

# The Power of Parents

By Donna L. Sorkin, MA, and Carrie Spangler, AuD

Several decades ago, when each of us were first becoming advocates for deaf and hard of hearing children, the opportunities for children with significant hearing loss to develop oral language were dramatically more challenging than they are today. Then, children were typically identified as having hearing loss at 2 to 2 ½ years of age—when they weren't talking.<sup>1</sup> Technology options were not as powerful as they are today. When a child was fit with hearing aids or a cochlear implant, (s)he was typically close to three years of age or more. Habilitation was carried out by a therapist who worked with the child while the family member waited outside. The concept of professionals *mentoring* parents to be a child's first teacher had not yet become common practice. This was in part because children were so much older at the time of identification and learning language via listening was hard work.

How things have changed! Today 75% of children who fail the newborn hearing screen are referred into the early intervention system and complete diagnostic testing by 3 months of age.<sup>2</sup> The aim of universal newborn hearing screening is to have all children receiving services no later than 6 months of age though many begin well before that. Regardless of the child's level of hearing loss, technology is dramatically better than it was 30 years ago. Even children who are born deaf, now have opportunities to listen, talk, and develop language on par with their typically hearing peers. But it is not just early identification and technology that has made this possible. We now recognize and promote the "power of parents" to spur their children on, using the language of the home and strategies that incorporate language learning into the natural fabric of the family.

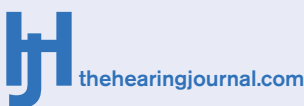
Encouraging families to maximize the quantity and quality of words they use with young children was highlighted by Dr. Dana Suskind in her medical practice as an otolaryngologist

working with low socio-economic families and described in her best-selling book *Thirty Million Words: Building a Child's Brain*.<sup>3</sup> Emphasis on the essential role of families in developing language and literacy has also come from pediatric nurses with the introduction of the phrase "language nutrition" to call attention to these concepts for all families—not just those whose children are growing up with hearing loss.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services began the program *Talk, Sing and Read Together Every Day!* building on the Clinton Foundation's *Too Small to Fail* initiative which embraces and promotes the essential role of families in supporting reading and language skills.<sup>5</sup>

Children whose families provide exposure to a home language rich in quantity and quality—whether that is English, Spanish, ASL or another—are more likely to develop age-appropriate language and reach literacy milestones.<sup>6</sup> Taking into account cultural and linguistic diversity is recognized as an important component of habilitation and education services for young children with hearing loss as well as a contributing factor in developing social competence.<sup>7</sup> Despite recognition of the benefits of families using the language of the home and heart—parents and professionals are increasingly being exposed to misleading and inaccurate information that implies that unless children with hearing loss have access to sign language, they will be unable to develop age-appropriate language and are at risk of being "language deprived."



From left: **Donna L. Sorkin** is the executive director of the American Cochlear Implant Alliance, helping to expand awareness of and access to CIs. **Dr. Carrie Spangler** is an educational audiologist for Summit Educational Service Center in Ohio with over 25 years of experience.



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Figure 1. ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~

There is no credible research that demonstrates this perspective. Rather, what we find is that parents are best able to facilitate their child's language learning when they are comfortable doing so—just as they do with their children with typical hearing. Given that 90% or more of children with congenital hearing loss are born to two hearing parents, it can be quite a challenge for these families to quickly acquire fluency in a second language alongside of the many other adjustments needed to support their child with hearing loss.

Federal law emphasizes that parents have options and may choose the course that is best for their family. If parents decide that learning and utilizing ASL is what is best for their family and child, they must be supported in that choice. If their choice is to exclusively use listening and spoken language for a child with hearing loss, it is our responsibility to fully support them in *that* choice—particularly given that rich interaction with one's child in the language of the home is associated with positive outcomes in the development of language and literacy.

Donna Sorkin, MA, and Carrie Spangler, AuD, experienced hearing loss as children and received cochlear implants as adults. They co-chaired a 2023 collaborative initiative for professionals, researchers, and parents to explore the benefits of listening in advancing literacy for children who are deaf and hard of hearing. Figure 1 summarizes the group's findings. For more information, visit: <https://www.acialliance.org/page/listening-languageliteracy>.

References for this article can be found at <http://bit.ly/HJcurrent>.