hinder students in speaking proper English.

What it lacks are verb endings like ed, ing and s and articles like a, an and the.

Instead of verb tenses, time words are used in the sentence.

"It is possible to render almost anything from spoken English to signs," Culton said. "But sometimes deaf people use finger spelling along with sign language, especially when discussing complex academic concepts, he said."

Each letter of the alphabet corresponds to a hand movement and words flow quickly with a flash of fingers.

In recent years a new signing system, which corresponds word for word to spoken English, has been developed, Culton said.

Seeing Essential English (SEE) signs have verb endings and articles.

"The theory is that the children will grow up with English as their native language," he said. Unfortunately, most children invent their own SEE shorthand which is more like AmSilan. One reason for the shorthand is

## They Hear With Eyes And Talk With Hands

Bill Teel, a 37-year-old Orange County resident, can't talk. But that doesn't mean the deaf Golden West College student has nothing to say.

It does mean he sometimes finds himself isolated in a crowd of hearing people who do not understand his conversations in American Sign Language and finger spelling.

To prevent such isolation, teachers of the deaf traditionally have preached that success in schooling must be measured in conquered pronunciations and careful diction.

Speech and lipreading are the keys to communicating with the rest of the world, say those supporting the so-called oralist tradition in deaf schooling. And other, easier forms of communication, such as sign language, should be discouraged because they can stunt the development of speaking skills.

But others now think strictly oral teaching methods, which can squish communication until a deaf child learns to speak and lip-read, prevent learning.

The total communication advocates say any kind of communication—including sign language—should be taught.

Warpers run high in the battle between the two schools of thought. And parents are faced with the agonizing decision of how to school their youngster.

It's a decision which could determine whether the child grows into a self-sufficient, happy adult or a misfit.

Bobbie Barras, a self-taught lip-reader who now trains deaf adults in the art, is an articulate spokeswoman for the oralist point of view.

"I would never want to be limited as to whom I could communicate with," Mrs. Barras said.

That's the key to her support of lipreading and speech training for deaf children.