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Deafness: Disability or Culture? Best Practices Regarding Controversial Interventions for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

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Deafness: Disability or Culture?

Best Practices Regarding Controversial Interventions

for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

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Background

Definitions & Statistics

- Deafness/HOH exists on a spectrum, from mild difficulty understanding spoken language to complete inability to process auditory stimuli
- Approximately 4 out of every 1,000 students in the U.S. are Deaf/HOH
- According to the Virginia Department of Education there are approximately 2,200 Deaf/HOH students in Virginia

Accommodations

- Cochlear implants
- Hearing aids
- Communication Across Real Time (CART) and C-Print transcription software
- Visual alert systems
- In-class sign language interpreters
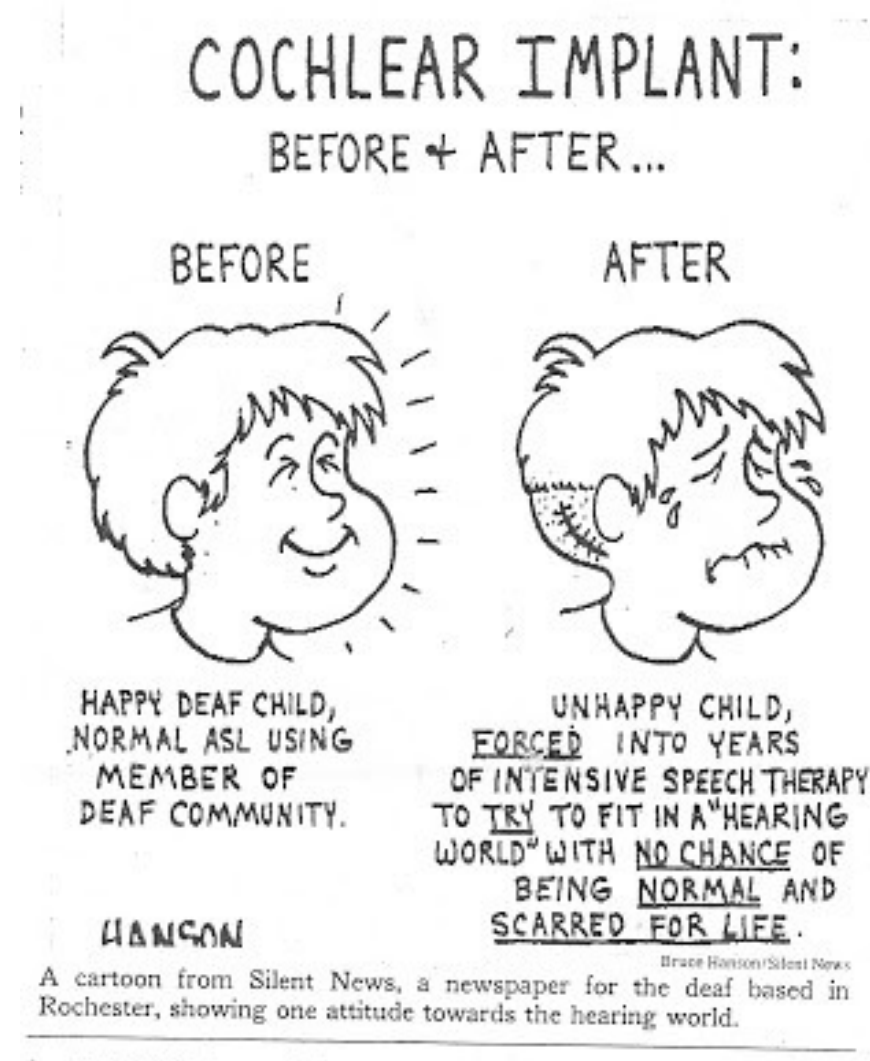- Some students function successfully without any accommodations
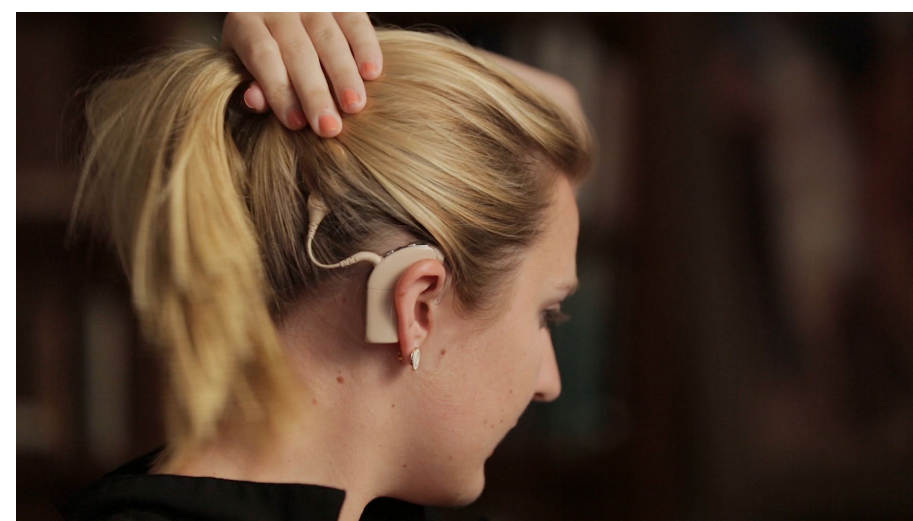
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Controversy

- Some members of the Deaf/HOH community don't conceive of deafness as a disability which limits them, but rather, as a distinct culture with its own language, history, and institutions
- Some consider external pressure to use certain assistive technologies, most notably the cochlear implant, to be a form of genocide (Jordan, 2012)
- Conversely, some medical practitioners and ethicists believe that denying a child technology to counteract a sensory disability for ideological reasons is a form of child abuse (Denworth, 2014)
- The earlier a cochlear implant is installed, the more effective it will be, which creates a sense of urgency that further complicates matters
- Thus far, most court cases have ruled that the use of cochlear implants are likely in the best interest of children; however, they ultimately reaffirm the rights of parents to raise their children as they see fit
- Ethical, culturally competent educators and school counselors will not impose their own opinions about the use of certain assistive technologies on deaf students or their families (De Raeve et al., 2012)

COCHLEAR IMPLANT: BEFORE + AFTER...

BEFORE   AFTER

HAPPY DEAF CHILD, NORMAL ASL USING MEMBER OF DEAF COMMUNITY.

UNHAPPY CHILD, FORCED INTO YEARS OF INTENSIVE SPEECH THERAPY TO TRY TO FIT IN A "HEARING WORLD" WITH NO CHANCE OF BEING NORMAL AND SCARRED FOR LIFE.

HANSON

A cartoon from Silent News, a newspaper for the deaf based in Rochester, showing one attitude towards the hearing world.

NO Cochlear Implants FOR DEAF CHILDREN

NOW HEAR THIS KEEP CARLTON DEAF

Best Practices

K-12 Teachers and School Counselors

- Best practices for Deaf/HOH students and hearing students are often identical
- Create lessons and materials that appeal to students with diverse learning styles, not only those who learn best from spoken content
- Maintain a relatively quiet, orderly learning environment. All students benefit from a consistently stable classroom, and assistive technologies like hearing aids and cochlear implants lose much of their effectiveness in a noisy space (Vermeulen et al., 2012)
- It is not necessary for teachers to know the cause of a student's deafness/HOH, and they should not ask intrusive questions about it. Counselors may broach the topic with sensitivity. Counselors should obtain consent from the student and/or parents before sharing personal medical information with other education professionals
- Educators should not express preferences for some interventions/assistive technologies over others. If an educator is concerned about a lack of interventions, or does not feel a current intervention is sufficiently effective for a student, they should consult with an administrator or school nurse

Navigating Conflicts

- In the event of a conflict between students/parents/teachers regarding an intervention, it can be helpful for all parties involved to have a conference with the school counselor present to mediate
- Exact regulations can vary between states and districts, but the wishes of the parent will often take precedence. Consultation with the school board or union's legal representation is advisable in especially difficult cases
- School counselors can help students and parents to determine how and if certain interventions can be used alongside active participation in the deaf community
- Remain sensitive to the complex emotions and questions about identity that this situation can pose. All perspectives should be treated with sensitivity and respect
- Above all else, create an environment of unconditional safety and support for students