



Keeping O.U.R. Children Safe – The Work Continues

By Christine Griffin

It's not a topic most of us want to talk about. But the fact remains that children who are deaf and hard of hearing are at greater risk for abuse, neglect and bullying. In a study conducted by researchers at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), "the incidence of maltreatment, including neglect and physical and sexual abuse is more than 25 percent higher among deaf and hard-of-hearing children than among hearing youths." (Schenkel, et al., 2014)

Researchers, at RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf,

"conducted a survey of 425 college students, 317 hearing and 108 deaf, asking them to describe any maltreatment they had experienced prior to the age of 16. Seventy-seven percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents indicated experiencing some form of child maltreatment, compared with 49 percent among hearing respondents. In addition, respondents with more severe hearing loss indicated an increased rate and severity of maltreatment." (Schenkel, et al., 2014)

For parent leaders within the Hands & Voices organization these statistics are painfully unacceptable.

A few years prior to this study, Harold Johnson, professor of Deaf Education at Michigan State University, began to notice the prevalence of stories told by college students who worked with deaf and hard of hearing children, specifically issues with neglect, abuse and safety. Determined to do something, Harold Johnson contacted Hands & Voices. In 2008, the [O.U.R. Children's Safety and Success Project](#) was established as the only project dedicated to the prevention of child maltreatment for deaf and hard of hearing children in the U.S. and elsewhere.

O.U.R. stands for Observe, Understand, and Respond, which needless to say, are the necessary components to begin providing prevention. Since 2008, members of Hands & Voices, along with professionals working in the field of child safety, have met regularly via conference calling in order to form a learning community. Their mission--to share knowledge with one another in order to bring information back to their communities.

With a need for greater clarity and action, the work of the O.U.R. Children Safety Project continues. Most recently, in May 2016, the core group (Harold Johnson, now retired professor at Michigan State University, Janet DesGeorges, Exec. Director of Hands & Voices HQ, Sara



Kennedy, Director of Colorado Hands & Voices, Chresta Brinkman, a Unilateral Hearing Loss parent guide for Colorado Hands & Voices, and Cheryl DeConde-Johnson, Hands & Voices HQ Board Member, University of Arizona professor and deaf education consultant, along with two other members (Poppy Steele, founder of the nonprofit Sign Club Co in Tennessee, and author of *Deaf in the City of Music*, and Christine Griffin, Guide By Your Side Coordinator from Washington State Hands & Voices) met in Boulder, Colorado to strategically set project goals in motion for completion within the next four years.

With this continued focus on the O.U.R. Children Safety Project along with your efforts as parents, we are hopeful that the vision Hands & Voices has for keeping our children safe will become a reality by 2020.

What Parents Can Do

Understand the Six Risk Factors for Child Maltreatment

As a group, children with disabilities:

1. [Do not understand what constitutes maltreatment;](#)
2. [Do not know they have the right to say “NO!”](#)
3. [Are socially isolated and lonely;](#)
4. [Lack the language knowledge and communication skills to tell others that they have been maltreated.](#)
5. [Do not understand their own emerging sexuality.](#)
6. [Do not know how to recognize or protect themselves in “risky situations.”](#) (Johnson, 2013)

These risk factors compound the likelihood of child maltreatment with a higher degree of delay of a child’s pragmatic language skills. Pragmatics are defined as the social usage of language and includes three components; using language for different purposes, changing language according to the needs of the listener or situation, and following rules for storytelling and conversations. (ASHA, 2016)

Take Action - As parents, educators, administrators and community members it’s imperative that we not only become aware of this situation, but more importantly, that we take action. Here is a list (with links) of actionable items you can do today to enable your child’s safety:

- [Learn about childhood abuse, neglect and bullying](#)
- Routinely [talk with your child and establish safety rules](#)
- Ask your child’s teachers about [safety precautions at daycare and school](#)
- [Call 1800-4-A-Child, also known as the CHLDHELP Hotline](#) if you suspect maltreatment. Here you can remain anonymous and a counselor can help you

to determine next steps. A parent can even call to get ideas for strategies to manage their own behavior.

- [Build Family and Community Safeguards](#)
- [Engage others on this topic and share your resources](#) on the Wiki site, designated as the repository of our community of learners.

References

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