

From “Horrible” to “Great”...Holidays

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It's January in my second floor psychotherapy office where the couch pillows are a tranquil blue and the portable heater provides extra warmth on this chilly winter day. The shades are tilted up so that backlighting doesn't interfere with visual communication. On the hour, I see well-functioning Deaf* and hearing adults. People come in to talk about everything from a minor life stress to a more severe mental health condition. My appointment schedule is full and every hour is unique, with one person talking about issues of aging, another adjusting to antidepressant medication, and a third who is trying to figure out how to convince a teen to stop experimenting with drugs. Prior to our meeting, I greet each person in the waiting area and we chat – in signs or speech – and I casually ask about the holidays. Hearing people and Deaf people from Deaf families smile and tell me about the family visit, the stress of shopping, or complain about Uncle Fred, who always drinks too much at holiday dinners. However, many Deaf people from hearing families respond to my question about the holidays with a single sign: “Horrible.”

“Horrible” describes an experience that always begins with high expectations and ends with isolation and disappointment, although there are two different versions of “Horrible.” Most commonly, Deaf people tell me that they once again joined beloved family members for latkes or turkey or New Year's Day brunch. They go on to tell me about a crowded dining room with everyone eating and talking at once. They tell me how they were frustrated when requests were misunderstood. Most horrible was a twenty minute story by Uncle Joe who had the whole table laughing, while the Deaf person asked, “What is he saying? Why are you laughing?” only to be told, “I'll tell

you later,” or in basic signs “Later.” “Later” my patient received a one-sentence summary, “He told us a funny story about his trip to Canada.” The details are never filled in as the loved-one then responds to another conversation or serves the pumpkin pie.

Other Deaf people tell me another story of hope and disappointment. These Deaf people decide to avoid the holiday dinner with their hearing families, because of past isolation. Instead, they join friends for dinner or stay home to watch a movie. Unfortunately, there is still an instinctual yearning to be with family for the holiday and, once again, there is disappointment and isolation.

Parents do not want their children to experience a “Horrible” holiday. I also work at a children’s hospital and I talk with parents of young deaf children who are fully committed to their children’s inclusion in the family. So what happens? What happens between the time these parents make a commitment to their preschoolers and the time these adults come into my office? Or, more appropriately, what doesn’t happen? The answer to that question emerges when I talk to those Deaf people from hearing families who respond to my small-talk about the holidays with a different sign: “Great!”

The first time someone told me “Great!” I was taken aback. I asked the young woman about her holidays and she talked about the traditions, the food, and chatting with family members. I told her that it’s unusual to hear such good things about big family dinners from Deaf adults in hearing families; more often, they tell me that they are not fully included. She looked at me with understanding and said that many of her friends complain about the same thing. “It’s not like that in my family,” she asserted. Her family knows that it’s impossible for her to participate in a noisy environment without signs, and everybody knows some signs; her mother and her sister sign well. Another time, a Deaf

woman told me about a “Great” holiday trip where her family encouraged her to invite a Deaf friend. With two Deaf people at the vacation home, it was obvious that group communication needed to include them. Although this woman commonly functions by speaking and speechreading within her family, they made the effort to communicate more visually, and include her and her friend in planning and conversations. Another time I heard, “Great!” when the family pitched in to hire a sign language interpreter for a major holiday so that everyone could communicate with their Deaf son. Although this was a significant expense for the family, they not only included their son in the party, they also demonstrated their total acceptance of him. Both the woman on the holiday trip and the Deaf son with the interpreter told me about earlier experiences when their families expected them to participate in an oral environment that was impossible for them; they recognized and appreciated that their families now were trying to meet them half-way.

Let’s try to banish “Horrible” holidays. In mid-January, let’s have Deaf and hearing people alike raving about their holiday desserts and complaining about their extra five pounds. One way to stop “Horrible” holidays would be to look at the “bright spots,” or those Deaf people who describe great holiday experiences with their families. What we can learn from these amazing Deaf people and their amazing families is how to fully include everyone, not only when children are toddlers, and communication is simple, but also when they are young adults, and they are traveling across the country to connect with their family.

The Bright Spots: How can families facilitate communication with a Deaf family member from childhood through adulthood?

Recognize Differences

Hearing families who have effective communication with a deaf family member know that the child is similar to his or her hearing siblings: the child loves them, likes friends and fun, and wants to have a good life. But, these families also accept that their deaf child has a difference and they need to accommodate to that difference, not expect the child to make all of the accommodations. How the family accommodates will look different for different families, depending on the child's age, interests, talents and the choices parents make. It can include taking sign language classes, recognizing that a cochlear implant does not provide normal auditory input, educating the whole family and community to the need to provide visual communication, providing appropriate books and toys, meeting other families with deaf children, and interacting with other people who share this unique difference – Deaf adults.

Don't Treat Differences as a Disability

Those families who enjoy effective communication among all members encourage their deaf children to expect the same level of interaction as their hearing siblings. They know that their deaf child wants to participate in family conversations, to have play-dates, and attend a good school. And, just as they do for their hearing children, the family makes changes in order to accommodate the deaf child's needs. These families embrace the idea that their child will be fully successful, and that "success" will look different for different children.

Be Open to New Information

Families who fully include their deaf children in the holidays are open to new information and they avoid making judgments. Historically, many professionals have not been so open. They often had strong opinions about the best communication and education options for a deaf child, and they only shared information that supported that view. Thankfully, this is changing, and professionals acknowledge that we don't have all the answers about what is "best" for a deaf child; professionals openly share the contradictory information that makes it difficult to provide a single direction for parents of young deaf children. With or without professional support, families who fully include their children are open to the options that work best for their child and family—and those options are all considered successful.

Engage in constant reevaluation

These families recognize that they have limited information and cannot see into the future, and yet they must make choices that will have a huge impact on the child's life. They know that they must constantly re-evaluate and reconsider these choices to insure that communication, peer group and school environments are appropriate for their son or daughter. An environment with four same-age peers may be perfect for a preschooler but will likely stunt the social development of a teenager.

Learn about your child's world

From the moment these parents find out that their child is deaf, they find books, movies, videos, documentaries, and internet sites to help them learn more about kids and grown-ups who share their child's hearing status. These parents know that if

they yell over the back fence for their hearing daughter to come home for dinner, they need to give their deaf son a vibrating pager, so he can have that same neighborhood freedom. Even if their child is able to integrate into a hearing environment, they let their child know that there is also a Deaf environment, and that's also an important place to explore.

“Great”

Families from a Christian background celebrate Easter, those from a Jewish background celebrate Passover, and Muslims celebrate the birthday of Mohammed and we all celebrate the 4th of July. Holidays are important in every culture as a time to come together and share food, traditions and love. It is also an important time for families to stop and reflect on their many blessings and problem-solve about new challenges. For all families, and especially those with Deaf family members, it is a time to insure that every family member—from tiny toddler to independent teen to well-launched young adult—is included in the joyful celebration of traditions, food, and family love. It's a time for everyone to have a “Great” holiday.

*Following the preference of many Deaf people, I use the term “Deaf” to refer to people who consider themselves to be a part of the Deaf community, use sign language and identify with Deaf culture. I also use the term “deaf,” primarily to refer to children who have hearing loss and may, or may not, be part of the Deaf community.

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