Resilience in Deaf Children
Debra H. Zand • Katherine J. Pierce
Editors

Resilience in Deaf Children

Adaptation Through Emerging Adulthood

Springer
For Hannah & Abrahm – our child guides to understanding the resilience pathway
Foreword

Throughout much of history, deaf people have been misunderstood and misrepresented by societies that magnify their inabilities and try to change these to abilities that will allow for their seamless merging into the hearing population. For deaf people, this is a frustrating odyssey that often results in an inadequate sense of belonging within the auditory environment swirling around them. Communicating and relating to others in ways that do not match the surrounding society’s expectations of typical communication usually results in negative responses and distancing from others. It is no wonder that hearing parents are weighted down with concern and worry when they discover that their infants/toddlers are deaf.

Refreshingly, the past few decades have witnessed an astounding explosion of publications that explore the ways in which deaf people have forged ahead with their lives. These publications have accelerated the shift away from the perception of deaf people as a subgroup at risk for maladaptive lives if they don’t “overcome their disability” to focus on their ability to survive and manage their lives competently, all things being equal. This relatively recent focus on strengths, healthy functioning, and positive psychology has been a long time coming.

The authors contributing to this book, Resilience in Deaf Children: Adaptation Through Emerging Adulthood, have continued this trend away from the historically negative framework by focusing on the concept of resilience as a positive attribute that each one of us has the capacity to possess. Resilience is a concept with multiple definitions, as has been made abundantly clear throughout the chapters. Most typically, resilience has been defined in terms of the ability to withstand adversity. Other approaches to this construct rely on a dynamic paradigm that incorporates developmental and transactional processes between oneself and the various environmental influences that mold and reshape the ability to confront the various vagaries that life offers.

Reading through the chapters, I could not help but reflect on my own life story and how my own resilience evolved. As it should for many deaf people, the critical points made by the contributing authors resonated with me. I was not identified as deaf until the age of 2. I was blessed by parents who provided warmth, affection, and access to communication and language after overcoming a week’s worth of mourning for the loss of their idealized hearing child. Utilizing the steadfast support of a therapist experienced in working with young deaf children, my parents
spent untold hours ensuring a language-rich environment for me, even though both had to work full time. They made it comfortable and “normal” for me to be deaf. They affirmed my desire to be with deaf friends as well as hearing peers. When my academic and social abilities as a deaf girl who spoke differently were questioned, the principal of my elementary school fought against entrenched opinions that I as a deaf student could not succeed in challenging post-elementary educational environments. These dynamic ecological influences, and more, conspired to form within me a resilient, solid, and coherent sense of self capable of facing indifference, doubt, opposition, and outright discrimination as well as the joys of life.

My experiences and the perceptions of the various authors in this book highlight the importance of considering not only individual characteristics but also the ecological systems that surround the individual. Edna Simon Levine’s (1981) seminal book, *The Ecology of Early Deafness*, was one of the early significant texts to bring attention to the critical importance of the interactive role of self and environment in enhancing the development of deaf persons. She noted how an unaccommodating, noninclusive environment could result in individual deficiencies, even when the deaf child had significant potential. The importance of reforming the environment to enhance communication access and appropriate development was a constant theme for her.

How accommodating environments could be created has been highlighted by a parade of books that followed Dr. Levine’s. For example, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Padden & Humphries, 1988) taught the public how culturally Deaf people created an approach to life that was functional and full of human connections, enhanced by visual ways of communicating. This approach is grounded in an environment that accommodated their communication and social needs in ways that were normal for them. Creating a new center of normality that can stand alongside the normality of people who hear was a critical contribution to the notion that deaf people are capable of full lives and dealing with risks in their own ways just like everyone else. This new center reinforced the expectation that deaf children could be well-adjusted and resilient given appropriate access to the world around them.

With that expectation in mind, books such as *The Deaf Child in the Family and at School* (Spencer, Eting, & Marschark, 2000) began to look at the nature of interactions between the deaf child and the family/community/school systems as well as the philosophies that guide these systems. The book you are holding in your hands has taken this scrutiny of accommodating environments and theoretical frameworks one step further. Its authors have proposed various system constellations that contribute positively to the deaf child’s evolving resilience. A number of them focus on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (e.g., 2005) theoretical paradigm that encompasses the critical bidirectional influences of distant systems such as culture and government and more immediate systems such as schools or the medical establishment, for example, as these directly and indirectly influence the deaf child via family and neighborhood systems, and vice versa. How these systems are shaped can have powerful influences on resilience and sense of self as the child transitions to adolescence and young adulthood. This is a dynamic process that requires some goodness of fit between individual characteristics and the various systems in order
to enhance the potential for resilience. Although the complexities of this process are daunting, the power to mold the child demands that it be carefully attended to. In this book, the authors successfully break down the complexities into components that readers can try to apply in their own situations.

Again and again in this book, the contributing authors refer to the family system as a centerpoint that serves (as it did for me) to pave the way to the incredible possibilities of being a resilient deaf person. Based on research documentation, strongly emphasized throughout the book, the nature of attachment, relationships, and family communication – whether via a signed or spoken language – are key components for the development of resilient deaf children. Given professional support to encourage them to work on strong family relationships and communication, parents are more likely to be intuitive in meeting their child’s needs. Using this as a foundation, the authors provide practical suggestions that will enhance the ways multiple systems (family, community, neighborhood, school, workplace, and so on) can facilitate social support and resilience, thereby enhancing the deaf child’s capacities for relatedness, competence, and self-determination.

This book is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature that focuses on the strengths and capabilities of deaf people for managing their lives. It provides a refreshing look into how these positive attributes can be developed throughout the early phases of the life course. It provides us with theoretical paradigms that help us conceptualize how resilience can be fostered in any deaf child, whatever the internal attributes and external circumstances may be. And it provides hope that society can and will recognize that deaf people can and do make significant contributions to the fascinating diversity of human lives.

Gallaudet University                   Irene W. Leigh, Ph.D.
Washington, DC, USA

References

Acknowledgements

This book was meant to stimulate thought and discussion regarding the manner in which resilience among the deaf may be similar, and yet again distinctly different, than that of the hearing population. This conceptualization created the canvas on which many of the works in the book were painted. We would like to take the time here to thank all of the authors for their timely and generous contributions to the content of this book and making the “picture” as complete as possible at this juncture in time.

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About the Editors

Dr. Zand is a clinical psychologist and Research Associate Professor at the University of Missouri–Columbia, Medical School, Department of Psychiatry. For the past 14 years, her work has focused on child and adolescent mental health and resilience. During this time, she has been responsible for writing, designing, and directing multiple federally funded longitudinal grants. Her most recent project focuses on fostering bonding between medically fragile, developmentally disabled young children and their caregivers. Dr. Zand has taught both graduate and undergraduate courses in research methods and mental health policy, mentored graduate students and junior faculty, published in peer-reviewed journals, and presented findings in local, state, and national forums. Recently, she was accepted into the American Psychological Association’s Leadership Institute for Women in Psychology.

Dr. Kathy Pierce, a clinical psychologist at Washington University’s School of Medicine – Department of Psychiatry, specializes in novel interventions for persons with treatment-resistant depression. Over the past 6 years, Dr. Pierce has worked on both industry and federally funded clinical trials, serving as a supervisor, psychometrician, treater, statistician, co-author, and/or grant writer. Prior to working at Washington University, Dr. Pierce was the Evaluation Director for a nonprofit agency providing care for AIDS patients, and co-led Missouri’s “Deaf Mental Health PAH,” a statewide deaf mental health advocacy group.
About the Contributors

Elizabeth B. Adams, M.A., received her M.A. in psychology from Gallaudet University and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Gallaudet University. She is a co-editor of the *Gallaudet Chronicle of Psychology*, a student-run journal that truly reflects the working, living, and learning that takes place at Gallaudet and within the Deaf community.

Shirin D. Antia, Ph.D., is a full professor at the University of Arizona in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies. She was born and educated in India and has considerable international and intercultural experiences in special education. Her research interests are in the area of peer interaction, social integration, and best practices in inclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. She has authored numerous research articles and chapters on these topics. Most recently, she was the principal investigator of a research grant to examine the social and academic status and progress of deaf and hard of hearing students in public schools over a 5-year period.

Patrick J. Brice, Ph.D., received his Ph.D. in clinical and developmental psychology in 1983 and has been at Gallaudet University since that year. He first completed a postdoctoral fellowship in psychology at Gallaudet in 1983, taught in the Department of Counseling from 1984 until 1995, and since 1995 has been a professor in the Department of Psychology. He has been the Clinical Psychology Ph.D. Program Director since 2001. In addition to his teaching at Gallaudet, Dr. Brice has studied various aspects of development in deaf children, including social cognition, self-regulation and executive functions, social–emotional development, and parent–child attachment. He is a reviewer for *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* and the *Journal of the American Orthopsychiatric Association* and also serves as a grant reviewer for various funding agencies. Dr. Brice has also been a consulting psychologist to the Lab School of Washington, St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, The National Health Care Foundation for the Deaf, and the Family Service Foundation in Maryland. He maintains an independent practice of psychology in Maryland and District of Columbia. He specializes in parent–child attachment, adult attachment, social and cognitive development of deaf children, psychological assessment, and individual psychotherapy.
Cindi Cassady, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in private practice in San Diego, CA, has worked with deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their families for the past 20 years. She is co-clinical director of mental health services at Deaf Community Services, as well as clinical supervisor at the Bridgman Group Home, which serves emotionally and behaviorally disturbed youth, ages 12–18. Dr. Cassady also specializes in working with perpetrators and victims of domestic violence and is certified by the Department of Adult Probation to facilitate a 52-week domestic violence group for deaf male perpetrators.

Rachel Gali Cinamon, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling and Special Education, School of Education, Tel Aviv University and is also Head of the special program for career counseling for young adults, Tel Aviv University.

Susan Daniels, OBE is the chief executive of the National Deaf Children’s Society, UK.

Johannes Fellinger, M.D., is a neuropsychiatrist, pediatric neurologist and Head of the Neurological Institute for Language and Senses – Health Center for the Deaf of the Hospital of St. John of God in Linz, Austria.

Lorraine Green, Ph.D., is a lecturer in social work at the University of Manchester. Her main research interests include gender and child welfare, abuse, and children in vulnerable settings or circumstances.

Peter C. Hauser, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Research and Teacher Education at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York where he is the Director of the Deaf Studies Laboratory (DSL). His laboratory follows three strands of inquiry that focus on the (a) separate effects of sign language fluency and different levels of hearing on cognition, including attention, executive functions, memory, and reading processes; (b) psychosocial development of deaf students and the impact of audism on education; and (c) development of sign language assessment instruments. He is also the Director of the Neurocognitive Foundations of Vision for Language and Communication Research Initiative at the National Science Foundation Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning at Gallaudet University, Washington, DC.

Daniel Holzinger, Ph.D., is a clinical linguist and Head of the Centre for Language and Communication of the Neurological Institute for Language and Senses – Hospital of St. John of God in Linz, Austria.

Susan Kashubeck-West, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and Associate Professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Dr. Kashubeck-West’s primary research interests fall into two main areas: body image and eating disorders, and multicultural issues (broadly defined). She is interested in issues related to sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and gender, primarily as they relate to psychological well-being.

Erin A. Kennedy, Ph.D., is a Developmental Psychologist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Lock Haven University in Lock Haven, PA. She
has conducted research on bullying in adolescence, socio-emotional adjustment of children with siblings who have been diagnosed with serious illnesses, self-esteem and academic motivation in college students with learning disabilities, and issues related to gender-typed behavior in childhood.

**Lynne Sanford Koester, Ph.D.** is a Developmental Psychologist who specializes in infant development and parent–infant interactions, particularly with children who are deaf. She worked previously at the Max-Planck Institute for Psychiatry in Munich, Germany, and at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Her current position is at The University of Montana–Missoula, where she is a Professor in the Department of Psychology.

**Janet E. Kuebli, Ph.D.** is a Developmental Psychologist and Associate Professor at Saint Louis University where she also directs the Undergraduate Studies Program in psychology. Her research interests include emotion development, including the role of family discourse in emotion socialization; children’s health/safety socialization; and the psychology of parenting.

**Jason Listman, M.S.** is currently a faculty member in the Department of American Sign Language and Interpreting Education at the National Technical Institution of the Deaf. Prior to becoming an ASL instructor, he worked at the Deaf Studies Lab (DSL) from 2004 to 2009, working closely with Dr. Peter Hauser in areas such as linguistics, cognition, and psychosocial factors relating to the deaf experience. Mr. Listman hopes to begin his doctoral program in Education in 2012, with his primary research interest being resilience in deaf adolescents.

**John Luckner, Ed.D.** is a professor and the coordinator of the Deaf Education teacher preparation program in the School of Special Education and the Director of Research for the Bresnahan/Halstead Center at the University of Northern Colorado. Dr. Luckner was a classroom teacher of students who are deaf or hard of hearing for 9 years. His primary research interests include literacy, social–emotional development, teacher preparation, and the provision of appropriate services for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families.

**Pamela Luft, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Kent State University in Ohio and the Director of the Deaf Education program. She received her M.Ed. in Deaf Education from McDaniel College, her M.S. in Technology for Persons with Disabilities from the Johns Hopkins University, and her Ph.D. from University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign in Special Education. She worked in public, special day and residential schools as a teacher, behavior specialist, career coordinator, and program administrator before getting her doctorate. Her research and grant projects have focused on transition services and rehabilitation services for the deaf. She has published on issues related to transition, technology employment of persons with disabilities, special education policy, and instructional practices.

**Jennifer Lukomski, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology School Psychology Program. She teaches for RIT as well as consults with Greater Rochester school districts regarding school programming for deaf and
hard of hearing youth. She also has a clinical practice. Her research focus includes social–emotional issues related to deaf and hard of hearing learners.

**Linda Risser Lytle, Ph.D.** is an associate professor and director of the Summers Only School Counseling Program in the Department of Counseling at Gallaudet University. She also maintains a private practice, working with deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their families. Dr. Lytle is interested in issues surrounding the development of deaf female identity. She is currently intrigued by the richness and complexity of using narrative inquiry as a research tool and how the use of stories influences both teller and listener.

**Nicole McCray, Ph.D.** is a recent graduate of the Developmental Psychology graduate program at The University of Montana–Missoula. Her research focuses on parent–infant interactions and interventions with at-risk populations.

**Jill Meyer, M.S.** is a licensed clinical professional counselor conducting research at the Missouri Institute of Mental Health in St. Louis, MO. She is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Her background is in rehabilitation counseling and counseling education. Ms. Meyer’s primary research areas are disability issues (including deaf studies) as they relate to rehabilitation and well-being.

**Rinat Michael** is a doctoral student in the Department of Counseling and Special Education, School of Education, Tel Aviv University.

**Tova Most, Ph.D.** is an associate Professor, and Head of the Department of Counseling and Special Education, School of Education, Tel Aviv University.

**Gina A. Oliva, Ph.D.** was a professor in the Department of Physical Education and Recreation at Gallaudet University until her retirement in 2009. She continues to be active professionally through publications, presentations, and consultations.

Gina’s first book, *Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers Public School* (Gallaudet University Press) was published in 2004. Her current research and writing interests include deaf–hearing friendships and alliances, the development of social capital in summer and weekend programs, and the social needs of youth with cochlear implants.

**Joan M. Ostrove, Ph.D.** is an associate professor of psychology at Macalester College in St Paul, Minnesota. Her research concerns the connections between individual psychology and social structure. She is currently working on projects related to the ways in which social class background shapes people’s experiences in higher education and about how people build alliances across differences related to social identity. Her work on alliances is focused on relations between Deaf and hearing people, and between people of color and white people. She is currently on leave from Macalester and is a student in the Interpreter Preparation Program at Ohlone College in Fremont, CA.

**Susanne Reed, Ph.D.** is a researcher at the University of Arizona. She taught deaf and hard of hearing students in public and center-based programs, preschool
through high school for 18 years. Her research interests are in the area of best practices for inclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. Dr. Reed is the author or co-author of several peer-reviewed articles and a book entitled, “Itinerant Teachers of Students Who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing: Their Beliefs and Practices for Developing Literacy.”

**Katherine D. Rogers, M.Res.,** is a NIHR (National Institutes of Health Research) doctoral fellow working within the Social Research with Deaf People group at the University of Manchester. Her main research interests include the mental well-being of deaf children and mental health assessment in Sign Language.

**Linda R. Shaw, Ph.D.,** is a Professor and Department Head, in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies at the University of Arizona. Prior to her current position, Dr. Shaw was Director of the Rehabilitation Counseling Program at the University of Florida. A licensed mental health counselor, Dr. Shaw’s research focuses on disability, human rights, rehabilitation ethics, and professional issues in rehabilitation counseling. Dr. Shaw has published and presented widely on issues related to disability-related job discrimination and the correlates of professional ethical behavior.

**Martha A. Sheridan, Ph.D.,** is a professor of social work at Gallaudet University where she teaches courses in human behavior and the social environment, social work practice, and field instruction. She has worked as a clinical social worker in school, community mental health, and private practice settings, and as an administrator, educator, consultant, and advocate. Her publications include *Inner lives of deaf children: Interviews and analysis* (2001) and *Deaf adolescents: Inner lives and lifeworld development* (2008).

**Nicole Renick Thomson, Ph.D.,** is a Developmental Psychologist and Research Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Missouri St. Louis’s Missouri Institute of Mental Health in St. Louis, MO. Her research interests include the etiology and prevention of youth alcohol use, socio-emotional development in early childhood, parenting, moral development and gender identity. Her recent publications have appeared in *Sex Roles, Pediatrics, and Journal of Adolescence*.

**Christine Yoshinaga-Itano, Ph.D.,** is a Professor in the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Professor Yoshinaga-Itano has certification as both an educator of the deaf and an audiologist and has conducted research on the development of young children with hearing loss and their families since the 1970s. She has focused on the interrelationship between language and communication skills, cognition and social–emotional development.

**Alys Young, Ph.D.,** is a Professor of Social Work Education and Research at the University of Manchester and director of SORD (Social Research with Deaf People). She has published extensively on families with deaf children and service development and evaluation.