

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN DEAF AND HEARING INFANTS AND THEIR PARENTS: A DECADE OF RESEARCH

LYNNE SANFORD KOESTER¹

UDK: 376.36

¹ The University of Montana, Missoula, MT, USA

This paper presents results of two analyses conducted as part of a study of the early social and communicative development of deaf and hearing infants, with either deaf or hearing parents. The first topic relates to patterns of eye gaze among deaf and hearing parent-infant dyads; the second describes these same infants in terms of their emerging awareness of self at age 18 months.

Infants establish the basic structures for later social interaction and communication through early exchanges with social partners. One essential component of this early communication is maintaining face-to-face interaction, usually involving mutual eye contact. The importance of the visual world is heightened for deaf parents and their children, all of whom must pay a great deal of attention to non-vocal cues in their social environment. Results of this study indicate that deaf and hearing parents use different strategies (i.e., emphasize different sensory channels) to re-engage an infant who has looked away during social interaction.

Communication, attention, and language acquisition may also play a role in the infant's gradual understanding of distinctions between "self" and "other". It is assumed that this emerging skill results in part from a growing sense of self-efficacy, or an awareness of the self as an agent causing things and people in the environment to respond in predictable ways. This in turn might depend upon a caregiving relationship which is both contingent upon and sensitive to the infant's nonvocal signals. Infants who share their parents' hearing status (e.g., both are deaf or both are hearing) appear to develop an image of the self as separate from "other" somewhat earlier than those in mis-matched dyads.

Key words: nonverbal communication, deaf children, face-to-face interaction, self-recognition, eye gaze behavior

This paper is based on results first reported in the following two sources:

1) Koester, L.S., Karkowski, A.M., & Traci, M.A. (1998). How do deaf and hearing mothers regain eye contact when their infants look away? *American Annals of the Deaf*, 143 (1), 5-13.

2) Koester, L.S., & Forest, D.S. (1998, April). Self-recognition responses among deaf and hearing 18-month-old infants

Poster presented at the Biennial Meetings of the International Conference on Infant Studies, Atlanta GA.

Theoretical and Methodological Background

Several years ago, a German movie entitled "Jenseits der Stille" was produced, depicting the dilemmas and realities of a *hearing* child growing up in a *deaf* family. Although this film did not address all of the possible combinations of hearing/deaf parents and children, it nevertheless drew attention to some of the important but subtle differences in the ways people communicate with each other in families where deafness is involved. It also conveyed an awareness that deaf people clearly do not simply live in a world of silence – that there is much, much more in the rich forms of interactions taking place between these