



Past, Present, Future

A Deaf Professional & Parent of Deaf Teenagers' Perspective of **Top 10** Lessons Learned in Early Intervention

Buckle up – this session will be honest, personal, and practical.

Dr. Thomas Horejes

- Thinks he's a farmer – but makes a difference every day
- Deaf professional, researcher, and advocate with deep roots in the EHDI community
- Brings lived experience as both a Deaf individual and an educator to every conversation



Teri Urban

- Dedicated parent advocate and proud mother of a deaf teenager
- Fierce champion for families navigating the early intervention, educational and hearing loss system
- Brings the irreplaceable perspective of a parent and shares – the triumphs, the challenges, and everything in between



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Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be equipped with insights drawn from real lived experience – as a Deaf professional and as a parent – to strengthen early intervention practices and family outcomes.

1 **Learn from History**
Identify historical patterns in EHDI to avoid repeating systemic mistakes that have harmed deaf and hard of hearing children and families.

2 **Balance Frameworks**
Describe how to balance medical frameworks with social and cultural Deaf identity, honoring the whole child and family.

3 **Strengthen Outcomes**
Apply mentoring, networking, and family-support structures to improve long-term outcomes for deaf children and their families.



LESSON #1

Understand the History of EHDI to Avoid Repeating Mistakes

Why History Matters

The EHDI field has made tremendous strides, but it has also carried forward assumptions that were not always built with Deaf people at the table. Understanding the evolution – from oralism's dominance to today's family-centered approaches – gives us the context to make better decisions.

Key Historical Lessons

- The 1880 Milan Conference banned sign language for nearly a century – a cautionary tale about decisions made without Deaf voices
- Early intervention frameworks have historically centered hearing as the default "goal"
- Progress comes when we acknowledge past harms and center the community most affected



Networking with Different Stakeholders Is Critical

No single profession, perspective, or organization holds all the answers. When audiologists, educators, Deaf adults, parents, interpreters, and policymakers work in silos, deaf children and their families fall through the gaps. Intentional, cross-sector networking builds the village every family needs.

Deaf Adults

Lived experience as mentors & models

Families

First advocates for their child

Providers

Medical, educational & therapeutic support



LESSON #3

Deaf Babies and Children Benefit from Mentoring

When a deaf child meets a successful, thriving Deaf adult, something transformative happens. They see their future self. Mentoring relationships provide language models, emotional affirmation, and a living answer to the question every deaf child eventually asks: *"Can I have a full life?"*

Programs that intentionally connect Deaf adult mentors with deaf children – and their hearing families – consistently report stronger identity development and family confidence.

What Mentoring Provides

- Positive Deaf role models who sign, speak, or both
- Language-rich environments and natural communication modeling
- Emotional support for families navigating a new landscape
- Community belonging and cultural connection from an early age



LESSON #4

Family Support Is Essential

More than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. These families receive a diagnosis and are often immediately overwhelmed with information, decisions, and grief. **What they need most is not just clinical guidance – they need emotional support, peer connection, and access to families who have walked this road before.**



Peer-to-Peer Connection

Connecting families with other parents of deaf children reduces isolation and builds confidence in decision-making.



Unbiased Information

Families deserve honest, complete information about all communication options – free from provider bias.



Ongoing Support

Support must continue well beyond the newborn screening – through school years, adolescence, and beyond.



Balance Identity with a Strong Social and Cultural Framework

Identity Is Not an Either/Or

Deaf children can be both Deaf and part of their hearing family. They can use sign language and spoken language. Identity is not a zero-sum game. When we present it as one, we harm children and fracture families. A strong, positive Deaf identity is a **protective factor** — not a threat to other goals.

What a Healthy Framework Looks Like

- Affirm the child's Deaf identity alongside family and community identities
- Provide exposure to Deaf culture, history, and community from infancy
- Help families understand that cultural belonging enhances — not competes with — communication and academic outcomes
- Support children in developing their own voice about who they are

Expose Your Child to a Variety of Options!

What works for your child makes the choice right.

There is no universal "best" communication method, technology, or educational setting for every deaf child. Families who explore a wide range of options – ASL, Cued Speech, spoken language, bilingual approaches, mainstream schools, Deaf schools – are better equipped to advocate for what truly fits their child's unique needs, strengths, and personality.

Providers and advocates should be **guides, not gatekeepers**. The goal is to open doors, not close them.

- Explore multiple communication approaches without pressure
- Visit diverse educational settings before deciding
- Let the child's response guide the family's path



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Advocacy Does Not Require a Ph.D.

Every Voice Counts

Parents, teenagers, and community members are among the most powerful advocates in the EHDI system. You do not need credentials to speak truthfully about your child's needs, your family's experience, or the gaps you see in the system. **Lived experience is expertise.**

Practical Advocacy Looks Like:

- Asking hard questions at IEP meetings and provider appointments
- Sharing your story at local, state, and national levels
- Joining parent organizations like Hands & Voices
- Mentoring new families who are just beginning their journey
- Holding systems accountable – with data and personal testimony



Include Your Child in the IFSP/IEP Process



"Nothing about us without us." – A cornerstone principle of disability rights and the ADA that should guide every IFSP and IEP table.

As children grow, their voice in planning their own education and services becomes increasingly critical. Including deaf and hard of hearing children – even young ones – in these conversations builds self-advocacy skills, personal agency, and a sense of ownership over their own future.

- Start early: even young children can share preferences about communication and activities
- Use accessible formats so the child can truly participate
- Ensure the child understands their rights under the ADA and IDEA

Leverage Technology Effectively

Technology is a powerful equalizer – but only when families and providers know how to use it purposefully. From hearing aids and cochlear implants to captioning apps, video relay services, and educational software, the landscape of accessible technology has never been richer.



Hearing Technology

Hearing aids, cochlear implants, and FM systems – optimized and consistently worn – provide access to spoken language and environmental sounds.



Visual Access Tools

Video relay, captioning apps, and visual alert systems ensure deaf individuals can navigate daily life fully and independently.



Educational Technology

ASL learning apps, literacy platforms, and remote interpreting services expand access in classrooms and at home.



Community & Connection

Social platforms and virtual Deaf community spaces help deaf children and teens find belonging regardless of geography.

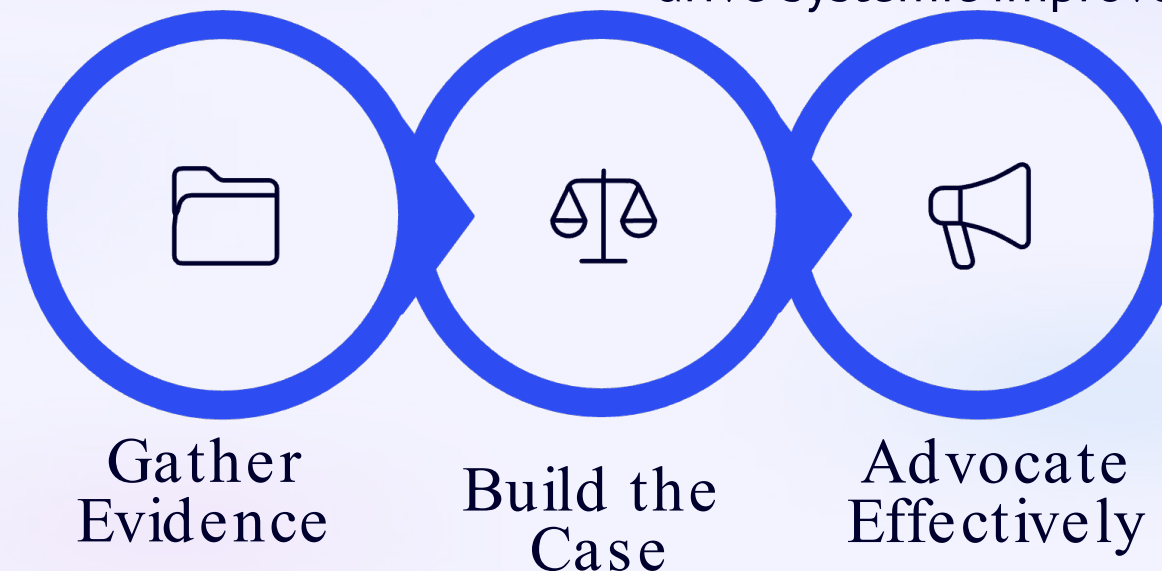
Use Data and Evidence to Support Accommodations

Data Is Your Ally

When families and providers speak the language of data – outcomes research, audiological assessments, academic performance metrics – they become far more effective advocates in meetings, policy conversations, and legal proceedings. Evidence-based arguments are harder to dismiss.

How to Put Data to Work

- Document your child's progress and gaps systematically over time
- Reference published EHDI outcome research to support accommodation requests
- Use IDEA and ADA legal frameworks backed by evidence when advocating for services
- Partner with researchers and professionals who can help translate data into action
- Share family outcome data with EHDI programs to drive systemic improvement





Contact Us!

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Thank you for joining us at the **2026 National ELDI Conference**. We hope these 10 lessons spark meaningful reflection, new connections, and renewed commitment to the deaf and hard of hearing children and families we serve together.

Questions, stories, or reflections? Find us after the session – we'd love to keep the conversation going.

Past Informs Present Shapes Future Belongs to Our Children

2026 National EHQI Conference · Dr. Tommy Horejes & Teri Urban

