Support group program for signing deaf & hard of hearing (DHH) teens: Is it worth their time?

Presenter: Julia Petersen, LMHC, M.A.
Mental Health Therapist/Deafness Specialist
julia.petersen@seattlechildrens.org

Seattle Children’s Hospital, Dept of Psych, DHH Program
“Sometimes we feel down and interaction with other DHH teens helps us feel better.”
How was the support group program in Dept of Psych implemented?

- Initial plan: Seeking support resources for signing DHH teens who use cochlear implants. Some need individual or family counseling as well as the support group while others need just support group.

- Finding: No support group exists for signing CI users on a local, state or nationwide level

- Action plan: Implemented a support group in the Dept of Psych with 3 participants

- Current status: Program has evolved based on participants’ and parents’ input. Currently participants are divided into two groups for middle & high school students.
Teens’ common quote in support groups:

“\textit{I finally realized I am not alone!}”
Main targeted goals in the group

Development of:

- Social skills
- Communication skills
- Problem solving skills
Another teen said:

“Sometimes there are situations that happen and we don’t know how to solve them. So we can practice that here.”
Other areas of focus include:

- Exploring themselves as a whole person
- Getting peer support
- Learning necessary skills to deal with challenging situations in their daily life
- Practicing healthy interpersonal skills
- Developing self advocacy skills
More areas:

- Fostering own perception of responsibility
- Promoting self-esteem
- Respecting diversity
Teens’ quotes:

- “The group helps me feel better inside.”

- “It is a relief to talk about problems and challenges in a confidential place.”

- “Sometimes we offend each other and we figure out how to deal with that here.”

- “We go out into the community to have different experiences and to learn how to interact with hearing people.”
Experiences shared by teens after outings:

“Meeting deaf employees working at Microsoft and at Starbucks who work with hearing people was cool. It was nice to see how they communicate through writing and/or signing.”

“Seeing DHH people at work made me feel like I could get a good job, too.”

“We had to discuss, negotiate and come to an agreement regarding what we wanted to order at a restaurant. It wasn’t easy. We also had to teach the waiter how to communicate with us.”

“Sometimes people get really emotional or angry, we help them calm down, remind them that they are not alone and explain how to get through it.”
Self-esteem & self-confidence promote other skills

“In the past, I felt really bad about myself. I wasn’t able to socialize with hearing people. I now can communicate with them after learning alternative strategies.”
Summary

- **NOT ALL** DHH teens develop adjustment problems. Some of them just need a support network and knowledge that they are normal and not alone.

- Seeing themselves as a whole person is necessary for normal development.

- Empowering teens to define their own identity is crucial.
Is it worth their time?