



Behaviour Modification and Discipline in Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Children

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“Parenting is not for Sissies,” was a t-shirt caption that I once saw, and I had no idea, that with time, I’d appreciate this statement to be one of life’s simple truths. Whatever your child’s personality, abilities and challenges, sometimes frankly, parenting is really hard work! Learning that there are boundaries that need respecting, certain behaviors that just aren’t okay and that other people in this world matter and need to be respected, are some of the hardest teaching tasks for any parent. We all have ideals of how we desire to parent our children, some of us desire an open nurturing environment where the child largely leads in various areas, whilst some of us prefer to adopt a firmer parenting style. Like all things, there is a spectrum, and like all things, we will need to discover what parenting approach fits best with our individual children and family units as a whole.

We are all very familiar with “the terrible twos” saying, suggesting that toddlers desire to explore boundaries, some more than others, making parenting during the toddler years, a task and a half! We can also appreciate that different people have different personalities – some children have a strong will, which thrown into the pot of everything else going on, can make for quite a parenting challenge. I have one of these little fireballs, and know first-hand that they are a hand full! So the average person who has been a parent for two years or more will understand that behavioral issues requiring modification or “discipline” is something that we all have to grapple with, at one time or another.

Throw a deaf (and here I’m referring to the wide spectrum of hearing loss) kid in the mix, and consider that statistics show that more than 90% of deaf kids are born to hearing parents. Then consider that most of these hearing parents are unfamiliar with deafness, fraught with grief at least initially, overwhelmed by the road that lies ahead, whilst burdened by the myriad of decisions that obstruct their immediate view of what actually does lie ahead, and yep there’s a recipe for potential chaos. Now to top it off, realize that in developing worlds like ours, newborn hearing screening is not routine, so yes, like in my situation, the child is identified with a hearing loss ONCE the lack of communication has already become a problem.

I remember a situation in my own home two years ago. We’d wake up for the day and wonder downstairs to prepare breakfast for each of the girls. Anxiety would grip my insides as I knew that the

first tantrum of the day would soon be inevitable. Swinging around the kitchen to fling open all the doors (and fridge) for all the potential edible options to be in view, so that the girls' pointing could at least serve as a form of communication as to what they wanted to eat, I'd stand back and hope that what they wanted was in view, because if it wasn't, all hell would break loose, due to the frustration of not knowing how to ask for something that was out of sight. Cupboard doors would get slammed whilst we desperately tried to gather the odd item and convince them that honey was delicious....but if honey was not what was wanted...not much would calm the storm. Totally intimidating and exhausting for any parent! On the other hand, imagine how frustrating it must be, to not be able to tell mom that what you actually wanted for breakfast was anchovy butter. But hey, the last jar was thrown out a week ago, so there was nothing to point to. And because you have nothing to point to and no language to describe it, mom doesn't know to buy more. Frustration with a capital "F"!

So considering the marriage of all the above, it is not surprising to see that deaf children are reported to have higher rates of aggression, bad behavior and inattention. (1)

Where then, do we start as parents? I think that firstly, one needs to define the objective of "discipline" - often seen as a "bad" word due to the connotations of physical punishment which has globally been frowned upon and legally banned in many parts of the world. I'm not going to get into that debate at all here. I like the explanation of "discipline" that I found on the Women's and Children's Health Network website that explained, "Discipline is not about physical punishment but rather about teaching. It helps children know what is to be expected and gradually helps them to learn how to control their own behaviour. They learn best when they feel safe and secure and good behaviour is encouraged." So, encouraging healthy desired behaviour in a safe way, is the fundamental goal. After consulting a host of articles from various sources as listed below, I've extracted some of the key points that I think are particularly helpful and practical.

Reasons for behavioral challenges in deaf/hard of hearing children:

Parenting a deaf child is a unique situation for various reasons. The issue of a possible poor foundational language base resulting in **difficulty in communication** and consequent **frustration**, is of fundamental importance. This in turn will affect everything. It will affect your relationship with your child, their cognitive development (how their brain grows) and the way they see and interact with the world based on the social concepts (or lack thereof) that they have created. If you can't communicate about breakfast choices, are you going to be able to discuss topics like school subject choices, relationships, issues around safety and just the day to day trials and tribulations? An overwhelming thought, I know! But, just start somewhere, your child is worth the effort and please believe me when I insist that you CAN do it!

Guilt is a common feeling experienced by parents of special needs children, and some parents have admitted to being a little more lenient on their special needs child, as they kind of feel responsible for the "disability" and even sorry for the child. This can lead to poor boundary setting which can express itself eventually in behavioral problems, and can also cause resentment in the heart of any other siblings who are dealt with more strictly. Again, adding to difficult home dynamics for desired behaviour to be practiced.

Other challenges highlighted globally, include the possibility of **other cognitive challenges** and sensory integration problems (both of which would need specialist consultation for assistance) as well as some subtleties. If you are deaf, you miss out on the “incidental” chatting that is happening around you. This is the conversation that mom is having with dad, or that your sister shouts out from another room. We know that even the best amplification device does not give you “perfect” access to sound, so missing out on at least some incidental communication, is a given for any deaf child. Imagine that you are enjoying playing with your Lego and have set your little heart on how you want to spend the next 30 minutes constructing your truck. Over the past 40 minutes, mom dad and big sister have been planning an outing to the shops as Aunt Lizzy is coming for tea later that afternoon. No one has thought to get down to your level and explain that in 30 minutes we will be going to the shops, so that you can be prepared. Nope, as soon as the engine has been started, you are whipped away from what you were enjoying with no prior warning at all, because having a hearing loss meant that you missed all the leading conversational components. So now you are upset, frustrated and grumpy and dad says that you are “acting out”. We all need time to adapt in part to the next activity or experience. As hearing people, we take this kind of incidental hearing for granted. And later that afternoon when Aunt Lizzy appears from nowhere, the surprise factor of seeing her (since you didn’t hear the conversation about her visit, or the chatter that she had arrived, or the clutter of the house keys as dad reached for the gate remote to let her in) and so you’re shy and unfriendly, and again “acting out.” Recently, we were having renovations at home and there were various strangers in and out at different times. For the first few days, the girls were just “difficult”; demanding and clingy, and I thought, “Perfect timing! Renovations are stressful as it is, can’t the kids just behave well!” I then thought that possibly it wasn’t Murphy doing his thing again, possibly the walking out of their play room into a stranger, the waking up and wondering downstairs to meet a different stranger, having their house, their safe place, invaded by, and then altered by strangers without their knowing when they were arriving or why they were there in the first place, was possibly really disconcerting and could definitely affect their behaviour. I then took time to explain to them what was being changed and who to expect to see, and when someone arrived, I’d try to find the girls and inform them of the new event, to minimize the “surprises,” consequent of not accessing the incidental moments. There was definitely a difference in their general moods after that.

People often ask me, “You must have such a quiet house?” I can assure you that quite the opposite is true. In fact we have a wall mount in our home that says amongst other things, “We do loud...really well!” Kids with a hearing loss often can’t appreciate how loud they are being, so the volume of their voices and sounds escalates. Having three competing for attention, means a snow ball effect of what I call “noise stress”. And man, I find excessive noise VERY **stressful**. It wears on my nerves, until eventually I become ratty, and that in turn upsets the girls which makes them behave less desirably, which gets louder and louder and makes me more frustrated etc. A definite link between hearing loss and a recipe for difficult behaviour.

Helpful Strategies and Techniques:

Routines can be difficult for deaf kiddies to grasp, for various reasons. Besides language delays, incidental hearing again plays a role, and concept development can be compromised if language is weak. So if Granny fetches you from school on Wednesdays, but you don’t know it is Wednesday, because you missed that, and you are really wanting to see mommy at pick up time. When you see Granny, there

may be a meltdown, because your little heart and mind wasn't prepared. Making routines understandable to deaf kiddies is not difficult, but does require effort. **Create a weekly visual calendar.** Pictures (or even photos) at first are great, but as the child gets older, embellishing this with words, phrases and short sentences will also be a useful literacy development activity. Draw Monday, draw a swimming pool and a happy face, draw school on Tuesday morning getting dressed and the various activities that day may include. If Wednesday is the day that Granny does a school pickup, draw Granny and her car, and maybe she takes the child to speech therapy, add that detail too. If something different, out of routing is happening that week, maybe Daddy is going away for a few days on business, draw that in, and take your child through each day in turn, helping them to know what each picture, then word means, and what to expect. You don't need to be able to draw, find pictures on line, or cut out from magazines, make it fun and colourful for your visual child.

A Kidpower book that I am working through starts a section on the topic of behaviour with, "Be prepared that children will sometimes have difficulty staying in charge of their behaviour." Our children can't always express their needs or concerns which can be very frustrating, they may not have the tools and skills to process this frustration and convert it to something desirable to their parents. But instead, behaviour that in turn draws attention is the result, and sometimes this is the moment when the adult in their life needs to **stop, think and reassess**. Is this frustration that is boiling over, and how can I help lessen this? Is he feeling insecure for whatever reason? Is she feeling ignored? Have there been some significant changes that she is emotionally not mature enough to work through, such as a new teacher, move to a new house? Or simply, is my child feeling unwell, or could she be hungry. I'm not for one second suggesting that the child is always an innocent angel whose bad behaviour doesn't need acknowledging and addressing for what it is, but as responsible, loving parents, let's first ask the question of, "What could be beneath this behaviour?"

Apart from the desire to keep yourself sane and your child safe from harmful behaviour, there are various other reasons why investing time and effort into teaching and modeling desirable behaviour in children is so important. The process of learning that certain behaviour is unacceptable, could possibly cause harm to yourself and others, and that certain consequences may be the result, teaches a child vital life lessons. Self-discipline and problem solving are some examples with obvious long term benefits. Understanding concepts such as cause and effect, is a normal cognitive milestone and an important skill necessary for independence in everyday life. Opportunities to work through issues around behaviour are golden moments to build emotional literacy and set the foundation for the development of emotional intelligence. I've found that whilst doing this, **validating my child's feelings** as a start to the conversation, often starts calming things down from square one. "I can see you are very angry. Are you angry? Your sister popped your balloon. Mama would also feel angry. It's okay to feel angry. Angry and maybe disappointed? Smacking your sister is not okay even when you are feeling angry." And then the conversation would continue to explain why smacking isn't kind, and telling mommy that you are very angry would be better. You have validated their feelings, have given them permission to feel emotions, and clearly highlighted that feeling the emotion and acting out the emotion in a negative way are different, and something that the child can steer in the future. You've also had an opportunity to embellish language around emotion. We don't only feel happy or sad. We feel disappointed, embarrassed, frustrated, worried, hurt and jealous; nice words for your child to learn the meaning of too. Taking the time to work through situations like these is also an opportunity for bonding with and

getting to know your child better, opportunities that could actually strengthen your relationship with him or her.

When you are feeling tired or equally frustrated by the situation, remembering that this is an opportunity for learning can be really hard. It becomes easier with practice and a few simple suggestions from various sources really do make a difference. Firstly, you simply have to **stop everything that you are doing**. Not always easy, and the exact situation needs to be assessed to always ensure safety first, for example whilst driving, but when possible, stop the cooking, the emailing, the texting and give your child your full attention. Take a few deep breaths and DECIDE to practice patience. Go down to your child's level and make an extra effort to **make eye contact**. Eye contact is important for children with a hearing loss as irrespective of communication modality, they are wired to be visual. Even further evident when considering this: hearing kids, when not wanting to hear their parents correction, will sometimes block their ears, as a rebellious, "Ha! Now I can't hear you!" And deaf kids? I've experienced this first hand. The deaf kid equivalent is to close their eyes. So frustrating for a parent, and often, I've just had to wait for them to peek to see if I disappeared and had given up. Knowing that they won't last standing with their eyes closed all day as it shuts them off from the rest of their world, which is not something that they enjoy, I take a deep breath, get comfortable at eye level and wait for that peek, until I have an opportunity to communicate again.

Being consistent is probably one of the most agreed upon "tips" on parenting and discipline, consistency **sets clear boundaries**. Boundaries that children need and actually desire, as clear consistent boundaries make them feel safe, even if they protest at the time. If language is still limited with your child, mime or role play if necessary. These methods are effective ways of communicating with children who are in the process of developing a language foundation. Then be mindful about potential compounding variables; what is their diet like, is sugar intake excessive as this can certainly affect behaviour? Are they getting enough sleep, could they be cold or hungry, need the toilet? Are there other factors involved such as sensory integration problems that need professional intervention? Is there routine in your child's life, so that they know what to expect daily? Is there consistency through out your child's day? You may carefully need to address what is happening at school and come to some agreement with the staff involved with your child in that environment, to maintain consistency. And then be very aware that issues around discipline and behaviour can be stressful for everyone including any hearing siblings. **Keep expectations consistent for both the hearing and deaf siblings** so that the hearing siblings do not feel unfairly treated.

When it comes to managing meltdowns or tantrums, various sources come up with a few helpful suggestions. Interestingly, many of the suggestions lead to the "**prevention is better than cure**" ideology, which, where possible, makes life much more manageable. If doing the week's grocery shopping is the lowlight of your week due to an inevitable meltdown for whatever reason, is it possible to have a babysitter for that hour whilst you attend that chore? As this would be an "instant" solution.

Grocery store shopping with my three, was at times totally painful. I'd often try to arrange someone to watch them so that I could go alone, but this wasn't always possible. Here communication really is key, and I found that preparing them beforehand really made a difference, and often, this involved role play. So, I'd show them the empty fridge and cupboards, and explain that we needed to go shopping. I'd explain that one of them would sit in front in the trolley (the preferred seat), while the others would

walk, or sit inside the trolley. We'd decide then, who would do what to prevent the fight for the kiddie seat, once we were already in the shop. Then I'd give them an example of the things that we would buy, and then tell them that if they were good girls and helped mommy, I would get them each a treat at the end. They could have either a fruit juice or a packet of crisps or a small sweetie, but only one, and they could think about which one they wanted. This may sound like bribery, but I see it as a reward; consequences to actions is a reality of life, and in this case, it has greatly helped my shopping experiences. What would be important though, is to be consistent. Once, my youngest daughter behaved really badly, demanding everything and shouting and kicking up a huge fuss. Her sisters were angels and deserved their rewards, but not this little one. I had to withhold her reward which created much gnashing of teeth, but the next shopping experience was very different. She experienced a consequence of her actions that she had been forewarned about, and mom followed through. Following through was not easy, by the way; it would have been a lot easier to give her everything she wanted as man, we were catching the attention of a crowd! Add some expressive sign language to the mix, and you have the makings of great entertainment for all on-lookers...but I knew that my perseverance was an investment for future better experiences and a life lesson in consequences.

After the age of 4 years, involving the girls in shopping experiences, like giving them each a little shopping list with pictures and matching words, gives them an opportunity to be involved in the whole experience. This is also a great literacy exercise. Then, a simple adjustment that in itself may make all the difference, could be identifying that your child is at their worst in the afternoons, try then to adjust your schedule to do the fragile tasks like groceries in the morning. I think the point is to try out several things until you find a good fit for you and your family.

And then, in spite of your best "preventative" attempts which may make a great difference for many situations, there will still be situations where that "parenting is not for sissies T-shirt" will have been well earned. I clearly remember one Sunday morning about 18 months ago, whilst visiting a church as a family, I experienced that frightful mix of emotions that a toddler's tantrum can ignite. It was tea time, and we were meeting new people whilst being served tea, our thoughts and conversations competing with the din of chatter. Our littlest one made her way to the cold water dispenser and started playing with the tap. I got her attention and signed that she needed to stop touching it. With a glimmer in her eye, she continued, water splashed everywhere, and like an out of place jelly fish, the huge container wobbled and nearly lost its balance. Realizing that a disaster was just around the corner, I picked her up and removed her from the water dispenser and attempted to distract her by offering her some juice. Struggling with the frustration, she threw herself backwards, ripped out her hearing aids and began, what looked like, the ultimate break dancing, whilst producing the most unearthly screams. I could tell that no negotiation to stop was going to help. I gently reached for the hearing aids, to remove them from harm's way, and calmly walked away. I walked just out of sight from her, although I could see her clearly. She was safe, and well visible as everyone in close proximity had taken a few steps back from the crazy toddler. The din of chatter was silenced by the screeching which in turn seemed even louder. Half the crowd was staring at her in disbelief whilst the other half looked at me with disapproval. A teenage boy came up to me and said, "I think she's crying." I replied, "Yes, I think you're right," with a smile. He offered, "Do you want me to fetch her?" Appreciating his ignorance mixed with bravery, I answered, "No thanks!" About one minute passed (which felt like about 10 minutes at least), she lifted her head and scouted for me. Discovering that I was not in the corner cowering at her outburst, she instantly stopped screaming, stood up and brushed off her dress (during which time I quickly made myself visible

to her but pretended I was having an engaging conversation with her sister). Silently she walked towards me, I turned, smiled and asked, "Are you finished now? Feeling better?" With a little frown she nodded. **Not responding to her behaviour** was the best response of all, it diffused the situation in about one minute. During that time, she was completely safe.

It is not always practical to do this especially if it means an unsafe situation, so various experts suggest other strategies. An important point is to **keep your communication simple**. Little kids struggle with complex sentences. So to say, "Stop standing on the table." May be heard as, "Stand on the table," and we wonder why confusion exists. Try making a statement about the desired behaviour such as, "Sit on the chair." This is far clearer. Something that I realized that was really important and often diffused any frustration, was ensuring that my child knew that I had understood her. She may have been fussing for a sweetie which I wanted her to only have after she had finished her dinner. Saying "No!" over and over, mounted more and more frustration. Once I began the discussion with affirming her efforts to communicate, there was an instant calming effect. So instead of a whining nag for the sweetie whilst signing "sweetie" being followed by a harsh, "No!" by mom, I'd reply with a, "I understand. You want a sweetie. You want this sweetie. First supper, then sweetie, okay? Yes, you want a sweetie. You are feeling frustrated because you want that sweetie. I understand. First supper, then sweetie." Simple and repetitive, they appreciate that they have been understood (which remember has been a real source of much frustration for quite a significant portion of their lives at least) you have shown, that you have heard them, but that there needs to be a desired behaviour first. In our family, conversations like these are signed, but you'd use whatever communication modality that you have identified as best suiting your child. And then, **rewarding the positive behaviour** is key to their understanding of what the desired behavior is. If they are having a meltdown because they can't find their favourite toy and there is no reason why they can't have that toy when they do find it. It would be unwise to find the toy for them and present it, to relieve the meltdown. Instead, calm them down first, help them to recognize their feelings and their undesirable behaviour, then get them to behave favourably, e.g. asking nicely for the toy, before giving it to them. Tantrum – then give toy to relieve behaviour scenario, teaches them that the tantrum got the desired outcome. Tantrum – must then calm down – ask nicely/say sorry scenario, shows the child that the good behaviour got the desired outcome. This takes more time and effort for sure, but always be mindful that you are investing in your child. Investing in their behaviour which in turn will mould who they become as responsible, sociable adults whilst investing in your relationship with them too. Showing them that they are worth the time and effort to guide and shepherd, shows them that you love them.

Removing your child from an environment where the behavior is unacceptable is another strategy that can be effective. If your child is in classroom with other kids and starts having a meltdown that may negatively affect the other children, or you are in the library where being quiet is required, staying calm and picking up your child, even if they are kicking and freaking out, to take them outside for few minutes until they become calm, will teach them that their behaviour is not welcome in those environments, again teaching them social skills. Holding them closely to you, whilst you breathe in and out slowly and calmly, may also create a sense of calm as they feel your body "demonstrating" calm.

So what about "time out's"? **Time out's** are generally not recommended by experts as they have the potential to evoke fear in the child without the consequence of their action being directly related to their behaviour, so the question around how effective it is as a learning tool, is also raised. Two things to

bear in mind if you opt for this tactic, is firstly ensuring that where ever the time out is done, that the child will be safe. If you use the bathroom for example, is the bath empty? Are there sharp objects that could be harmful? If Granny is visiting, are her meds far out of reach? Remember that deaf and hard of hearing kids can't hear everything on the other side of a closed door. They can't hear that you are in the living room chatting. For all they know, you have reached for the car keys and left them indefinitely. So possibly opt for an open time out zone such as a "time out corner" and tell your child what to expect, "You need to wait here alone for two minutes. Mommy is in the kitchen and will come back soon."

An alternative that is preferred in many parenting texts, is the "**time in**" concept, which is pretty similar to what we mentioned in a previous paragraph. Taking your child to a "time in" zone and holding them close or just sitting quietly with them for a few minutes until you are able to communicate further, can be a very effective strategy. A technique that I heard of from a friend, who I regard as a "Super Nanny" for deaf kids and special needs kids based in the UK, included having a laminated happy and sad face that lived in the "time in" zone. As soon as the parent and child needed "time in" time, the sad face was stuck on the wall in clear view of the child. Once the meltdown had subsided and the child had shown he or she was sorry, the sad face was replaced with a happy face. These faces could be happy or sad versions of their favourite cartoon character. This had specifically worked well for a child with whom my friend had been working. Hey, you have to try something until you find the right fit for your child! I will be honest in saying that a "time out" in a safe environment, is something that I use with my girls as they are old enough to understand the concept and I communicate to them that I am not leaving but will return in a few minutes. Sometimes it's in their best interest that I have the "time out", to make a quick cup of tea and take a few deep breaths aside from their company. Nurturing our own mental health is also important. Our kids need us to do this, even more that our own need for this.

Then, take every opportunity to positively reward or **affirm any good or desired behaviour** throughout the day. Draw their attention to the fact that you noticed them cleaning up their toys, and you appreciated that. Rewards could be in the form of a star chart, sticker or little treat now and then, but a simple "high five!" or thumbs up and, "good job!" will be adequate encouragement. On this point, ensure that you are also learning affirmative vocab, especially if you have chosen to use sign language to communicate. Phrases like, "I'm proud of you!" "Good job!" and "Clever boy!" are all part of the reinforcement to show the child that he is seen, heard, accepted and loved, whilst reinforcing the behaviour that you want to be repeated.

Something that we use a lot in our home is **the power of a choice**. I enjoyed Danny Silk's book, "Loving Our Kids on Purpose." Here he explored the power of choice. Choice can be empowering to children as the feeling of being "controlled" by an adult can be very overwhelming. This strategy works wonders in our home. The girls may be playing with their toys, for example, and now it is time to pack up and get ready for bed. I ask them to clean up, two of them oblige, one refuses. An opportunity for choices, and this is where communication needs to be very clear. "Ok, you have two choices. One (clearly indicated with one finger), you tidy your toys and tomorrow you get to enjoy playing with them again. Two (a second finger lifted), you sit here (and I'll even fetch the beanbag) and you don't clean up. Your sisters clean up and tomorrow, your sisters play with your toys, and you sit here and watch. You can't play tomorrow as you didn't clean up today." Then a quick recap helps, "One – clean up, tomorrow play – fun! Two, sit here, tomorrow no play – sad. You choose." Again so important to follow through! If she opts for number two, you had better make sure that there is no play with those toys for her tomorrow.

She'll get the point after one or two examples and learn that she has the power to make good choices. A powerful life skill and opportunity to start developing emotional intelligence, part of which is the ability to size up consequences and make good choices. Recently, I over saw my youngest using this technique on one of her sisters, "You have two choices, one you share your sweets with me. Two, you go to the toilet." Surprised at the will of such a tot, her sister started laughing, which is where I had to intervene to diffuse my clever little one's consequent disapproval, discuss who is actually the mommy in the home and the importance of sharing. She obviously recognized that having choices is empowering, so thought she'd try it out to get what she wanted!

Following this, it is important just to mention the "strong willed child". My youngest fire-ball is one of these. These strong willed kids are not easy to parent, and frankly, exhausting at times. Breaking them to become compliant is not the goal, but shepherding them to learn how to channel their strengths can make for opportunities to nurture the natural leadership qualities and inner strength and responsibility that often sees strong willed children that are parented well, become tomorrow's leaders who are able to put that same will and determination into achieving their dreams and goals. Something that we desire, especially for our children with special needs - an "I can do" attitude. We do need to guide that now, into positive desired behaviour – a challenging task requiring consistency.

To communicate your intentions, thoughts and desires to your child, you are going to need a set of tools. Whether using speech or sign language, your message to your child needs to be in synch with your **facial expressions**. If you want to say that something is not ok, a frown and a shaking head, helps to communicate that this is not what mom wanted. It also then aids the development of the language that they are being exposed to, as a well expressed emotion on the face, can speak for itself. Conveying clear simple messages is vital. **Role play** is very useful, and once a situation has blown over, going back to discuss the topic of sharing or fussing can be "re-lived" through role play, however your child will now be calm and able to learn the lesson you are wanting them to take away from the experience. Role play can be useful when wanting to mould desired behavior, which is true for all toddlers not only our deaf kiddies. If you are role playing a meltdown, where you want your child to learn to calm themselves down through breathing slowly and deeply, remember, that during a time of a "real" meltdown, you may need to give in-the-moment- coaching, taking them through calming strategies such as breathing techniques for example, and they will remember what you had demonstrated previously, during role play. This will probably be most effective for older children. A technique that I am excited about for a whole array of reasons, is the **Persona Doll** technique, here, a doll who becomes the child's friend, can be used to address issues around behaviour whilst creating a safe, comfortable environment for learning, building on emotional literacy and developing skills needed for the growth of emotional intelligence.

Our children, being deaf, are more visual and they are going to notice the big nose, the funny hair, or the woman's ugly shoes. It's not naughty or bad to notice such things nor is it wrong to share that with us as their family, it's just the way that they are wired. When they point these things out to you, either through speaking (again usually with the volume raised) and most often whilst pointing simultaneously, they will need to learn that this is not the ideal or socially acceptable way to do so. Decide ahead of time, on how you want them to behave when they notice these types of things, and role play it. Your actions can speak volumes if you don't have the vocabulary just yet. And when it comes to building vocabulary, especially for families using sign language, where this to you too may be a foreign language,

effort is going to be required to learn the relevant necessary language that you will need to use. Make a list of behaviour based vocab that you need signs for, whether it be words like, “naughty,” “good girl”, “you feeling disappointed?”, “I forgive you” and “I love you.” **Equip yourself with the tools to communicate.** As you have more conversations, jot down words that you needed to know, and then find out the signs, so that you know for next time. Before you know it, your sign vocab will be growing nicely. If speech is your communication modality of choice, remember not to shy away from the bigger and more difficult words by always falling back on “no” “don’t do that” or “that’s not nice”. Just because our kids have a hearing loss, whether we sign or speak, we want them to develop a strong vocabulary set, even when we are living life whilst amidst discipline and trying behaviour.

Lastly and importantly, irrespective of what techniques and strategies best fit you, your child and your family, ensure that all of your children **know that they are loved**. Pull out all the stops to communicate this, hug them, kiss them let your eyes light up when they enter the room. Do this often, even when you don’t necessarily feel like it. The “**connection before correction**” strategy that I read about, resonated well with my heart. Reminding your child first that they are loved, then offering them a word of correction e.g. “I love you and see that you are upset because you want that sweetie. Mama has said no.” This reminds them that guiding them towards positive behaviour is not about control, but rather about love. Love and a desire to see them make choices that will best benefit them.

Loving our kids and communicating this to them, also means spending time with them, and by that I mean, being present during the time that we spend with them. In the world of technology, cell phones and social media consume a large part of our time and attention. Let’s practice showing our kids that they really are a top priority in our lives. When we are with them, we are truly with them, reading books together, tickling, playing games and telling stories, quality time that speaks louder than words (and grows literacy!) That WhatsApp message and Facebook status can wait (and here I’m speaking to myself too!)

Although relatively uncommon, more serious mental health issues can impact child behaviour and need psychiatric intervention. Signs of good mental health in children include, enjoyment of play and other pleasures, ability to engage with family and friends and ability to enjoy those interactions. Red flags that need further intervention include, excessive aggression, bullying, cruelty to pets, harm to self (for example scratching themselves, head banging, pulling out hair or even self-pinching), harming others, soiling and wetting once potty training has already been well established, excessive fear, constant crying, obsessive compulsive behaviours (such as a need for precision and symmetry, fear of germs or dirt, fear of harm coming to self or relatives), sleeping problems and withdrawing, to name a few. If you identify any of these features in your child, it would be wise to consult a paediatrician or even a child psychologist / psychiatrist. I’m a believer in the wisdom of a parent’s “gut instinct”. If a particular behaviour demonstrated by your child is causing you concern, consult expert advice, as persistent anxiety can have long term effects.

Parenting is not for sissies. Parenting deaf kids and kids with special needs, takes that challenge up a notch or two. Each one of us wants to know that we are understood, seen and loved. Building a foundation of communication, repetitive efforts to ensure that your child knows that he or she is loved and accepted, whilst having clear boundaries in the home through consistency, are core aspects of guiding your child on their journey of becoming responsible, likable and purposeful people. Start exploring what may be behind the meltdown - could it be frustration? Never forget that children also

learn from example, so take great care to search yourself for less desirable behaviours that you too may be modelling – you may even need to model “I’m sorry I shouted. Mommy felt frustrated because there was too much noise. Please forgive me.” **Modelling positive behaviour** is a constant reminder that we all are human and make mistakes, being perfect is not the goal, but recognizing our mistakes, being sorry for them, and in turn, desiring to do better, is.

Now, take many a deep breath, and know, my friend, that your effort and perseverance will be worth it. Try out a few ideas that resonated with your heart, see what works with your children, toss those that don’t. Remember that we are all greatly aware that the stork did not leave a “how to” manual when he dropped off our bundles of fun – how could he, our kids are all so unique? You will make mistakes, won’t always be calm, and may at times even freak yourself out by the way that you respond. Don’t beat yourself up, you are the chosen parent for your child, get good at saying sorry, and try again. I’m also just a mom, early in my journey with three deaf kids. I make mistakes on the parenting front EVERY SINGLE DAY! One day we will look back at how far we have come, where our amazing children are at, and what they have taught us, and when we glance at our own reflections, we will see, that finally, we are wearing THE t-shirt

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