At the urging of our members, ACI Alliance organized a critical initiative in January 2023 to explore and suggest how we might better communicate the benefits of listening for language development in children who are deaf and hard of hearing. The project was urged by professionals who work in early childhood hearing loss as they were alarmed at the extent to which families, hearing care professionals, pediatricians, public officials, media, and others were being provided with information that implied that unless children with hearing loss had access to sign language (specifically ASL), they would be unable to develop age-appropriate language and were at risk of being language deprived. Such language appears on state websites. State, and even, local officials were being urged by groups to alter parent advisement practices that have been in place as part of Federally funded Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) programs for over two decades. Since its initiation in 2000, EHDI has emphasized the importance of parent information that is accurate and comprehensively covers the range of technology and communication options available to families of young deaf and hard of hearing children without being preferential to one modality.

Collaborative Process Initiated
We assembled a group of individuals that included parents of deaf and hard of children, educators of children with hearing loss, audiologists, speech pathologists, a surgeon, psychologists, university based early intervention experts, and adults with hearing loss. The group agreed that they wished to explore and develop research-based messages relative to listening and language learning in deaf and hard of hearing children. Our effort was not limited to children who have, or may receive, cochlear implants but rather spanned the continuum of pediatric hearing loss from mild to profound. The Task Force Members identified below worked together for six months, collaborating to develop specific messaging that we wished to widely share.

Encouraging Families to Build their Child’s Brain
Early on, we looked at research and published work on language learning in typically hearing children. Dr. Dana Suskind’s landmark book, Thirty Million Words: Building a Child’s Brain (2015), emphasized the critical importance of parent conversations with their children and the impact such interactions had on a child’s lifetime accomplishments with a simple message to families:
“The most important thing you can do for your child’s future success in life is to talk to them.” The work of Dr. Suskind, a CI surgeon at the University of Chicago, was based upon earlier studies completed by Hart & Risley (Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children, 1995). While the central message of Suskind’s book is not specific to families of children with hearing loss, the emphasis it provides on the importance of rich verbal interaction in families is even more critical for deaf and hard of hearing children.

We reviewed published work by the pediatric nursing community that used the term Language Nutrition to communicate to families on the need to utilize language rich in quality and quantity with their children from the earliest age (Zauche LH et al, J Pediatric Health, 2017). In discussing the Language Nutrition concept, they noted that a child’s vocabulary at age 3 is the single strongest predictor of a child’s ability to read proficiently by grade 3. The nursing community hoped to convey the message that language exposure was crucial to a child’s development and associated with literacy and academic achievement. These concepts apply to all children but are critical for those who are deaf and hard of hearing.

We met with public and private educators working with children who are deaf and hard of hearing. A significant collaboration in Georgia led to use of the term Language Nutrition and their encouragement of families to use the language of the home—the language that they are most comfortable with whether that be English, Spanish, Polish or ASL. The efforts promoted families to talk, interact, read, and engage with their children every day and emphasized that families have the power to impact their child’s reading and writing ability by taking steps that they are comfortable with. In Georgia, during the timeframe after the initiation of the Language Nutrition program, reading scores increased—even during the COVID timeframe when most school districts measured a decline in reading achievement.

This is the message that the Task Force agreed upon to summarize and communicate our findings.

References:
Zauche LH et al, J Pediatric Health, 2017. (main audience: pediatric nurses)
Suskind RL. Thirty Million Words: Building a Child’s Brain, 2015.
Too Small to Fail. US Department of Education/UNESCO

Literacy is Supported by Rich Language of the Home and Heart

- All children—especially those who are deaf or hard of hearing—benefit from language exposure rich in quantity and quality (Language Nutrition).
- Families are most successful in building their child’s literacy when they are comfortable when talking with their child.
- Research shows the benefit of home language on a child’s learning and social/emotional well-being.
- Listening allows children to hear the sounds of language, facilitating reading and writing.
What comes next?
The Task Force efforts and the final graphic message was presented at CI2023 in Dallas. Our members and others are excited and enthusiastic about this emphasis on the importance of parents being brought into the language development process for children with hearing loss and the simple term that summarizes this process—Language Nutrition. Too often, families are discouraged by early intervention messaging that doesn’t emphasize their own knowledge of, and comfort with, the language of the home and the ability for the entire family unit to advance the language of a child with hearing loss.

As an organization, we encourage everyone in the pediatric hearing loss community to push these concepts forward. The upcoming CI2024 Vancouver conference lists, as one of the meeting themes, the importance of listening for language development and literacy and encourages submission of abstracts on this topic. In short order, we have heard from members of the creative ways they plan to push this forward with their families and patients with such tools as videos in Spanish, virtual talks, parent seminars, outreach to state early intervention agencies, research projects, publications, magazine articles, social networks, and messaging for the general media. Please let us know if you need help in pressing forward with this important new campaign. To download a pdf of the above infographic, go to https://www.acialliance.org/page/awareness_initiative.