

Sign of the times: Daycare learns deaf toddler's language ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Cassidy Moulson knows more sign language than anyone else in class - even her teachers.

And the not-quite-three-year-old isn't afraid to show it.

"Even when she first started with us and we were first learning some signs, she would randomly go around the room (pointing) at things, making me see if I knew it," recalls Lindsey Lawton, director of the Boys and Girls Club early learning centre at John Lake School.

"And if I didn't know it, she's laughing at me and she'd run to her teacher, who did know, and get her to sign it, then look at me like, 'You don't know anything.' That's what we love about Cassidy - she's such a smiley kid."

That's not to say things are easy for Cassidy at the daycare. In fact, the last couple of months have been tough.

Cassidy was born deaf. And while she's capable at sign language, the other three-year olds are not.

This wasn't such a problem when Cassidy was with other nonverbal two-year olds.

At that time, a staff member who was able to sign incorporated sign language into daily routines with her - during meals, music, reading and play.

"Since that time, all of our other staff members have been trying to keep up with Cassidy, but she's quick," Lawton said.

"As the other kids have become verbal, her ability to play with them has diminished - so she's excluded herself," Cassidy's father James said. "It seemed like there was an explosion of languages. The kids couldn't talk, then suddenly they could talk a lot. It was at that point that everything shifted."

The daycare doesn't want staff to have to be directly involved in the kids' play at all times, Lawton said.

"It's nice when they can do it on their own. But you can see where Cassidy would get frustrated, because she's trying to request an item, (the other children) don't understand

her, and she's reverting to pointing, and that's not what we want for Cassidy."

The toddler's troubles have prompted the day care to jump-start its efforts to teach every teacher and student sign language.

"I think it's huge," said Cassidy's mom, Liana Whitehead.

"You can imagine yourself going somewhere where you don't know the language, and then going there every day. You suddenly have people starting to learn your language and starting to be able to communicate with you. I think it's huge for her to be able to communicate her thoughts and feelings to people around her."

Cassidy has a cochlear implant, but it's hard to say how much she can hear with it. And while she does take speech therapy, speech isn't natural to her, Whitehead said.

"In terms of our day-to-day communication, when you're getting on your jacket and you're trying to communicate something to her, in that moment, it's sign language, because that's what she understands the best."

The day care has been hoping to incorporate signing for a while, since it improves literacy and vocabulary, Lawton said. She hopes the kids will learn 300 signs by December.

Already, the daycare's efforts have made a difference, she said.

"We've got little ones that are 10 months old that are signing more, being able to say 'Please' after we give them milk or things like that, and you don't see that with 10-month-olds that are trying to do it verbally."

The teacher with sign language no longer works at the daycare, so the staff have been trying to teach each other and the kids with books and sign cards for the past few months. It's not going as quickly as they'd hoped, so, starting next week, they're bringing in help from Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services.

The needs of the deaf are not being met, interpreter Nairn Gilles said.

"We are discussing with that daycare and others, what are some of the best solutions."

This daycare is unique in making sign language an essential focus, he said.

"I think it is fairly significant that they're willing, and it's extremely positive that people make changes where they can."

The teaching will probably involve a play-and-learn program, using activities and sign language games.

"When you congregate a group of deaf children together, or a group of children that are communicating like that, the growth is exponential. They just do so well."

Moulson sees the upcoming weekly classes at the daycare as a short-term stepping stone to the long-term goal of a Saskatoon daycare that focuses on the needs of deaf children, where signing is part of the core facilities.

"There are a lot of threads that have to be put together, even in terms of finding the building. That's why my first choice is to do it at John Lake, because I know them and Cassidy is already there," added Moulson.

-reprinted from the StarPhoenix

Region: Saskatchewan ^[2]

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