3

The Struggle to Shape an Identity

"I had to compare myself to the hearing standard as that was all I knew." (Focus group participant)

IDENTITY encompasses many aspects. One of its defining characteristics is that it includes both our past and present experiences, and the meanings we place on those experiences, as well as the future possibilities we see for ourselves. For example, adolescents ask themselves not only "Who am I?" but also "How will I fit into the world?" Identity includes our culture, our understanding about ourselves in terms of abilities, attitudes, and behaviors, and our spirituality. It includes our understanding of race, ethnicity, disability, age, and gender.

Another important aspect of identity is that it changes over time, and that in times of crisis and transition, we are most challenged as to how we define ourselves. Identity is based on two disparate concepts: how we see ourselves and how we think others see us. If these two concepts do not match, the process of forming a strong, healthy identity is much more difficult. The term for this is *psychosocial mutuality* (Erikson, 1968). Psychosocial mutuality says that if my self-concept and my knowledge of how others view me do not match, I must somehow integrate and explain these differences to myself. I don't have to accept the larger community's evaluation of me; however, I cannot ignore it.

Many researchers have studied how being deaf impacts identity development (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1996; Lytle, 1987; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Weinberg & Sterritt, 1986). Deaf identity has been explored in terms of a disability framework, a social identity framework, as an acculturation model, and as a racial identity model. The racial identity model is interesting in that it approaches identity as membership within a minority group and assumes shared experiences of oppression and discrimination from the majority culture. In the case of deaf individuals, the hearing culture is the majority culture. Glickman (1996) developed a model of culturally deaf identities in which he divided identities along a hearing world–deaf world spectrum where the highest level of identity development is a bicultural model. In this model, aspects of both deaf and hearing worlds are valued and appreciated and the deaf individual is comfortable in both worlds. Those who grow up in both environments have a natural head start with this development.

Sadly, growing up in environments that are equally supportive and valuing of the deaf child is a rare and precious thing. Too often, deaf children grow up in one culture—the hearing culture. They are made to feel they need to hide parts of themselves in order to be accepted by the majority (hearing) culture. They live in speech-only environments where conversational access is enormously difficult and often not possible, and this limits their language, cognitive, and social development, in addition to their identity development. This language deprivation has serious consequences (Humphries et al., 2012) to literacy, relationships, and academic and career success. As a result, too many deaf individuals are neither comfortable nor successful in either the deaf or hearing world.

Parents, Teachers, Community, and Deaf Peers in Identity Development

Parents, teachers, and deaf peers all can play important roles in supporting deaf and hard of hearing children and youth and in strengthening their self-concepts and sense of identity. Those of our research participants who felt most supported in their identities as deaf or hard of hearing individuals

were considerably more comfortable in their schools, and we learned that parents, teachers, and deaf peers played a large role in this process.

Parents

Parents who knew it was important for their child to have deaf and hard of hearing peers worked hard to make sure frequent opportunities were there, either in the school or at camps and social events. Often this required creative scheduling from school districts, and extraordinary advocacy and parental involvement. This is one participant's story:

> My parents were aware of the fact that it was also important for me to be in a Deaf environment. So, the decision was made to put me at a local public school in [city]. There was another Deaf girl who would also be attending this school in my class. We would have a sign language interpreter and it was only for like one or two classes at the end of the day. So we would be at the Deaf school all day until after lunch and then get on a bus and go for one or two classes at the local elementary school. (M31NE)

Some parents set a strong example for their deaf or hard of hearing child through advocacy, their own values and behaviors, and through open communication. We believe parents are vitally important to the development of their child's healthy identity and self-concept, so we want to give examples of what our participants shared with us about their parents' efforts, in advocacy for their child that demonstrated and transmitted their values, and in communicating with their child.

Parents as Advocates

Many of our participants mentioned the strong lessons in advocacy they learned from watching their parents fight for their educational rights year after year, never giving up. In fact, 16% of the survey respondents mentioned parental advocacy as extremely important shapers of their educational experiences, and the vast majority of our focus group members had involved, supportive families. One woman mentioned how by middle school she was fighting her own battles—for example, telling her interpreters how she wanted them to do their job—because she had learned this at her mother's

knee. It was such a huge part of their home life that it was impossible not to absorb these lessons.

Typically, it was the mothers who were most involved in their child's education. They were involved in the day-to-day communication with teachers and parents, attended IEP meetings, and made sure necessary accommodations were in place. Tutors were found, homework help was provided, and the school was kept accountable for meeting their child's needs. Moms also often took over the role of teaching others how to communicate with their child. We are sure there are many mothers of deaf or hard of hearing children who make the painful choice to put their careers on the back burner and use their skills and energy on the home front, to fight for their child. It shouldn't have to be like this. In our eyes, and the eyes of their children, these moms are truly heroes.

Dads were also powerful allies. One young woman who was fighting an uphill battle with her school district to convince them to use CART in her classes made little progress until her dad threatened a lawsuit. After a year of fighting, funding was finally provided for those services, and for the first time she felt like she was "on an equal playing field with hearing peers" in class (although not outside of class). This same woman stated quite strongly that parents who want their children mainstreamed must be dedicated and involved at *all* times in their child's education. She realized she could not possibly have won her fight for CART without her parents' backing.

Our participants felt enormously grateful to their parents, and they were keenly aware of how lucky they were to clearly have had parents in their corner, fighting complicated, time-consuming battles to assure they had the best education possible. Research has proven there is a strong connection between parental involvement and school success (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridgiall, & Gordon, 2009). Our participants recognized that the difference between their own successes and the struggles of some of their peers was deeply tied to parental involvement. Parents were viewed as crucial to their deaf child's success. Schools will not be able or willing to do all they should; therefore, parents must be a visible fighting presence as strong and perpetual advocates. And if they are not able to be, our respondents stated unequivocally, their child will be better off in a school for the deaf.

Education for deaf and hard of hearing children should not be so highly dependent on parents' involvement in the educational process. Not all parents have the education, knowledge, time, confidence, or ability to navigate the American educational system and to successfully go into battle for their child. This is especially true for parents of color, recent immigrants, and those in the lower socioeconomic classes. Without an involved parent in their corner, many deaf and hard of hearing children who are alone in the mainstream have no one to advocate for them, and they suffer greatly for it. There should be a process in place to successfully look out for the best interests of each and every school-aged deaf or hard of hearing child that is not so heavily dependent on a single parent or set of parents.

A common quandary for parents of deaf children is that they are faced with few acceptable educational choices in their local communities. Feeling strongly about wanting their child to live at home, parents often do not consider residential schools. As a result parents sometimes end up doing unbelievably difficult things for their children. One of our participants said his mother drove him back and forth to school, putting in hour-and-a-half drives each way daily. She did this because she knew he needed to be in a school with other deaf children. When his parents started looking at mainstream programs, they worked hard to find a school where there would be at least one other deaf child in the same classroom. In spite of their planning and hard work, their son went through school alone, as the other deaf child soon left the school.

This young man, looking back, recognized the sacrifices his parents made for him and appreciated the home support he received as well (his parents signed, they provided him with tutors, he had closed-captioned TV, etc.). He also recognized that as lonely and unhappy as he was, there was not a lot that could be done. This story is both sad and confirming. We are sure there were painful days for both parents and son, however they were all on the same page and nobody was being fooled into thinking this was a good situation. They openly acknowledged that this was merely the best situation they could currently manage. They had their son home. He was getting a good education. He had a supportive family who signed and was able to provide him with educational enhancements. The one thing

that would have made it a better (much better) situation would have been to provide their son with a critical mass of deaf and hard of hearing peers and adults. And this, like so many other families in their situation, they could not do.

A few of our participants had deaf mentors involved with their families, and all were strongly supportive of such. Mentors were seen as a vast source of information and resources. Equally as important, if not more important, they were seen as role models for the deaf child. For parents, they were adult models of what their deaf child would become. Knowing a well-adjusted deaf adult, rather than having superficial knowledge of some stereotypical deaf adult, is enormously important in building hope, realistic expectations for the future, and language competence—all of which support a child's growing sense of self.

Communication: Difficult Conversations

There can be no doubt that being a successful and happy mainstreamed student takes both considerable work and considerable luck. It also takes considerable communication between child and parents. Regardless of the language and communication used in the family, it is vital that the parent and child have the ability to engage in lengthy and substantive conversations about difficult topics. Our participants told us very clearly that they knew the great sacrifices their parents had made for them and thus tried to be careful not to overburden them with school troubles or to disappoint them by not meeting expectations. Hence, our informants did not always share their troubles with a parent. However, when they did, the best parents were the ones who were able to bear difficult conversations and—together—to find solutions to educational problems.

Our participants stressed the importance of parents being able to discern the words that were *not* said. For example, clearly everything is often *not* fine, even though that's what parents are told. Kids sometimes don't know how to talk about difficult issues and need their parents to guide them. All of which goes to say, when kids do share their mainstreaming issues, parents need to be able to both listen and to brainstorm solutions. For some families of our research participants, the solution to school troubles was

to add interpreting services to the IEP. In other cases, a change of schools was needed and sometimes that change was to a school for the deaf. One woman in our study described life after a transfer to the state school for the deaf: "I had more relationships, had challenging classes, had extracurricular activities, had everything that a normal high school kid could have. My self-esteem soared." Another participant and his parents agreed to his skipping his senior year in high school and getting an early college start at the Rochester Institute of Technology, which has a large body of deaf students. This saved him from needing to suffer through another full year of isolation in his public school.

One woman, who gave many great examples of how she had to work double to prove herself, had parents who told her by word and example that it was not a problem to be deaf, but that the world might send her that message and therefore she would have to work harder and differently to get what she wanted in life. While her parents acknowledged the unfairness of this, they allowed no excuses for not doing the extra work. She took that message to heart and it has become a large part of her daily strategy:

> Sometimes that means, making sure I read and study all the rules from the handbook/manual while my peers can randomly learn by eavesdropping conversations. Sometimes that means I must follow up a million times with my class/staff to remind them how Deaf I really am. Sometimes that means accepting how others may think I am a snob or rude since I can't hear their "hellos." Sometimes that means I have to kick my mother under the table to let her know I am not following the group discussion. So many "sometimes that means . . ." but I have accepted it as a part of my life. (F30S)

Teachers

Instead of embracing their deaf identity and their sign languages, many deaf and hard of hearing kids in public schools do everything they can to hide these aspects of themselves, even when it is clear to all that they are not hiding anything. We learned that the difference between feeling a need to hide these deaf aspects of self and being comfortable with being seen unabashedly as deaf, was often in the behavior and attitudes of the parents and teachers.

The participants mentioned frequently that their teachers made a difference in how they felt about themselves and in how they fit into the school social environment. Some teachers were special—they took a personal interest in their deaf students and were not afraid to get to know them. Some teachers were just so much better than others at recognizing the needs of a deaf or hard of hearing child and doing something about it. Some teachers were somehow comfortable and flexible with using different communication strategies. These teachers were the ones who engaged with the deaf child and made the child feel included and valued rather than awkward, dumb, or embarrassed. They were the ones who made ASL (and by default, the deaf or hard of hearing student) seem fun and cool, such as our participant says in this excerpt.

> I used the AM/FM system so much more in the 6th grade. I remembered I avoided using it up until that point. I didn't like how it made me stand out in the classroom and brought attention to me. It's probably also because my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. B., had a ball with it. She loved wearing the mic! Mrs. B. really loved the idea of having a deaf kid in her classroom. She took ASL classes and showed me off to her friends. She wanted to be "besties" with my Mom. Anyway, Mrs. B. really had high expectations of me and told me often that I had potential to do better, grade-wise. Thanks to her, my grades improved so much that year. (F30W)

Sometimes, our participants told us, the teachers who were most fearless and able to support them were in nonacademic departments such as shop and creative arts. One of our participants had this to say:

> I always signed up for art classes every semester because there was not much talking in the class and art teachers are always the most expressive in the body language. They were comfortable with me. I felt relaxed in the art classes. I may not be the best artist but I love the environment in the art class. I did have secret desires for taking foreign language [classes], advanced history and advanced technology classes but I did not want to deal with an interpreter so art classes were always a best choice for me. (F25SE)

F30NE's teacher had a wonderful idea. "The one thing that made my transition into the new school much easier was having a small informal

meeting with my teacher. My teacher invited a few of the students who would be in my class so we had some interaction time getting to know each other so I wasn't entering my first day blind. I think that really set a good tone for the year, and it ended up that one of the first classmates I met at that first meeting later became an interpreter."

These stories are important because they illustrate clearly what many others also said: Teachers who were not afraid to communicate with their deaf students clearly enabled student–teacher relationships to flourish. Additionally, these teachers became positive models for peers and other adults in the school. Observing an engaging interaction between a hearing teacher and a deaf or hard of hearing student, made it easier for others to try also. Hence relationships between deaf and hearing peers were also much more probable. As we saw in the above stories about the art and shop teachers, direct communication did not always mean speech. What was important was being *comfortable* and *flexible*. Teachers who always communicated with their deaf students through the interpreters, or who made the interpreter their primary relationship rather than the student, were viewed as far less effective teachers.

Respondents who did not have good experiences with teachers often recognized the difference a supportive teacher would have made. We heard such comments as

- "I wanted my teachers to be more knowledgeable, understanding, and open about having a deaf student so I didn't have to feel so much like a freak,"
- "My school had low expectations for deaf students," and
- "Teachers don't get it!"

Research shows that having strong relationships supports school achievement (Putnam, 2000). In general, our participants told us these relationships are *not* happening. Other researchers, who also used focus groups as means of gathering data, also identified teachers as being able to make a difference in the successful school experiences of oral deaf students (Eriks-Brophy et al., 2006). We need to find ways to help general education teachers feel comfortable communicating with the deaf and hard of hearing

students in their classrooms. We believe changing teachers' attitudes and behaviors may very well be a key that will open doors for these students in general education settings.

Small Communities

In addition to actively supportive parents and teachers, respondents identified another factor that they perceived as making a positive difference in their self-concept: the size of their community and school. Being from a small town and attending a small school, particularly one that emphasized personal strengths (e.g., a creative arts school) both made the school experience easier. Everyone in the school, and sometimes the entire town, knew the deaf individual, so no awkward explanations of being deaf were necessary. In small classes students got more attention and communication was less stressful. In small communities deaf and hard of hearing children and youth were more able to get their needs met and to have their views of self confirmed by others. Their identity seemed more assured; however, even this did not work perfectly: On leaving for college, individuals found themselves totally unprepared for knowing how to meet new people, and it was often at that point that their identity struggle began. So while they were comfortable in their identities in mainstream K–12 schools, they had significant social and personal challenges in college.

One woman in our focus group illustrated this well. She was a rarity in that she had a solid group of hearing friends whom she had grown up with in her neighborhood. In school they were rarely in the same classes and our respondent, describing herself as a straight-D student, denied her deafness most of the time and felt marginal at best. During her senior year she watched her friends all choose colleges while she herself took a job at a local CVS, feeling college was an impossibility for her due to both grades and finances. It took a couple of years and much nagging from her friends before she had the confidence and determination to change her destiny. She applied to Gallaudet University, was accepted, and became someone to be reckoned with, obtaining a B.A. and doing a semester abroad.

She is currently working toward her master's degree while employed full-time. During those years in college, she says, she did more self-exploration

and soul searching than she had ever done before in her life. In the end she was able to stand up to what she knew she wanted to do, rather than giving in to others' concepts of who she was. This woman was African American. Did that contribute to her struggle? Perhaps it did, because deaf students of color have it much harder than others, and their role models and "like-me" deaf peers are much harder to find. This makes the journey toward identity much harder as well.

Deaf Peers

By middle school, nearly all of our participants said they were increasingly lonely and a "school fog" was settling around their shoulders. They described this fog as a feeling of powerlessness and despair. Part of this fog was due to the daily experience of having conversation flow above, below, and around them each day without being a part of it. Part of it was due to the sheer boredom and frustration of being in the position of bystander, watching the same interpreter hour after hour, day after day, being powerless to change much of the situation. Part of it was the inevitability of comparing themselves with hearing peers, feeling increasingly inferior and not measuring up. Our participants said that by middle school, the pain of being the only deaf or hard of hearing kid in the school became unbearable, and they were desperate to find deaf peers.

Researchers have noted this need for middle-school students to find others like themselves. Tatum (1997) studied why African American students sit together in the cafeteria, and her descriptions of racial identity formation strike a familiar chord for those of us in the Deaf community. We can relate to her description of the natural process of craving to be in the company of others like us. Finding others like us helps us to define ourselves and to find a place of belonging. It completes the missing pieces. It makes us feel *whole*.

Hearing peers frequently had little, if any, important influence on our participants' identity development, except in negative ways. Knowing other *deaf* peers, however, made a positive difference to the self-concept and resilience of our participants. Notably, it enhanced their ability to tolerate the loneliness of the school day. Additionally, once self-esteem was supported, deaf and hard of hearing students were in a much better position to be

comfortable in their own skin and to embrace their identity, rather than hide it. Our participants learned that the self-confidence that results from feeling good about one's self—embracing who you are, and not trying to be someone different—is a very attractive quality and pulls others in.

Horejes (2012) says this eloquently, describing the process by which he was (finally) able to integrate his identity in both Deaf and hearing worlds.

> I started to embrace sign language as an integral component of my academic instruction, deaf cultural identity, and perception of normalcy. Sign language not only had an emotional and educational impact on me, but also gave me more leverage as a "normal" person. I was no longer struggling to adapt to the hearing society, but rather, by using sign language, I found avenues to enable the hearing society to adapt to me. My confidence soared and sign language became my "special" weapon, as if I were somehow equal in different ways (often personally feeling superior) to those hearing students. I also could feel that they looked at me as uniquely different in a positive way rather than deviant way. (2012, p. 34)

Many of our respondents mentioned the powerful, life-changing experience of attending deaf camps. That experience is so powerful that we have included a chapter specifically about the rich relationships and personal growth that developed from camps. Deaf camps are among the richest supports of identity development available to deaf and hard of hearing kids today, particularly those who are mainstreamed alone.

The Challenge of Forming a Healthy Identity in Mainstream Environments

Psychosocial mutuality and identity development in general are important to the understanding of the mainstreamed deaf and hard of hearing student. Many of the participants in our research were well aware that they were viewed as "the deaf kid," who was additionally often also viewed as a social reject and an outsider. Our participants said they were variably viewed (depending on person and circumstance) by their peers as "really smart" or "really dumb," and much of that appraisal was based on communication competency. Of course communication competency most often

meant speech competency, skills that are notoriously difficult for deaf kids to develop, no matter the effort they put into it. Many deaf children do not produce speech at the same level of competency as their hearing peers, yet that is the personal aspect of themselves that they are most frequently judged on. Self-esteem and confidence take quite a beating.

One of our participants actually begged a good friend of his to tell him what his classmates thought of him. His friend reluctantly told him that because of his speech, he was generally viewed as "a Down's syndrome kid." This statement hurt, but it wasn't as devastating as he expected it to be, because all it really did was confirm what he had always suspected. He already knew he was an outcast. Fortunately for him, his small, semiprivate laboratory school was affiliated with a university teacher-training program and an interpreter training program (ITP); additionally, the university had 50 or so deaf undergraduate students. He started socializing with this group outside of school time. Meeting other deaf students and interpreters-in-training created opportunities for deep relationships, and these relationships carried him through the isolation of his daily school life. These deaf college students and the ITP students were able to support him and *see* him as he truly was.

Looking at this boy's experience using the concept of psychosocial mutuality, what was happening? The view his peers had of him was a terrible mismatch to his own perception of self, but although it hurt, it did not surprise. He was able to dismiss their view of him by accepting that his voice was indeed odd and that these peers did not know him. More important, he was able to find a group of deaf peers (and hearing peers who signed) who confirmed his view of self. His view of self was greatly strengthened and he was able to withstand the negative views of his school peers. Indeed, Musselman, Mootilal, and MacKay (1996) found that when mainstreamed youth had deaf peers they were able to establish satisfactory relationships with both deaf and hearing peers. Having deaf peers seemed to serve as a protective buffer to self-esteem.

Our informants told us that, by and large, hearing peers did not get close enough to know them in anything more than superficial ways and thus they primarily went on first impressions and stereotypes. Deaf and hard of

hearing students in mainstream schools are socially stigmatized. Reconciling that mostly negative view held by their peers (and sometimes teachers) with a positive view of self is a real challenge for adolescents, particularly as their self-image is often not so positive either. A lack of deaf role models and peers creates a void in their self-concept that deaf and hard of hearing children do not know how to fill. Their worlds are filled with others who are "not like me," and they are hungry to meet others who are "like me."

The lack of significant relationships with other deaf and hard of hearing adults and peers creates an interesting and unfair dilemma. How is it possible to understand and accept one's self without integrating the deaf or hard of hearing aspect? How can I accept myself if I don't also accept that I am deaf (or hard of hearing)? We don't think it is possible, and we have a lot of support for this belief. Remember all those researchers mentioned previously who studied deaf identity? Irene W. Leigh, a psychologist who is deaf, wrote an entire book on identity as seen through a deaf lens. In speaking of mainstreamed youth, Leigh (2009) says, "The definition of social success becomes that of 'making it' with hearing peers." Our interviews and surveys tell us that identity itself becomes based on "making it" with hearing peers, in both the academic and social environs of school. We learned that comparing one's self to hearing peers rarely results in a positive outcome.

The "Hearing Standard"

One of our focus group members said this very clearly, "I had no positive Deaf role models. I had to compare myself to the hearing standard." All of the members of her group understood this term immediately. She further explained for our benefit that what this meant for her was that she had to constantly work hard to participate in and do well enough in a variety of hearing-based activities such as speech, dance, and music. After years of doing this, as we see from this excerpt, she was both exhausted and lost in terms of identity.

> When I was in the choir (4th grade or 5th grade), I didn't really sing—I "mimicked" the songs. I would memorize the songs, and just mimic them without using my voice. I was in the back row—so that explains it. :) I truly think the music teacher and my mom had good intentions at heart, but it

> didn't benefit me, and it just perpetuated the fact that my deafness didn't exist or was locked somewhere in my treasure box never to be discovered. It also perpetuated the idea that I had to work hard to make up for something I "lacked," and that became a theme for the rest of my life. It's funny—now looking back, a lot of my upraising was auditory-based. I took piano lessons, joined the choir, played the saxophone, had a bat mitzvah (had to do an oral reading of the Torah), and played the drums. (F28W)

Participation in auditory-based activities such as dance, music, drama, and public speaking was so frequently mentioned, in fact, that it became something of a theme with our participants. It seemed as if participation in these activities allowed everyone to deny there was anything at all wrong with their ears. Looking back, our participants wondered why they were so often in activities that required hearing. They concluded that it was as if this proved something about being as close to, or as good as, hearing. These activities required an enormous amount of effort and work on their parts, and opting out of some of these activities sometimes meant an enormous letdown and disappointment for families and for themselves. It posed a conflict for them. They either continued in these activities, which became harder each year, with subsequent loss of self-esteem, or alternatively they quit the activities, resulting in feelings of disappointment and failure.

This is not to say that deaf and hard of hearing students should never be in music, dance, or other auditory-based activities. There *are* some deaf and hard of hearing individuals who love music. For some, these activities were seen as what got them through the day—one survey participant said "I wouldn't be alive today without band. Sometimes it was the only reason to go to school." However such activities need to be chosen by the student and not by others such as parents, and they should be chosen because they are truly enjoyed, and not because of trying to match a hearing ideal the student cannot meet.

Elementary School: Planting the Seeds of Identity Development

Identity development is typically seen as a task of adolescence, but of course the development of self occurs from birth to old age. A deaf or hard of hearing child is confronted with identity issues each step of the way. Most

children begin to articulate some of these issues in elementary school. One of our focus group participants, a hard of hearing woman from a deaf family, reported a strong reaction to her first year of school and to meeting her hearing classmates. She pitied them because, unlike her, they could not sign. Even at 6 years old, she defined herself as a "signing person" and felt clearly superior to people who could not sign, even in an environment where she was clearly in the minority.

Although most young children may lack this clarity of self (e.g., a strong and clear concept of who they are), they don't overly concern themselves with what other children think of them. They are simply content to be themselves. If only this clarity could last throughout one's entire educational journey! What we have learned is that whereas elementary school was generally a positive experience for many of our informants, some deaf and hard of hearing children experienced considerable confusion during these years. One of our participants said that one of her most profound experiences from early elementary school was the day she realized she would "grow up and still be deaf." She had an "aha!" moment the day an older man who often visited the school to share stories with the children showed up wearing a "huge monster of a" hearing aid.

Another participant, also hard of hearing with deaf parents, was placed in a classroom with hearing children while other deaf children were in a self-contained classroom in the same school. She remembers clearly her confusion and her envy that they had each other and she was "all alone." She appreciates having her deaf family, but insists her school day was as much alone as any other deaf student in the mainstream. She and several of the other research participants who had deaf families somehow kept their school and family lives very separate and were not able to merge these disparate identities into a cohesive whole until they were much older. This same woman shared how on a school field trip to Washington, D.C., she was embarrassingly "outed" by a random encounter with a deaf man who recognized her and started a sign conversation. Suddenly her classmates saw her in a completely different light. This random encounter somehow became a trigger for more successful integration of her dual identities (hearing at school and deaf at home). Serendipitously, her classmates were seeing

a part of her that she had long kept hidden, and she found, after her initial surprise and embarrassment, that she (and they) were quite okay with it. In fact, she experienced it as a relief.

Middle School and High School Identity Challenges

Our focus group participants overwhelmingly reported feeling lost, left out, frustrated, and sometimes depressed by the time they reached middle school. Middle school is a hard time for many children, but our focus group participants described this period of schooling as overwhelmingly difficult and as the "beginning of the end" of a positive school experience. School was no longer a friendly or even safe place to be. In middle school, they suddenly had to explain themselves to a multitude of strangers and few found much acceptance. Additionally, our participants had increased awareness of self and others, which was often painful.

Middle school marks the time when children notice and care more about being "different" and not fitting in. For deaf and hard of hearing children, the conversational barriers become almost insurmountable because friendships and socialization increasingly occur in group settings rather than in play dates of one or two friends, where conversation is more easily accomplished. Again and again, our participants shared stories of dramatically increased isolation and exclusion, such as this: "In spite of my speech skill, I had a relatively normal social life until I was in seventh grade and moved to middle school. That's when everything changed. Cliques were formed and I was left out. They weren't interested in sign language or trying to communicate with me in sign language" (F29C). Participating in extracurricular activities and being smart seemed to help very little, as another informant shared:

> I went on to middle school desperate to be popular, pretty, and have a lot of friends. I was the only deaf student in a student body of about 800. Most of them knew me as "that deaf girl with the interpreter lady." I played soccer, basketball, and track. While I was on those teams, the girls were really nice and friendly with me, but after the season ended, they would barely acknowledge me in the halls (or they would ask to borrow some lunch money!). . . . By 8th grade I would spend my free periods holed up in the

> library reading and eating my lunch in the bathroom or the nurse's office. I hated sitting alone because EVERYBODY knew why I was sitting alone. For group projects, either they wouldn't like being paired up with "the deaf girl and her interpreter" OR they knew I was smart/paid attention and knew I would get a good grade in our project, resulting in me doing a lot/most of the work. (F30NW)

These vignettes illustrate the difficulties deaf and hard of hearing preteens and teens face in school on a daily basis. There was a clear line between social acceptance in elementary school and middle school that our focus group members, in spite of their intelligence, determination, and involved parents, simply could not cross. Instead, they became increasingly isolated and cut off from the daily social milieu, which is, as we know, actually the essence of middle and high school.

Amazingly, being involved in sports and extracurricular activities helped very little, and this is something many adults involved with deaf and hard of hearing youth do not realize. Often when researchers study deaf and hard of hearing students, the number of extracurricular activities one is involved in is said to measure the quality of their school experience and success in the mainstream. Students with more activities are viewed as more successful and happy. Our focus group participants say this is not so.

It is initially satisfying to make the varsity team or to participate in band, and it definitely fills up what would be many lonely hours, but there is a distinct downside. Our focus group members talked about the loneliness of being part of such activities while still being excluded. The rides on the bus provoked particularly poignant memories. Being *in a group*, but not *part of a group* was especially painful for many. In the years looking back, many of them even ask if they were allowed to join clubs or teams not because of their qualifications, but to "give the deaf kid a chance." Being a token, whether it is for real or not, sits badly on one's shoulders. Our participants shared with us that it often felt better to decline to be on a team, rather than to participate in the off-the-field milieu as bystanders.

Of course there were exceptions. A few individuals lived for the game and told us they did not care that they were missing out on social chat and friendships. These individuals were true athletes, dedicated to the game,

and generally had the respect of their teammates (note the word *respect,* not necessarily comradeship) and supportive coaches. And for some reason, these individuals apparently had less of a need for social connections, perhaps because they had these needs met elsewhere, or perhaps because of character differences. However all of these individuals also acknowledged that if they had been able to participate in conversations, their experiences in team sports would have been significantly enhanced.

Many of our focus group participants mentioned being aware by middle school that their childhood friends were having issues of their own. The elementary friendships were often still there but they were relegated to occasional arrangements outside of the school environment. Our participants ruefully recognized and accepted their friends' struggles to fit in, to make new friends, and to "be cool." Clearly, having a deaf friend in the middle school and high school environments was not cool.

During middle school, identity issues began to surface for our focus group participants. It did not matter if their families were deaf or hearing. They all seemed to struggle with feeling confident and proud of whom they were as deaf or hard of hearing individuals and more often than not, they wanted to hide this aspect of their identity while at school. Our focus group members were variously skilled at this subterfuge, and much of that depended on their level of hearing. Hard of hearing students were more successful than profoundly deaf students; however, that is not to say the latter did not try to conceal their difference. One informant explained her feelings in this way:

> As I made my way through middle school/junior high school, the boys started to pick on me because my voice didn't sound like the others. I remember feeling so awkward and not knowing my place as I started to feel different from everyone else. I was always the last to be picked for any sport activities. I started to feel ashamed of my deafness—I wanted to be like everyone else—I would refuse to wear my hair in a ponytail for the fear that people would notice my hearing aids. (F34SE)

Another informant found both social life and the classroom intolerable. As coping strategies failed and loneliness increased, he resorted to distrac-

tions and fantasy. In the 1960s, Linda used to spend her days in school writing reams of nonsense in notebooks, counting the minutes till the day was done. It seems not much has changed in the years between. These are our informant's words:

> Life became difficult the first day of entering 7th grade when I was mainstreamed. I was the only Deaf person and I never knew how to deal with that. I tried hard to fit in. I begged my mom to buy me these expensive clothes that everyone was wearing. I joined chess but later learned that was a geek club. I cracked jokes whenever I saw an appropriate place to do so. I realized nothing could change the ignorance of my classmates overnight. I started eating more, sleeping in class more because it was boring as hell to watch the same interpreter all day long, and I most of all I started to have a new friend that was not a human being.
>
> My new friend eventually became my best friend and got me through each day throughout my years in the mainstream. Most times I felt my best friend was too slow but still managed to help me get through the day by counting the minutes before I could go home. My best friend was the clock in each class[room]. (M34C)

Closing Notes on Identity

In closing this chapter, we want to briefly discuss two other groups of deaf and hard of hearing youngsters who don't so easily fit into the descriptions of those described in the previous pages. The first group consists of those students who attend schools for the deaf. Identity and self-concept issues surface there too, and we don't want to leave the reader thinking all is rosy for students who attend those schools. For example, one of our focus group members who has taught ASL to deaf students shared this perspective:

> A lot of my students at the Deaf school categorize "mainstreamed students" as "smart." . . . I recall asking my ASL class (all Deaf students) last year to raise their hands if they thought of themselves as smart. None of them did but instead pointed at the mainstreamed students or the students with excellent English skills. It shows clearly how our obsession with trying to fit into the "hearing mold" defines how successful you will be in life—no matter how deeply they can discuss politics or the way the world works in ASL, good English determines if you're smart. This saddens me—it's evidence that

> Deaf education and our attitudes/perspective on how Deaf children should be educated are terribly flawed—and those attitudes are influencing the self-fulfilling prophecy that Deaf students have with their ability to succeed academically. (F28SE)

An interesting point of our respondent's writing is how she identifies the hearing standard (which she calls the hearing "mold") as being an issue not only for mainstream students, but for all deaf students (and, we add, deaf people of all ages). Even though being deaf is a core aspect of the identity of most deaf children at residential schools, and one most will tell you they feel proud of, they are still undeniably saying those who have good English skills (and speech skills) are smarter. We need to erase this misconception, which has the power of a stigma. Development of English skills has nothing to do with intelligence; rather, it has to do with having a solid foundation of a language model at a developing age, and that language does not have to be English. It could be anything—Senegalese, Chinese, or, yes, even ASL.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from those attending schools for the deaf are those deaf individuals who never find other deaf people. They never found others "like me" and are often not fully a part of a community. We looked at our survey respondents to find individuals who had not found deaf friends to learn more about that path. One of the survey respondents shared that he wished that his school had provided some sign classes in addition to the speech lessons he had, feeling it would have made a huge difference to his life today. He says, "Today I am a deaf person who is culturally hearing and I feel more alone now than I did as a child! Lip reading gets harder with age and signing ability is nearly nonexistent. I feel I have no communication methods with the deaf or hearing world." Other respondents echoed that sobering message.

Our research participants have given us several important messages for building and maintaining a strong identity. We close this chapter by repeating the two strongest ones. The most powerful message was the need to find others like themselves. The importance of getting to meet and know other deaf and hard of hearing peers and adults was crucial and contributed to a sense of wholeness. Not only did finding others "like me" confirm their sense of being okay and stem some of the loneliness, but it also had such a

positive effect on their self-esteem that it also paved the way to improved friendships with hearing peers.

A second strong message was that parents have a strong role in the identity process of their child. Parents need to be strong advocates in the educational process, making sure not only that academics are accessible, but also that access to extracurricular activities, clubs, and sports is there. Excelling in one area, not matter what that area is, is a strong boost to identity; however these activities cannot be based on some hearing ideal of the parents. Additionally, parents need to be able to bear difficult conversations with their sons and daughters. Attending school as a solitary deaf or hard of hearing student will inevitably be painful at times, and needing to hide and cover up this pain makes it much worse. Acting *as if* everything is okay is never good for self-esteem and identity. Therefore parents must be able to bear this pain with the child and try to find their way toward solutions. Almost equally important is having parents meet deaf and hard of hearing people, so that they have a concrete concept of what a deaf adult can be, and thus they can become less anxious and more confident about their child's future.