

New Technology
and the
Deaf Community

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Suppose you are expecting a baby girl, and you begin to reminisce about your childhood. There are several joys that you would like to pass on to her and heartaches from which you would like to protect her. You remember back to your school years and recall the friendships you made back then. You still keep in contact with most of those people. You feel a bond with them. You have so much in common with them; you are all Deaf. As Carol Padden states, you share a language and a culture that you can call your own. Because of this, not only are you deaf and unable to hear, but you are Deaf and a part of the Deaf culture (2). You are capital “D” Deaf and you are proud. If your child is born deaf, you have decided you will pass on your language and teach her ASL, also you will send her to the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf like you attended. You will be proud to pass on your heritage. You will also protect her from people forcing her to wear hearing aides. You do not want her to experience the oppression you felt from hearing people trying to fix you, as though you are not a whole person because you could not hear. To a hearing person, a cochlear implant for a deaf child is a “no brainer”; however, there are several reasons hearing parents should listen to the valid reasons for not implanting their child.

For years people have been trying to figure out a way to make deaf people able to hear. John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch tell us that back in the sixth century it was common to try and bleed out a patient hoping to cure them of their deafness. Later it was thought that physicians should try noise therapy, which involved blowing a trumpet directly into the ear. As time went on, people became more creative, there were potions and lotions and other such things (6-8). Van Cleve writes “Physicians frequently recommended pouring or syringing various liquids in the deaf individuals’ ear canals. Medieval tests mentioned oil, honey, vinegar, bile of rabbits or pigs...as auditory canal purgatives” (7). Of course, technology has greatly improved since then and there have been other developments like hearing aids and FM systems. Within the past few decades,

a device called the cochlear implant has become increasingly popular and has since been the source of many tensions within the Deaf community. With the technology of cochlear implant, Deaf children are at risk of not being able to participate within the Deaf culture.

The cochlear implant is not a hearing aid but a device that is actually surgically implanted into a person's inner ear. Andrea J. Hedley-Williams explains that the cochlear implant is a mechanism that consists of two parts, the internal and external receivers. The external receiver magnetically connects to the internal receiver which is surgically implanted into the mastoid bone behind the ear. From there, electrodes are inserted into the cochlea. The amount of frequencies a person can hear after an implant depends mostly on the amount of electrodes implanted (11). If a person removes the external magnetic attachment, they are just as deaf as before they received the implant.

There are several different candidates for the cochlear implant ranging from infants to late-deafened adults. The candidates who raise the most controversy within the Deaf community are children receiving the implant. The book, Choices in Deafness: A Parent's Guide to Communication Options, states, "the ideal age of implantation is 24 months" (46). Dr. Pat Chute, who is a cochlear implant audiologist, says, "when children are younger they are learning language and it becomes a much more natural process than trying to learn language later on" (Sound and Fury). This seems understandable. It makes sense that a child would need to be implanted as soon as possible to get the most benefit from the implantation. So, even though a person could potentially be implanted at any point throughout his or her life, cochlear implant advocates would go by the "earlier the better" philosophy.

Consider, however, the amount of work that goes into learning to hear with a cochlear implant. Choices in Deafness: A Parent's Guide to Communication Options also says, "A multidisciplinary team composed of audiologists, speech/language pathologists, rehabilitation specialists, and educators familiar with the cochlear implant

will be essential to helping your child learn to listen and speak” (46). If this child were to go without a cochlear implant, he/she could be a healthy deaf child speaking sign language and focusing on being a child instead of spending many hours with several specialists. This is what the Deaf community does not want to see happen to defenseless deaf babies.

As hearing people, we place high value on the ability to hear. We can hear alarms, car horns and other warnings. We can wake up to noises, like a baby crying, in the middle of the night. We can also experience the joys of listening to musical instruments, singing and the radio. We take for granted the multitasking that we can do because we can hear. We can listen to the TV while typing on a computer, or talk on the phone for hours. With all of the apparent advantages hearing brings to us, it seems clear that if you had a deaf child you would want to give them a cochlear implant to open the doors to every opportunity available in life.

The Deaf community would argue that there are opportunities being hindered by implanting a child with a cochlear implant. Deaf people place a high value on their culture which includes the use of ASL and the importance of their eyesight. Through their sight and other senses, there are many different forms of entertainment Deaf people can enjoy. The art of expressive poetry and Deaf plays may be of special interest to some. Music is also another joy Deaf people can experience. Although hearing people hear music with their ears, there are other ways to enjoy music. Deaf people can feel music through the beat of the bass line or the drums. Deaf people can dance at clubs or feel the music in their cars. Although there are several ways deaf people can talk on the phone, most deaf people would rather get together face to face to talk. This is another value within the Deaf community - socializing. There are many things that are important to Deaf people, and it differs from what is important to hearing people.

As for safety, deaf people are not at a disadvantage because they cannot hear.

There are several adapters deaf people can obtain for a variety of sound alerts. Kathryn Woodcock writes "Plenty of gadgets and gizmos have been created that aid daily living for deafened people. Among our favourites: television caption decoders; TTYs; modem that permit computers to function as TTYs..." (101). She goes on to say that the use of flashing lights can be used to warn a deaf person in the event of an emergency. In the case of an alarm clock the sound alert can be replaced with a vibration. There are several different assistive devices that make life for a Deaf person safer and easier.

Of course there is more to consider than just safety. There are other decisions to be made.

A major portion of figuring out whether or not you would want a cochlear implant for your child, lies with which group you would want them to identify with. Beverly Biderman writes "immersion in the hearing world is generally an important prerequisite of success with a cochlear implant" (119). The whole question lies between which group you would like your child to identify with. If you decide to give your child an implant and immerse them in the hearing world, then you are taking away a piece of who they are as a Deaf person and forcing them to be something that is unnatural to them. Dr. Simon Parisier, a cochlear implant surgeon, was quoted saying, "When we do an implant in an eighteen month old, that child is able to hear, develop speech, and relates not to deaf people, but to hearing people." (Sound and Fury). This is precisely the reason there is controversy within the deaf community. By giving a child a cochlear implant, a parent is making a decision for that child to take them away from the history and culture they are born to be with.

In a way, it is oppressive for parents to implant their young children with a cochlear implant. Even though it is easier for children to learn to hear and speak English when they are young, giving children an implant is sending a message to them that they were born incomplete and needed to be fixed. Once they receive the implant, which

group do they identify with? As stated before, they will identify with the hearing culture, yet they are not all the way hearing. They will need to take the implant off to go swimming, or take a shower. Often deaf people will not sleep with the implant on since it is uncomfortable to lie on. As mentioned before without the implant on, they are just as deaf as before they ever received an implant. The child will always be a deaf person forced to conform to the hearing world. If he or she grows up not identifying with the Deaf world, they may never learn to deal with the times when they are inevitably deaf.

All parents want to do what is best for their child. Of course your children will be a part of whatever culture you belong to; however, if they are deaf, they are born into the Deaf culture which is full and rich. For cultural aspects, compare hearing parents having a deaf child, to an out of country adoption. If a white American parent adopts a child from Korea, it does not make the Korean baby white. Likewise, if hearing parents give their deaf child a cochlear implant, it does not make them hearing. It is the parent's responsibility to teach their children about their history and culture, no matter what that is. If you have adopted a Korean baby, then they should be taught about their Korean history and culture. If you have a deaf child they should be taught about the Deaf history and Deaf culture which strongly includes the use of ASL. As a parent you may have good intentions with teaching your deaf child about their history, culture and language; however, as stated before, in order to have success with the implant they must be immersed in the hearing world. Pat Chute says if children start to learn ASL while learning to use the implant they will use the ASL as a crutch since it would be easier for them and their English and speech would suffer (Sound and Fury). If children are left deaf and able to grow up with their language and culture, they will grow up with a stronger identity than if they were given an implant. In doing what is best for your child, you must consider who they are meant to be.

There is a certain pride that goes along with being a part of the Deaf community.

In fact, many deaf people would never consider getting a cochlear implant to “fix” their hearing because they like being Deaf. It is their identity. I conducted an interview with Doug Bahl who is a Deaf instructor at Saint Paul College and a Deaf historian. When I asked him how he felt about the cochlear implant, he responded by saying that he is happy being Deaf. He is also happy with his Deaf culture and feels a bond with other Deaf people. While growing up, the teachers made him wear hearing aids, and he felt that was oppressive. He said he was maybe a little bitter about that. I asked him why there was such controversy within the Deaf community regarding the cochlear implant in children. He responded by saying that when hearing parents have a deaf child, they go to doctors to get advise. The doctors are giving them information on how to “fix” their child without having any knowledge of Deaf culture. So parents are making decisions for their children’s future after only hearing the medical point of view. He went on by saying that parents are deciding for another person what is best. It is not their body and to take a perfectly healthy child and perform such and invasive surgery on him or her seems abusive. He, like many other Deaf people, enjoy being deaf and would never change that.

It might be difficult to understand that a person would prefer to be deaf. It is hard to imagine how a hearing parent would feel to find out his or her child is deaf. Usually when hearing parents find out their child is deaf, there is usually a great deal of sadness that goes along with hearing the news. Like most Deaf people, a lot of hearing people want their children to be like them. Harlan Lane writes “Of the children in educational programs for the Deaf, only five to ten percent have Deaf parents” (30). It is obvious that a majority of the decision-making for a child receiving an implant, is done by hearing parents.

Edward Peters has a family of six children with the fifth child being deaf. He and his wife are both hearing and decided against the cochlear implant for their child. Neither

Edwards nor his wife come from a family with Deaf people; however, they researched both sides thoroughly and in the end they understood how important the Deaf community would be to their daughter when she grew up. Peters says, "Deafness inspires and sustains a language and a culture that offer fulfilling participation in every important aspect of life and society" (264). The family ended up learning sign language and have started to attend Deaf cultural event at least a couple times a month (263-65). This is the active role parents can take to ensure their Deaf child grows up with Deaf culture.

As an adult if they are curious about or want to hear, a Deaf adult can always decide to get a cochlear implant later in life. Even though it is documented that it is easier to learn a language when you are young, if they truly desire to be able to hear when they are older it is possible to receive an implant as an adult. Most adults, however, who have been Deaf their whole life, would not want to change that. If they do get a cochlear implant, it is not usually to hear English or for communication purposes; it is to hear music and other sounds. So, if an adult decides they would like to hear, they could receive an implanted at that point.

Overall, every parent wants what is best for their child. Parents who decide to give their children the cochlear implant are doing so with their child's best interest in mind. However, it is important for a parent to look into all aspects of their child's situation before making a decision which a child will have to live with for the rest of his or her life. Parents should educate themselves on the Deaf culture that is available to their child as they grow. Parents should also consider whether or not the child will be fully a part of either world once implanted. Keeping the child's identity in mind, parents should understand that if their child receives an implant he or she may not know which culture to identify with. If the child remained deaf the decision would be clear - they would grow up Deaf.

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