Parents partnering with language researchers to identify best practices for learning ASL

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Outline for today

1. Unique parenting challenges
   The challenges faced by parents of deaf and hard of hearing children

2. Linguistic perceptions
   Comparison of sign language acquisition as a first language vs a second language

3. Best practices
   What works and what doesn't work, based on research with parents and children
1. Unique parenting challenges
About 95% of deaf children in the US have hearing parents with no previous experience with deafness or sign language.

(Mitchell & Karchmer 2004)
"Nothing is scarier than not speaking the same language as your baby."

The challenge for hearing parents of deaf children: Accessible language or familiar, fluent language?
From your smartphone or tablet browser, go to kahoot.it

Enter this PIN: 904297

Create a user name.
Kahoot questions 1-3: Who are we?
Preliminary study: Interviews with 27 Hearing parents who have committed to ASL as a home language

(Chen Pichler, to appear, b)

Parents of deaf children ages 7 months - 10 years, median 4 years
Kahoot questions 4-5:
Goals
What are your long-term goals for **YOUR OWN** ASL learning? (Chen Pichler, to appear, b)
What are your long-term goals for YOUR CHILD’S ASL learning? (Chen Pichler, to appear, b)

Parents' goals for child's ASL development

- Short term only: 0
- ASL as backup language: 6
- Fully bilingual ASL-English: 23
"I just wanted to give her the tools and let her decide. I don't know if she going to want to wear hearing aids when she’s older … and she needs a way to communicate with whatever community she wants to be in."

"The one thing you can always count on technology to do is break. I’m not going to suddenly stop talking with my daughter for a week while we’re getting her implant fixed."

“I’ve met people who grew up oral and then learned to sign, and I don’t want my daughter to be in that position, to have to learn a new language at 21.”
2. Linguistic perceptions
What do language learners have to learn?
Kahoot questions 6-8: perceptions
Which aspects of ASL are the most important to learn?

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<th>Not that important</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Large vocabulary</td>
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<td>Produce and read fingerspelling</td>
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<td>Facial expression/nonmanuals</td>
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<td>ASL story-telling skills</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Word order and grammar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pick and use classifiers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using eye gaze correctly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child-directed ASL</td>
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<td>7</td>
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</table>
Which aspects of ASL are the hardest/easiest to learn?

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<th>Near impossible</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child-directed sign</td>
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(Chen Pichler to appear, b)
In some ways I feel it is easier to express myself in ASL [than in my other second language, English], because I don’t have to think about pronunciation, I can just focus on grammar or word order.

A lot of [ASL] words ... are very intuitive.
...signs that really look like what they are.

Split opinions on vocabulary;
Not much conscious attention to phonology
Word order is elusive and difficult to learn

“I can’t get any feedback on my word order [from Deaf adults]. Nobody ever corrects me, they’re just thrilled I’m doing ASL...”
"We are stuck at intermediate level. We’re already in the last ASL class offered in our area, but we still don’t feel fluent."

"I’m going to reach a point [where] if I don’t keep learning, I’m going to lose my ability to communicate with her in the way that I want to."

What resources do you still need to support your family’s development of ASL?

(Chen Pichler, to appear, b)
First Language: Acquisition
• Unconscious process
• Based on exposure
• No previous language
• Child controls pace
• Process is predictable
• Endpoint is uniform

Second Language: Learning
• Intentional process
• Based on teaching
• Transfer from first language
• Teacher controls pace
• Process is less predictable
• Endpoint is not uniform
Adults often need to be taught the patterns of ASL. Children develop those intuitions through exposure.
"We can only parent half of her; the Deaf community parents the other half."

"...I want him to be around people that do sign and I want him to be in classrooms that do both and incorporate both....I feel it every day, like, “Man, I wish I could do this for you, but I can’t.”"
Kahoot questions 9-11: Developmental patterns
3. Best practice: What works and doesn't work?
Build other sources of ASL models (your "village") into your family life.

Find opportunities for your child to have regular interaction with signing peers.

Develop more advanced levels of family-centered ASL curricula for parents who are ready for it.
thank you