

We picked you, not your hearing: Adopting a child with a hearing loss

By Brad and Heidi Ingrao



BRAD

The audiologists say our son has a severe to profound sensorineural hearing loss. Does he have a hearing problem? Is he hearing impaired? Is he hard of hearing? No. He is almost 7 years old, a very good golfer and baseball player, has a great smile, and is learning to read. Oh, yes, I almost forgot, he is Deaf and adopted.

When Heidi and I first investigated adoption, we made a list of which special circumstances we could handle. A Deaf child was on our "OK" list. I had been a Sign Language interpreter, and we had both been involved in the Deaf Community. We began parenting a Deaf child with an acceptance and respect of Deaf Culture and Sign Language. We didn't go through the typical hearing loss-related grief and guilt that many parents feel and struggle with.

HEIDI

We looked at all the pros and cons of adopting this child. We knew going in that he had emotional problems from his past.

Brad and I were experienced and educated with this type of child. I was a social worker for disturbed teens, and we had been therapeutic foster parents. We didn't learn until after he was placed with us that he has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

We had prepared ourselves and our families for adopting a Deaf child. Now, we were in the position to accept, learn about, and deal with a child who was very different from the one we expected. Just like most parents of children with hearing loss. The adjustment to a new addition to our family, understanding and learning to deal with ADHD, and re-aligning our priorities away from the two of us, and toward our son, all took priority over the fact that he can't hear.

BRAD

We searched the Internet and found a wonderful listing called the Deaf Adoption News Service, run by Jamie Berke (berke@erols.com). One day I was reading my e-mail, and saw a posting for a 5-year-old Deaf child and printed it for Heidi. For the next several days, I found myself reading that e-mail over and over. After careful consideration, we contacted the agency to get more information. We met him on his 6th birthday and then visited again a month later.

At 7:45 a.m. on July 5, 1996, we

parked the rental car in his foster parents' driveway. Feeling a bit nervous, we walked to the door and rang the bell. His foster father opened the door and invited us in. Five seconds later, "our" boy literally flew down the stairs into Heidi's arms. It was at that moment that we knew we had made the right decision. It was also then that we felt truly blessed that he chose us.

Like any other children, Deaf kids need to know they are loved and accepted as they are. Without excluding the family, they need to know and interact with other Deaf people. We parents can feel stampeded by well-meaning professionals looking to rehabilitate, improve, correct, and normalize our children. Like our son, these kids really aren't broken, they just can't hear. If we compare our Deaf kids to the "norm," they are, by definition, impaired. If however, we compare them to other Deaf kids, they are normal. As an audiologist, I have seen far too many kids who have good speech but poor language. These kids often meet their IEP goals, but have no goals for themselves.

While our son had a very rough start, he is now better off than many of his peers. When he looks into our eyes, he sees parents who wake each morning thanking God for him, just as he is. When he looks into the mirror, he sees a kid who is loved and accepted. When he looks at the world, he sees opportunity, not limitations.

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