

THOUGHTS AND HELPFUL HINTS ON PROCEDURES AND METHODS USED IN INSTRUCTING DEAF/HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN

Where do we start? Even finding the starting place seems like a monumental task. It goes without saying that there's plenty of work, frustration, tears, failure, success, repetition, soul-searching moments and joy ahead.

Prayer is the best starting point. Everybody's going to need lots of it. Then pray some more.

By no means do I consider myself or my methods used professional. A lot was learned by trial and error. Perhaps that's "Lesson #1": Be adaptable. Be ready to scrap all preparations for the day and pursue the topic of the day (maybe someone died), a question that came up, or review work that obviously didn't sink in.

TIME ELEMENT

In our case this was a slow starting process that picked up momentum as time went along. Several factors influenced this:

1) Communication

- a) DON'T WAIT! Get them when they're young! Even if the child is young (age 3 or 4) and hasn't learned to communicate effectively; even if his brain thoughts haven't been organized into nouns, verbs, sentences, names, etc; what's wrong with showing him pictures? Let him hear with his eyes, even in the area of religion. Picture Bible story books can be a real asset without even saying a word. Cartoon or comic book style books which show the progression of the story by picture are the best, one picture per story doesn't tell much. (But it's better than nothing.) (see picture bible story books file)

We learned not to wait the hard way: When one child in his early teens did not want to have anything to do with religious instruction (the Old Adam doing his thing), it was a matter of communicating with him – his parents as well – what this involved. It meant gaining his attention (not confidence) that this religious instruction was good for him and would be interesting -- contrary to everything he thought it would be. (Of course this couldn't be proven to him until he started attending.) Finally, with careful Christian concern, he and his family had to be shown that he had no choice. He was one of our baptized members, and I wasn't going to give up trying to teach him God's Plan of Salvation.

- b) The terms we use in our everyday religious instruction cannot be taken for granted with children who have no idea what we're talking about. For this reason, it may be beneficial to start with simple Bible stories, as in a Sunday School program, before the gradual introduction of a more thorough, outlined, catechetical, doctrinal, instructional approach is implemented.

- c) Obviously, communication was something to work on. More time was initially spent on the problem of communicating with each other than learning or teaching anything! This problem is not to be underestimated. Nor is it a problem that is insurmountable. It goes SLOWLY at first (slower than one usually anticipates or realizes). But, as the English language is gradually mastered (now we're talking about real, down-to-earth communication), as ecclesiastical terms are better understood, as the machinery used for communication (sign language, interpreters, lip-reading, captioning, etc) runs smoother, more and more attention can be given to God's Word.

2) Progression

- a) For a child to reach the level of instruction so that he is ready to be confirmed means years upon years of instruction.
- i) The starting place is at the home with
- Bible stories on mother's and father's laps
 - Teaching one to pray
 - Devotions
 - Memory work
 - Singing/signing children's fun religious songs, hymns, carols
- ii) Sunday School (assuming the Lutheran Elementary School is not equipped to instruct the deaf or hard of hearing child)
- iii) Vacation Bible School
- b) Formal instruction
- i) Once a frequent, routine schedule is established, it's just a matter of how long it takes the students to learn and retain, with much review, what one is required to know before receiving the Lord's Supper, that is, before being confirmed. Weekly classes are important for the children to learn and retain information.
- ii) Towards the end of instruction (last two years), we met once a week for an hour and a half. This was in addition to mandatory attendance at church and Sunday School.

THE SETTING

- 1) Visual aids are a must. Rooms with chalkboards, overhead projectors, computer access, and maps are standard equipment.
- 2) Don't worry about lighting bills when teaching a student who must hear with his eyes. In other words, have decent lighting. Always stand so that *you*, not the student, are looking into the glare from windows.

- 3) Properly fitted desks or chairs with tables help stretch the length of time one can stay seated.
- 4) The more severe the degree of hearing loss and other handicapping conditions, the more ideal the “one-on-one” teacher-student relationship is. In fact, it was our experience to have more teachers than students in every class. Let me explain: In the beginning of our instruction, I needed an interpreter who could sign the communication. Inevitably, this should be a member of the deaf person’s family, as it provides a number of benefits:
 - a) On the spot help which provides
 - i) help in signing
 - ii) help in finding pages, passages, places on a map, etc
 - iii) help in taking notes
 - iv) help in reading
 - b) The child has someone who can help with homework and review. Since someone else “heard” what was said in class, it makes it so much easier to further explain at home. REVIEW is important! HOME REVIEW is more important! The family must not be left out in this vital role for furthering the Christian education of the child.
 - c) It helps the child and parent grow together in God’s Word.
 - d) Without exception, the parent appreciates the long overdue review of what God’s Word says. Note: Many times the parents will ask questions about the topic at hand which can easily lead to in-depth discussion that will quickly go over the head of a child. If not too time consuming, I found it okay to allow such discussion. (The kids appreciate a break! Besides, it is always my hope that the parent will further discuss the subject at home or later on in life.)

THE TEACHING

- 1) **Prayers:** I had the children write their own prayers in advance, check them over with me, and begin the class with the children reading their own prayers.
- 2) **Memory work:** Do not let the child be cheated out of memorizing the beautiful truths of God’s Word, hymns, parts of the catechism, even the books of the Bible. Pronunciation may not be the best, but that’s not the purpose behind memorization. It was our pleasant surprise that the children could do more than anyone thought possible. However, one must be ready to explain the words and also realize that it often takes deaf or hard of hearing children longer to memorize.
- 3) **Materials and texts:** Again, be adaptable. Generally speaking, we started with the more simple and progressed, with time, to the more advanced. Pictures and visual aids are a tremendous help in any area. Concepts are undoubtedly the most difficult to teach, as for example, the 6th Commandment. Any Bible story that helps illustrate the point at hand should be utilized.
 - a) Movies/DVD’s, captioned/signed if possible

- b) Bibles in various translations
- c) *Luther's Small Catechism*
- d) *The Simplified Catechism* by Sandra Greenfield and Ardis Koeller available through Northwestern Publishing House
- e) *Sign to the Lord a New Song: A Religious Sign Language Dictionary* by Irene Riege, et al, available from Northwestern Publishing House and Harris Communications

One general observation: Decent materials for religious signs that are not influenced by Reformed theology are hard to find.

- 4) **Role-playing:** Acting it out is as beneficial as anything in teaching a Bible story.
- 5) **Sign language:** To be a more effective teacher and one that shows deep concern and willingness to help teach God's Word to the deaf and hard of hearing, I would strongly suggest taking classes in sign language (if that is the mode of communication). The time spent in learning the language will be time saved in teaching God's Word.
- 6) **Humor:** It was also our experience that, in order to cope with the many problems of life which the deaf and hard of hearing must face, a good sense of humor sure helps. To be able to laugh *with* each other in a more relaxed atmosphere goes a long way in studying and learning the seriousness of the truths of Holy Scripture.

These thoughts are shared with the prayer that they may aid children in learning more of God's special love in Christ.

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