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**THE EFFECTS OF THE SKILL PROGRAM ON THE LANGUAGE AND  
SOCIALIZATION OF HEARING IMPAIRED CHILDREN**

**by**

**Aimie Marlow**

**An independent study submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:**

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**Approved by:**

**JoEllen Epstein, Independent Study Supervisor**

*Abstract: This study will examine the effects of the SKILL Program on the social and pragmatic skills of the hearing-impaired children in the Pre-K department of the Central Institute for the Deaf. It will assess language and social skills necessary for the children to be successful in the mainstream and how having hearing peers may have contributed to their gaining of those skills.*

## **Literature Review**

The goal of any educational program for children with disabilities is to mainstream the children into a regular education setting as soon as possible. In working with hearing impaired children there are several factors to take into consideration when mainstreaming a child. We must not only look at the child's academic and language skills, but also at their social and emotional development. A child must be prepared socially and emotionally to enter the mainstream environment in order to be successful. McGinnis, as cited in Barklage, states that young children entering school with poor social skills often have a plethora of problems including peer rejection, behavior problems, and low levels of academic achievement (Barklage, 2004). Educators must evaluate if the child is capable of forming friendships and peer bonds? Can they strike up a conversation with a peer? How do they handle breakdowns in communication? This is largely determined by their use of social skills and their ability to use language pragmatically.

Social skills are defined as the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks. These include tasks such as learning, forming relationships solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development. It also includes self awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others (Schloss, 1990). Normal hearing children learn social skills naturally and incidentally by hearing them used in contexts. Children with a hearing impairment are typically lacking these skills due to the fact that they miss out on much of that incidental learning and difficulties in communication. These difficulties in

communication inhibit parents, teachers, and peers from explicitly explaining rules of communication. These skills are difficult to teach explicitly and are often not considered a priority in comparison to other skills that need to be taught to hearing impaired children. Despite the fact that social and pragmatic skills are difficult to teach, research argues that these are extremely important skills and should be made a priority in teaching hearing impaired children.

In order for educators to effectively teach these skills they must be precisely defined. Dore, Gearhard, and Newman, as cited in Knight, refer to pragmatic understanding as the knowledge of the effects of communication or the understanding of the functions of language (Knight, 1985). “Pragmatics is concerned with everything about language beyond the sentence level; it describes how phonology, semantics, and syntax are used in communication. Pragmatics includes the study of how sentences are combined to create various types of discourse, including conversations, narratives, and the many kinds of expository texts. In addition, it includes the study of how sentences are linked to each other to create a coherent whole through the use of cohesive devices. Finally, pragmatics includes the exploration of the psychosocial aspects of language” (Wilkes, 1999). An essential understanding of pragmatic language is very important in the development of social skills in children. Children must learn that the speech they produce has an effect on other people in their environment. They must make the connection that they can use their speech to make a request, to gain information, or to get attention. These pragmatic language skills are difficult to teach within a structured language setting and are difficult for children to carry over into real life situations.

The Cottage Acquisition Scales for Language, Listening, and Learning (CASLLS)

developed a language skills checklist to follow the stages of development for various language skills that are typically acquired by normally developing hearing children. This checklist includes pragmatic language and communicative intentions. Communicative intentions are reasons why we communicate and they include: to engage in interaction with other people (conversation), to direct the actions of others or provide detailed sequence of steps (directions), to relate series of events, real or fictional (narration), to provide justification or rationale (persuasion/propaganda), to offer logical analysis of ideas, events (explanation/analysis), to organize one's thoughts (self-talk), to create and to enjoy (jokes/riddles), to develop new ideas (hypothesis, imagination, synthesis, prediction), and to paint verbal pictures (description, simile, metaphor) (Wilkes, 1999).

The above mentioned communicative intentions emerge in stages. The CASLLS is a useful tool to help teachers track the development of these stages in hearing impaired children. The CASLLS begins at the pre-verbal level, which is usually around 9-12 months in a typically developing child. This age may vary in the hearing impaired child depending upon factors such as whether or not the child has appropriate amplification, support services, family support and involvement, and the presence of additional disabilities. The first types of discourse to typically develop are the conversations and directions. The child may use gestures or language to protest/reject, request action or objects, call or greet, respond to others, request information, notice/recognize, or express feelings. Around 12-24 months a typically developing child will move into the CASLLS-Pre-Sentence Level. As the child matures and their language skills improve they may begin to use words to label objects, request information, initiate play, comment/tell info, or acknowledge/answer (Wilkes, 1999). These intentions are all reasons a child may

have to communicate and they develop from the needs of the child. As the child matures, their needs change, and their language should in turn become more complex in response to their changing needs.

The CASLLS-Simple Sentence Level is achieved by a typically developing child around 24-48 months. A child at this level is able to verbally introduce and change topics, take 4-5 turns in conversations, clarify by repeating, request clarification, uses fillers to acknowledge (uh-huh, okay), begins to shift register with younger children, and uses descriptions to provide clarification. As the child masters these pragmatic language skills they move onto the CASLLS-Complex Sentence Level around 4-8 years for a typically developing child. A child at this level is able to end conversations appropriately, change topics appropriately, initiate conversations easily, politely interrupt, stay on topic for 10 turns, self-monitor speech/language for errors, make evaluative comments, and check listener's comprehension (Wilkes, 1999). The CASLLS is an important tool when teaching pragmatic language skills to hearing impaired children because it allows the teacher to see where the children should be developmentally, to see where they actually are (or how far behind they are), and to track progress of development of these skills. It also allows the teacher to choose areas of need to focus on when deciding which structures or skills to work on with a particular child by allowing the teacher to see what the child is lacking. All of these pragmatic skills are important for the child to have when entering the mainstream educational setting.

Another area of focus in the education of children with hearing impairments is on teaching expressive and receptive language skills. Many times social and pragmatic language skills are either ignored completely in the education of these children, or taught

informally after the child has begun developing complex language. Many researchers and educators suggest that this is too late a start to begin teaching these skills. Social and pragmatic language skills begin at the pre-verbal level and this is when they should begin to be taught. According to Kretschmer, as cited in Knight, “too much of what is taught to hearing-impaired children still focuses on communication of the obvious. Drills on objects names or repetition of sentences about actions that are developed by others reinforces for the deaf child the idea that English is used only in the classroom to communicate the obvious, not as a medium of information exchange, interpersonal communication, and pleasure.” (Knight, 1985). Unfortunately hearing impaired children miss out on much of the incidental learning that normally takes place in the home environment as well. They are busy focusing on speech and structured language during the school day and they are often ignored by family members in the evening. Too often parents do not take the time to make language and social interactions meaningful to the child. This becomes a cyclical process where the child needs social interaction to learn social skills, but cannot have the interaction without the language sufficient for the interaction. It is a difficult situation, but not one impossible to overcome. This is why it is important to begin teaching the pre-verbal social skills and pragmatic language the child will need to have the social interactions necessary to learn from and grow on.

Many educational programs for hearing impaired children have recognized the fact that pragmatic language and social skills are key factors in determining success in mainstreaming. These programs have taken the initiative to improve the pragmatic language skills of the children they educate through including typically developing children with normal hearing into the classroom. This is typically known as reverse

mainstreaming and it is a process by which typically developing children are placed in special education classrooms (Parment, 1998). The premise behind this movement is that the typically developing children can provide models for children with disabilities to help promote socialization and language skills, and appropriate behavior. It provides children with disabilities access to typically developing children and an opportunity for them to form friendships and bonds with their peers. It also allows the special education classroom to be a less restrictive environment for the children with disabilities. These programs have had mixed results, and one major flaw of this type of program is that while social integration is a necessary component for encouraging deaf and hearing children to interact and communicate, it is not sufficient. Levy-Schiff and Hoffmann, as cited in Barklage, studied 24 preschoolers in a mainstream setting and found that the children interacted socially most frequently with children of the same hearing status (Barklage, 2004).

The Central Institute for the Deaf Oral School and Outreach Center (CID) implemented the Stir Crazy Integrated Learning for Littles (SKILL) Program in 2003 to help facilitate pragmatic growth in the students in the Pre-k department. The program has experienced many changes in the past few years and is now integrating the hearing and hearing impaired children for a variety of classes and activities. These times include homeroom (device check, and calendar), lunch, recess, literature, music and movement, gross motor, and centers time. The goal of this study was to investigate whether the SKILL Program was helping the students in the Pre-k department develop social and pragmatic language skills necessary for success in the mainstream.



## **Data Collection**

The data was collected through surveys and interviews of teachers and the department coordinator in Pre-k. The survey consisted of seven questions intended to get feedback regarding the SKILL Program from the teachers and coordinator. The interviews sought to gain further information from the faculty to their perceived success or lack of success of the program, as well as to gain suggestions as to how the program might be improved. The interviews allowed the faculty to elaborate on their responses to the survey questions and to provide beneficial information not covered by the survey.

## **Results**

Of the seven surveys sent out, five were returned and three of the teachers agreed to an interview to summarize and elaborate on their opinions on the program. The teachers were asked to rate the SKILL Program's effectiveness in the areas of social skills and pragmatic language? One hundred percent of the teachers responded that they felt the program was very effective in helping teach the hearing impaired children appropriate social skills and good pragmatic language. The teachers commented that there are several factors that appear to increase the benefit that the hearing impaired children receive from the inclusion of normally hearing children. The first factor centers around the fact that hearing impaired children that learn language more naturally appear to benefit more from the inclusion because they learn language in much the same way a hearing child learns language. Another factor appears to be that hearing impaired children that are already using 3-4 word sentences also tend to benefit more from interactions with normally hearing children because they are able to interact and converse with them. Finally, hearing impaired children that use language to initiate conversation

and respond to questions tend to gain more from the program because they appear to use language much the same way as a normally hearing child does.

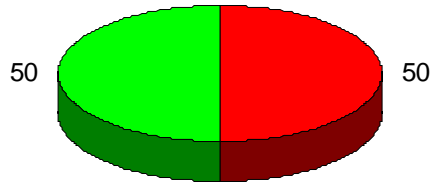
The teachers also unanimously responded that they felt including hearing children in the Pre-k department has been beneficial to the social growth and pragmatic language development of the hearing impaired children. All of the teachers responded that they felt that having normally hearing children included was highly beneficial to the hearing impaired children. The teachers reported that they felt the normally hearing children were great social, behavioral, and language role models for the hearing impaired children. Teachers reported that the hearing impaired children appear to be learning by example and also by overhearing the normally hearing children's conversations with each other and with the teachers.

The teachers were asked if they felt that more could be done to encourage interaction between the hearing and hearing impaired children. Four of the five teachers that responded said that they felt that the interactions between the hearing and hearing impaired children could be better facilitated. Teachers suggested making sure that there is at least one hearing child in every group of 3-4 hearing impaired children. During the time the children are together they should be encouraged to interact with each other more to make more use of the time allotted for the interactions. Other suggestions included role playing and scenarios.

Teachers were asked if they felt a curriculum was a necessary component for teaching social skills and pragmatic language or if these skills could be taught through taking advantage of situations that arise throughout the day. The teachers were divided on this point. Half of the teachers felt that social skills could be taught through naturally

occurring situations and the other half felt that a curriculum would be beneficial.

### Curriculum vs Natural



The argument for the structured curriculum was that it would provide repetitive interaction, which they argued is how most hearing impaired children learn best. The teachers who wanted a curriculum stated that it would be beneficial, but difficult to create. It is difficult to prompt situations that should naturally occur and “practice” good use of social skills and pragmatic language and expect that those skills will carry over into real life situations. The half of the teachers that argued on behalf of these skills being taught through naturally occurring situations stated that the skills taught in structured environments are difficult for the children to carry over into real life situations. They felt that the interactions between the hearing and hearing impaired children would be more meaningful if they occurred naturally.

Typically hearing and hearing impaired children are separated for snack and conversational lessons. The teachers were asked if they felt it would be beneficial to include the hearing children into this time of the day. They responded that they felt this would be a beneficial time to include the children since it is a time when the hearing impaired children can be exposed to natural language in a small group setting. They also felt it would be beneficial because the hearing children are good behavior models as well as language models. The only concern with including the children at this time is that the

conversational lesson is one in which the hearing impaired children are given opportunities to practice the language structures they have worked on in the more structured classes. The hearing children tend to talk over the hearing impaired children and dominate the entire activity. It is important that the hearing impaired children be given ample opportunity to converse and participate so that they are given the chance to use the language structures they are working on to truly make them part of the child's language. It was also noted that the teachers felt that it would only be beneficial to include those children who were already using 3-4 word sentences and those children that tend to learn language more naturally. Children who don't learn this way would probably not benefit due to the fact that they need a more structured environment in which to learn, and more focused attention from the teacher.

The teachers were asked if they felt that centers time in the afternoons could be used more effectively to encourage appropriate interactions between hearing and hearing impaired children. The teachers responded that they did not feel that centers time could be more effectively used. They felt that centers time is a time that is and should be unstructured and that the children need that time during the day to learn to develop and interact without too much teacher intervention. The teachers try to encourage student interaction during this time, but it cannot be contrived nor forced or it is taking away from the purpose of the time and the activities.

Outside of centers time, the teachers did have suggestions as to how the program as a whole could be improved. One suggestion was to make sure all of the typically developing children are truly typically developing. Testing should be done prior to admittance to the program to ensure the children will be good behavioral and language

models. It was also suggested that only children over four years of age be permitted into the program. Children younger than four tend to be difficult to manage behaviorally, are not always good behavior models, and take up too much of the teacher's time in dealing with behavioral issues for it to be a benefit to the hearing impaired children. One final suggestion was to have the hearing children go through some type of training program before entering the program to learn ways to effectively interact with hearing impaired children.

Finally, the teachers were asked how having typically hearing children in their classrooms has contributed to the social growth and development of pragmatic language in the hearing impaired children. The teachers responded that the hearing children have been great models not only for language, but also for behavior. The hearing and hearing impaired children have become friends and it has made the environment more like a typical preschool. The program has given the hearing impaired children opportunities to play and communicate with hearing children and it appears to have a positive influence on the social growth and pragmatic language development in the children.

## **Conclusion**

Overall the teachers and program coordinator in the Pre-k department gave an excellent evaluation of the SKILL Program. They believe that it has had a positive effect on the development of language and social skills of the hearing impaired children in the department. The normal hearing children provide language and social models that appear to be directly impacting the social and pragmatic language growth of the hearing impaired children. The teachers felt that the hearing impaired children that seem to be benefiting from the program are using language in much the same way as their normally

hearing peers. They have formed bonds and friendships with their hearing peers and appear to be learning to effectively communicate with the help of these interactions. These interactions give the children a chance to practice the language structures they have learned in a structured setting and they make those structures more meaningful to their lives.

### **Future Research**

The limits of this investigation are that it has not produced data that is quantifiable, but merely has surveyed the opinions of the teachers that help to run the program. The results may be biased due to the vested interest the staff has in the program itself. More research needs to be done to try to quantify the feedback from the teachers in the department so that the program can continue to improve and benefit the children it serves. It may be beneficial to gather data from other schools across the country with similar programs to help quantify the results from this study.

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## TEACHER SURVEY

(Name and contact information optional)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you rate the effectiveness of the SKILL Program in the areas of social skills and pragmatic language with regards to hearing impaired children in the Pre-k department?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not sure	Somewhat Ineffective	Very Ineffective

2. Do you feel including hearing children in the Pre-k department has been beneficial to the social growth and pragmatic language development of the hearing impaired children? If yes, how has it been most beneficial, please give examples?

3. Do you feel that more could be done to encourage interaction between the hearing and hearing impaired children? If yes, please list ways to encourage that interaction.

4. Do you think a social skills curriculum is necessary for teaching social skills to hearing impaired children or do you think it can be taught by taking advantages of circumstances that arise throughout the day? If you believe a curriculum is necessary, why?



5. Do you think including hearing children during snack/conversational lesson time would be beneficial for teaching social skills and pragmatic language? If yes, why?

6. Do you think that centers time could be used to more effectively encourage appropriate interactions between hearing impaired and hearing students? If yes, do you have suggestions for implementing changes?

7. How has having typically hearing children in your classroom/program contributed to the social growth and development of pragmatic language in the hearing impaired children?