

Deaf Children: Developmental Perspectives (Developmental Psychology Series)

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, 2004, 1(3), 231-240

Behavioural problems in deaf children: Theory of mind delay or communication failure?

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Some authors have tried to explain the relatively frequent behavioural problems in deaf children by an impaired theory of mind development: a poor appraisal of other people's beliefs and desires. Recent studies suggest that this explanation is too simplistic. When deaf children were asked to explain other people's emotional reactions, Rieffe and Meerum Terwogt (2000) found that they were no worse at giving mental state references than hearing controls. However, the content of these references differed between the two groups: deaf children made more desire attributions and fewer belief attributions than the hearing children. It is important to note that desires are strongly linked with the outcome of a situation, whereas beliefs are often necessary to understand the process that preceded this outcome.

A follow-up study showed, as expected, that when both groups were offered stories about disappointing situations, deaf children reacted primarily with outcome-dependent emotions and explained these emotions accordingly. Their neglect of the preceding process implied also a neglect for the causal factors, unlike their hearing peers, who frequently referred to process-relevant elements. Nearly all deaf children in these studies had hearing parents. It is known that the conversations between hearing parents and their deaf children are impaired due to a language gap: parents often fail to explain their decisions and they only communicate the eventual outcome. Their deaf children seem to react in a similar way: they limit their focus and communication to their own wishes.

If this type of communication pattern becomes common practice, one can easily see why deaf children are frequently labelled as stubborn and obstinate. In time, as we showed in another study, our deaf participants even failed to reproduce the reasons for an undesirable decision that was explicitly explained to them. Inadequate communication, delayed emotional competence and low self-esteem (by losing their grasp on the situation) form a dangerous triad that could easily have long-term effects.

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© 2004 Psychology Press Ltd
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pp/17405629.html DOI: 10.1080/17405620444000139

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