

Reaching Out

TO HISPANIC FAMILIES Through Special Activities

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Perspectives for Teachers of the Hearing Impaired

Teachers wisely seek to involve parents in deaf children's education whenever possible. But what happens when the language and culture of the parents are different from those of the teachers? Although as many as 30 percent of the deaf children in this country are Hispanic and have Spanish-speaking parents, only a tiny percentage (0.6 percent) of educators are Hispanic, and not many more teachers who speak Spanish well are available to work in programs for deaf children.

What can we all do to establish communication with Hispanic families and encourage their involvement in educational programs? How can we provide the support that these families need?

At the California School for the Deaf, in Fremont, we have a special program—now in its third year and still growing—that brings educators and Hispanic parents of deaf children into a cooperative relationship and enables these Hispanic families to meet and help each other. We have made some mistakes, but our efforts have proved both productive and rewarding. We have succeeded in overcoming language and cultural barriers and extending a warm welcome to the Hispanic families in our area, principally through a combination of workshops and other activities.

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Here are some lessons we have learned that we hope will make it easier for you to do the same.

Planning a Program

- *Clarify your goals.* Our primary aim was to bring Hispanic parents together: We wanted them to know that they were not alone and that they could support one another in many ways. Another important goal was to establish a relationship between the members of the deaf child's family and the teachers and support staff at school. We decided that we would share information with parents through workshops, home visits, and the establishment of a lending library of relevant materials.

- *Begin planning early.* It took us ten months to move from the planning stages to our first workshop. We began collecting materials for a library in February, but the library wasn't truly ready until October of the following year.

- *Listen to parents.* If you would like to establish a program for Hispanic parents but do not speak Spanish yourself, begin by approaching some bilingual parents. Ask them for their ideas and suggestions and respect their opinions. During the first year of our program we had only one bilingual family to advise us. Now six families (some of whom speak only Spanish) serve on our official advisory committee.

- *Plan to invite the whole family.* We quickly learned that the Hispanic culture places great emphasis on the family. Many mothers told us how much time their children spent in church- and holiday-related activities with their extended families. The women in our advisory group explained that, while Hispanic mothers are the primary caretakers in the family, the fathers generally make the major decisions. Thus, it is

particularly desirable to have fathers attend workshops and learn about the needs of their children. The mothers also advised us to encourage the whole family to come, and to provide child care during the workshop. The Hispanic child's extended family includes (besides the father, mother, brothers, and sisters) aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. We have invited all of these people to our workshops.

- *Anticipate problems (and then do the best you can).* It may be difficult to put some of your ideas into practice. In our case, for example, parents stressed the need for effective translation, but our school budget was limited and the low pay scale made it very difficult for us to find qualified interpreters and translators for our activities and materials. Transportation presented another problem, as many families did not have cars. We helped arrange car pools and asked some teachers to drive parents to school for our workshops. Still, some families who wanted to come were unable to attend because of transportation problems. We videotaped our presentations and arranged for these families to borrow videocassette recorders.

Enlisting Support

- *Solicit help from parents.* Parents not only serve on our advisory board but also provide help with every phase of our program. Parent volunteers assist with invitations, program planning, and follow-up evaluations. Hispanic parents have turned out to be our best public relations source; they tell their friends and acquaintances about our activities, and the word gets out. They have informed us of the Spanish-language radio stations and other resources for reaching the Hispanic community and translated our public

service announcements into Spanish for us. They have even served as speakers at some of our workshops.

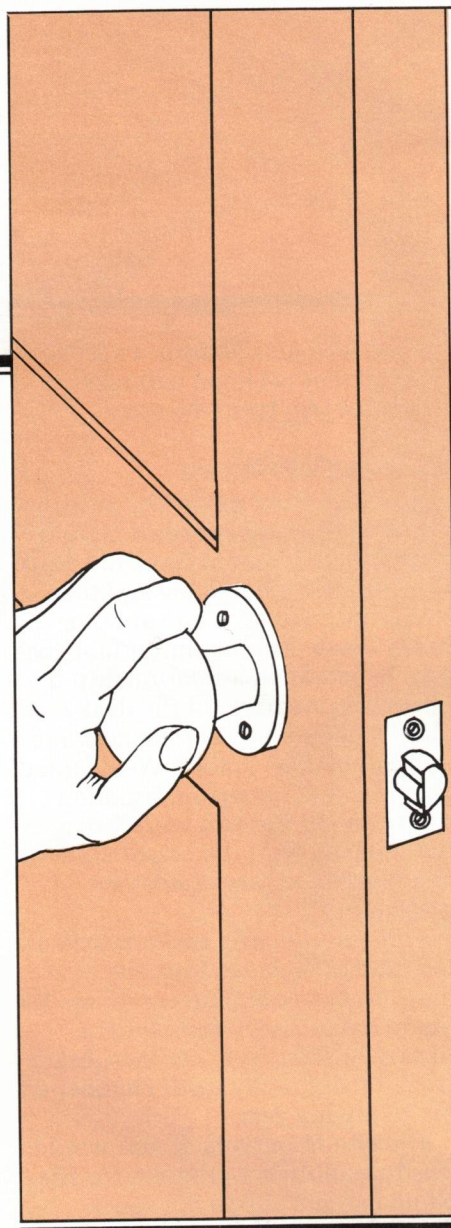
- *Seek administrative support.*

Our superintendent was very supportive, but not all administrators of educational services are in touch with the special needs of Hispanic parents of deaf children. School staff members who work directly with parents should provide information to keep administrators advised of your needs, activities, and successes. Invite administrators to your advisory group meetings. Ask them to deliver introductory remarks at an activity. And encourage the more assertive parents to express their needs to the administrators.

- *Make full use of staff support.*

Every school is full of dedicated, resourceful people. Ask for their help. It is especially important to seek help from any Hispanic staff members—they know the language, the customs, and the community. Don't just use them as translators. Ask them to assist with planning and to communicate directly with parents. Our food service department, for example, encouraged Hispanic staff members to select appropriate meals for our activities. When you involve Hispanics in your program you not only help ensure the program's success but also communicate your respect to the Hispanic parents.

Staff members who speak no Spanish also find important roles in our program. For example, residential counselors (both deaf and hearing) provided child care during our first workshop. Although they initially expressed hesitation about communicating with the Spanish-speaking children, the counselors were delighted to find that they had no problem providing excellent care



for all of the hearing and deaf children. They were pleased to see how well the children cooperated, and the hearing siblings of deaf children gained new respect for deaf adults when they saw them assuming supervisory roles.

Remember to express appreciation for the help you receive from the staff members (as well as parents) who provide support services. Give them the recognition they deserve. Introduce them to the families at the workshops, mention them in the school newsletter, and send them thank you notes.

- *Make regional connections.* Since parent support depends on parents—and the more, the better—

make the extra effort to invite families from a wide geographic area. Every participant enriches your program and makes the network of parents stronger.

Contacting parents from other schools may be difficult, but there are ways to do this. We sent announcement letters describing our activities to special education administrators throughout northern California. We made statewide contacts with teachers and other professionals. We sought and found newspaper reporters who were receptive to human interest stories about our upcoming activities. We contacted Spanish-language radio stations. We asked everyone who contacted us to allow us to add their names to our mailing list so they would be informed of future activities.

Presenting Workshops and Other Activities

- *Stress personal contact.* It is important that the Hispanic parents understand that your activity is designed specifically for them. Most Spanish-speaking parents are not accustomed to being invited to school, and they may at first assume that the activity will not be accessible or useful to them. Call attention to the fact that your activity will be presented in Spanish (or interpreted into Spanish) and is intended exclusively for Hispanic families.

The importance of personal contact cannot be overemphasized. We sent out a letter of invitation (written in Spanish, with an English translation on the other side) and then followed up with telephone calls. Each parent volunteer was asked to call ten other parents to invite them to attend the workshop. (Be sure that volunteers have access to all neces-

sary information and remember to reimburse them for any expenses.) A bilingual staff member telephoned each family to ask how many family members were planning to attend and also to offer help with any problems that might prevent someone from coming. This personal touch seemed to be quite effective in increasing attendance. In the third year of our program, 160 people (80 deaf and hearing children, and 80 adult family members) showed up for our principal weekend activity.

- *Choose effective speakers.* It is best to include some speakers who are Hispanic, can speak Spanish, and have some expertise on deafness. Gilbert Delgado, editor of *The Hispanic Deaf Child*, was our featured speaker one year. But it is difficult to find such an ideal speaker, so be creative. We invited a lawyer from a local Hispanic immigration organization to explain the rights of parents and children. We brought in Hispanic mental health professionals. We have asked parents to speak to the group. The personal qualities of the speakers are as important as the content of the presentations. If a speaker is not fluent in Spanish, find a skillful interpreter.

- *Address cultural issues.* There are cultural conflicts between Hispanic and non-Hispanic people, just as there are between deaf and hearing people. Bring out some of these issues and encourage Hispanic parents to work together as a group to help their children strengthen cultural ties. One of our Hispanic staff members interviewed deaf Hispanic high school students and reported her findings during a parent meeting. The parents were saddened to learn that many of their children preferred school to home because at

home “no one could talk” to them. Families were also disturbed to hear that the deaf children felt that their identification with the non-Hispanic culture was becoming stronger as they experienced effective communication outside—rather than within—the family.

When such issues come up at individualized educational program (IEP) meetings, parents may feel that the school is siding with the children and undermining the parents’ influence. But when the same information is presented at a parent group meeting the parents can talk to each other and find solutions. Parents can help each other discover ways to give their children a stronger

sense of their culture’s values and increase their children’s involvement within the family. Working together in support groups, parents can help their children develop an identity that relates to being *both* deaf and Hispanic.

- *Get feedback from parents.* Take advantage of these meetings to find out parents’ concerns and complaints. Listen to the parents. Conduct a brief needs assessment. Use a group interview or discussion format (and a tape recorder or note taker) rather than a written questionnaire.

Keep It Up!

After your first workshop is over, take a week or two to recover. Then be sure to follow up. Write thank you letters. Send parents any new information (such as the results of a needs assessment). Expand your lending library. And “toot your horn” a little to get support for your next activity.

Encourage parents to take over and plan a future activity. Provide support, share the mailing list, cover the cost of postage—but let them know that they are in charge. Some of the parents who met at our workshops later planned a family picnic in a park and then continued to meet as a group.

Organizing parent support groups and presenting informative workshops require a lot of work, but the benefits are great, not only for the children and their families, but for us professionals as well. We gain a valuable glimpse of another culture. We develop relationships with parents, begin to understand parents’ concerns, and learn to work together with these families to achieve common goals. All of this can only serve to make us more effective educators—and more enlightened people.

