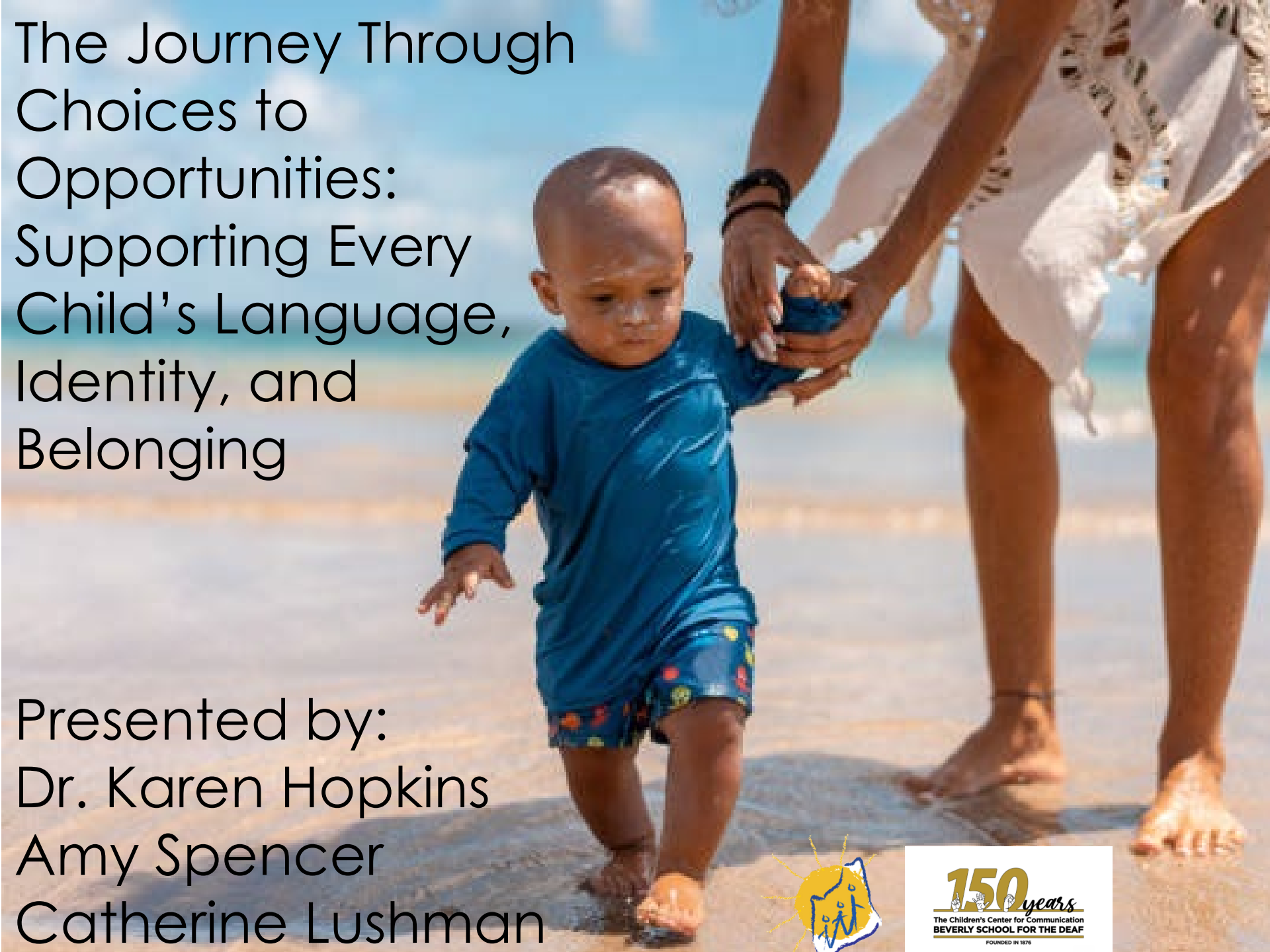


The Journey Through Choices to Opportunities: Supporting Every Child's Language, Identity, and Belonging

Presented by:
Dr. Karen Hopkins
Amy Spencer
Catherine Lushman

150 years
The Children's Center for Communication
BEVERLY SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF
FOUNDED IN 1876

Session Objectives

- Examine shifting from a one-time parental choice to a dynamic journey of opportunities, allowing families to adapt and move between multiple choices as their child grows and develops.

- Explore strategies for families and professionals to observe and respond to each child's unique needs, ensuring flexible, individualized approaches that may include auditory, visual, and multimodal experiences while maintaining connection to the Deaf and hard of hearing community.

- Promote inclusive practices by embedding Deaf and hard of hearing adults meaningfully in children's lives, fostering belonging, self-advocacy, and confidence in children as they navigate their developmental journey



Karen Hopkins, Ed.D

Executive Director – CCCBSD

Hands & Voices HQ Board President

Amy Spencer MS CCC/SLP, TOD

Early Intervention and family Services Coordinator

MECDHH

Cathy Lushman, MA

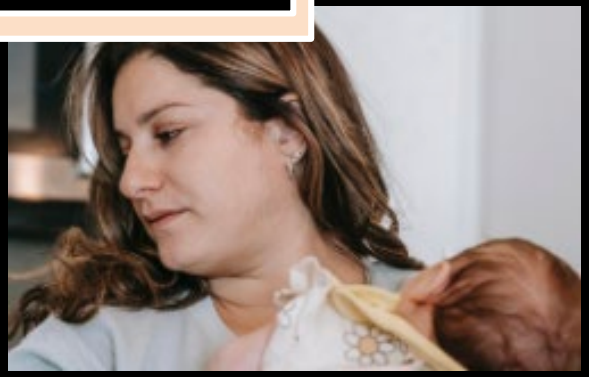
Assistant Director of Statewide Family Services.

MECDHH

One Decision Does Not Need To Shape an Entire Life



A Parent's Thoughts



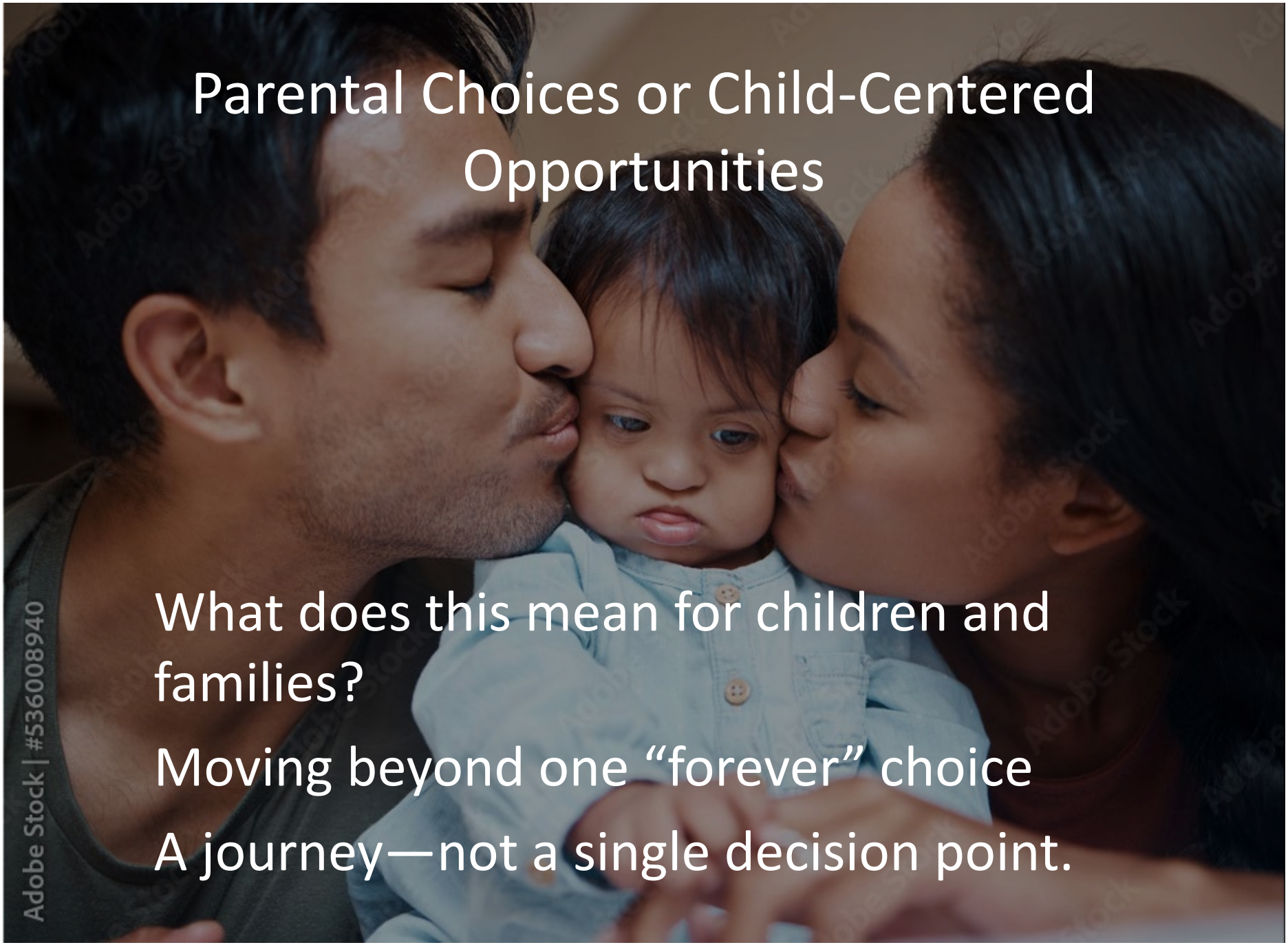
- "I remember there being a notebook, I think I still have the notebook in my office, and just being like well...there's a notebook. That was overwhelming at the time. I had a young baby… I didn't know when I was going to have time to read a notebook, and I remember thinking it seemed a lot, I was supposed to read, make a choice that would be written in a plan…this felt like a forever choice" and then I had this baby……"



The Search for Language, Identity and Belonging



Traditionally families have chosen one primary pathway



Parental Choices or Child-Centered Opportunities

What does this mean for children and families?

Moving beyond one “forever” choice

A journey—not a single decision point.

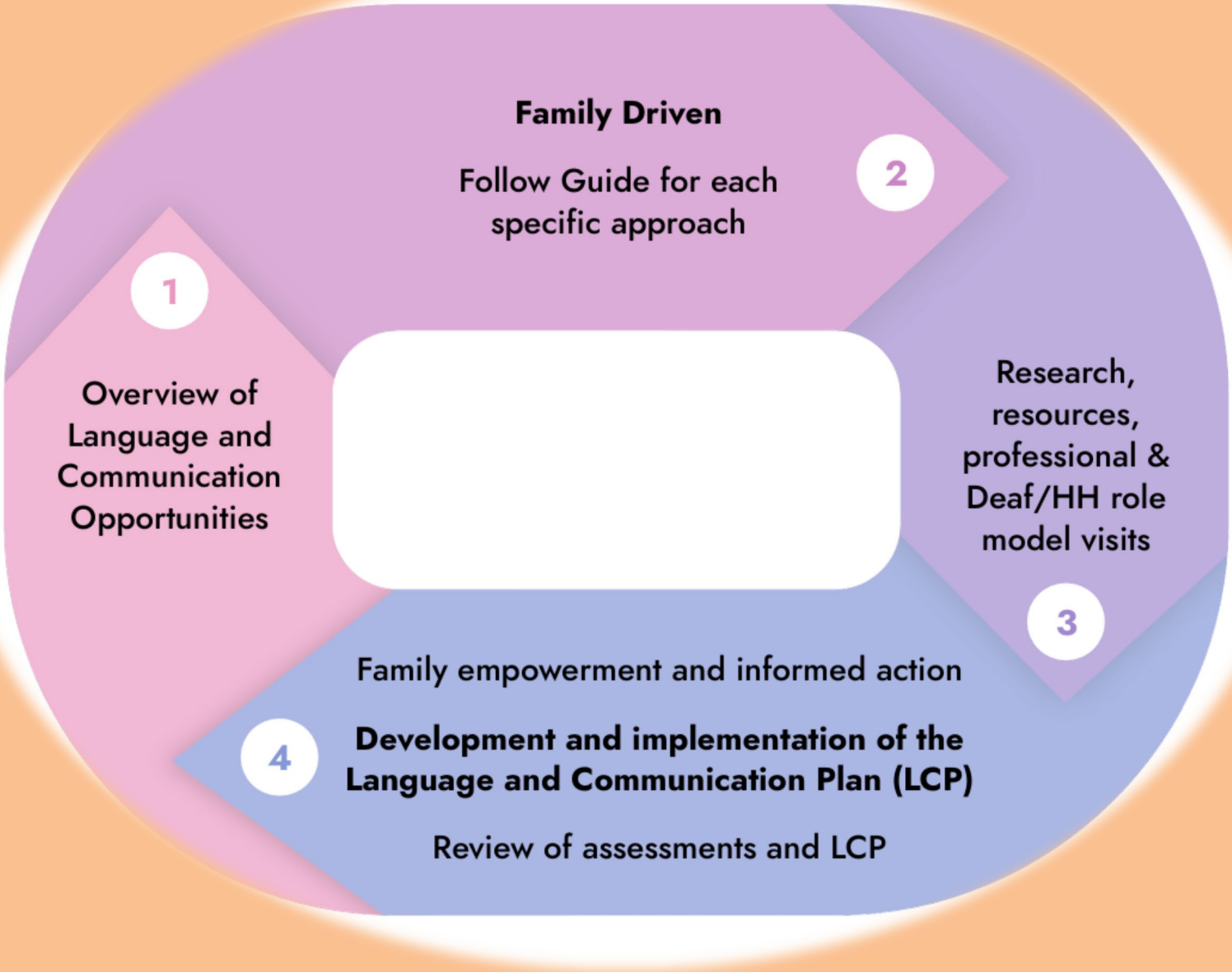
Children can explore multiple approaches: Auditory/Visual/Multimodal

As parents and professionals focusing on the child's unique strengths, observe how they interact successfully and watching how they learn best guides us on the journey with the child.





Interactive Exploring Language and Communication Opportunities Overview


Family Driven
Follow Guide for each specific approach
2
1
Overview of Language and Communication Opportunities
Research, resources, professional & Deaf/HH role model visits
3
Family empowerment and informed action
4
Development and implementation of the Language and Communication Plan (LCP)
Review of assessments and LCP



Families guided to observe their child closely:

Celebrate strengths

Notice patterns in communication

Evaluate what works in the moment – in different routines

Monitor milestones


Milestones
Matter.

18-24 Months

Receptive and Expressive Language Skills			
Language your child understands		**How your child expresses thoughts/feeling**	
Your child will complete two requests with one object. Your child will choose two familiar objects on request. Your child will understand 250-500 signs/words (by 24 months). Your child will understand personal pronouns (e.g. my, mine you, your). Your child will follow 2-step related commands on request (by 24 months).		Your child will attempt to tell stories about experiences. Your child will use I, you, and mine, but still sometimes ref self by name. Your child will ask where and what questions. Your child will use 2-word phrases with nouns, some verbs some describing words (by 24 months). Your child will independently say or sign between 150-300 signs/words (by 24 months).	
ASL	**Spoken English**	**ASL**	**Spoken English**
Your child will imitate the actions or faces of people in a story. Your child will answer questions (e.g. WHO, WHICH, FOR+FOR).	Your child will point to at least 5 body parts. Your child will listen to simple stories.	Your child will use classifiers (CL) to describe things (e.g. CL:F for SPOTS). Your child will use non-manual markers (e.g. raised eyebrows, squints). Your child will use headshake + sign for negation. Your child will use lexicalized signs (e.g. #BUS, #ICE).	Your child will engage in and sound play with adul Your child's single-syllabl words with early develop sounds will be understoo 50% of the time. Your child will sometimes the word endings -ing an Your child will use the wo in, on, and up.

Social and Print Skills		
Your child's social and play skills	**Your child's print skills**	
	Reading	**Writing**
Your child will take 1-2 turns in a conversation. Your child will use language to request help. Your child will initiate pretend play. Your child will tell about past events and future actions. Your child will request information (e.g. What is this?).	Your child will tell the difference between words and pictures. Your child will bring a book to an adult to read. Your child will look at a book alone and pretend to read familiar books. Your child will attend to pictures and written text for several minutes. With adult support, your child will respond to simple questions about a familiar story.	Your child will imitate drawing marks or scribbling. Your child will explore drawing, painting, and writing as a way to communicate.

Socio-emotional development

in babies and toddlers

0 - 6 months

·Comforted by a familiar voice
·Communicates by crying
·Smiles/Laughs when happy
·Recognizes own name
·Quietens down when being held
·Excited to see people
·Reacts positively when needs are met
·Friendly with strangers
·Reacts differently to different tones of voice
·Stops crying when talked to
·Holds out arms to be picked up
Discriminates between family members

6 - 12 months

·Chatters and smiles to communicate
·Feels a sense of attachment to caregivers
·Responds and reacts to 'NO'
·Examines faces of people and animals
·Screams for attention
·Experiences fear in new surroundings and with new people
·Separation anxiety starts
·Scared of strangers
·Gives love and shows some affection
·Waves hello or goodbye
·Claps hands
·Attached to teddy/toy/blankie etc.
·Searches for mommy or daddy
·Copies certain gestures (i.e. coughing)

12 - 18 months

·Separation anxiety continues
·Sympathetic towards other children
·Shows the need for help
·Wants to do things for themselves
·Cannot tell right from wrong
·Comes when called
·Enjoys the company of other children but does not share with others yet
Wants to help with daily activities

18 - 24 months

·Starts to develop a sense of self
·Can be away from mom for short periods of time
·Has mood swings
·Interested in own mirror image
Still plays better by himself

24 - 36 months

·Learning to function in group setting
·Can play in group but for a short period of time
·More open to taking turns
·Sensitivity develops
·Understands what is allowed and what is not

Closer to 3 years old

·Can comfort other children
·Willing listener and somewhat more obedient
·Lovable
·Wants approval for actions
·Able to express some emotions with words
·Parallel play
·Tantrums can occur
·Can feel anxious and become stubborn
Develops a sense of humour

Unlock Your Child's Potential with Developmental Assessment

Identify. Understand. Support.



Family Perspectives



"If only they would have encouraged us to explore this other option when he was little, I think he would have more language"



Looking through the child's lens with ongoing discussion and exploration

Fluid, Evolving Opportunities

Making choices plural, flexible, and adaptable over time

- Children's needs evolve
- No single path is required
- Focus on growth, connection, and identity formation



A bilingual-bimodal experience provides an inclusive, language-rich environment that empowers deaf children to thrive linguistically, academically and socially. Giving the children the freedom to explore and engage in ASL and English and with Deaf and hearing individuals.





Bilingual Bimodal Early Childhood Programming

Honors

- parent and child choices
- Deaf/hearing teams
- Deaf/hard of hearing and hearing connections
- Pure Language
- Language growth in two languages
- Culture

The Magic Doors of Connection





ASL Environment

- Language of instruction and interaction - ASL
- Deaf teaching team – native signers
- Deaf peers
- Always eye level with students
- Fingerspelling, facial expressions, body language
- Visual and experiential learning

Spoken Language Environment

- Auditory Access is critical
- Technology – on and working
- Acoustic Highlighting
- Expand language in English
- Eye level with students
- Incidental Learning learning
- opportunities
- Interpreting available for students without a during centers



The Multimodal Environment

- Use of both Spoken English and ASL with clear separation
  - Use of augmentative and alternative communication
  - ensure access at all times
  - Consistent staff modeling throughout the day
  - Accommodating various sensory needs
  - Supporting low-vision accommodations
  - Strong team approach with therapists
  - use of many forms of assistive technology



Parent Perspectives



The Power of Bilingualism





The even better news is that Jacob is with a team of amazing people in the meanwhile and has experienced absolutely ZERO breakdown in communication and can continue being his happy self :).

Thanks,

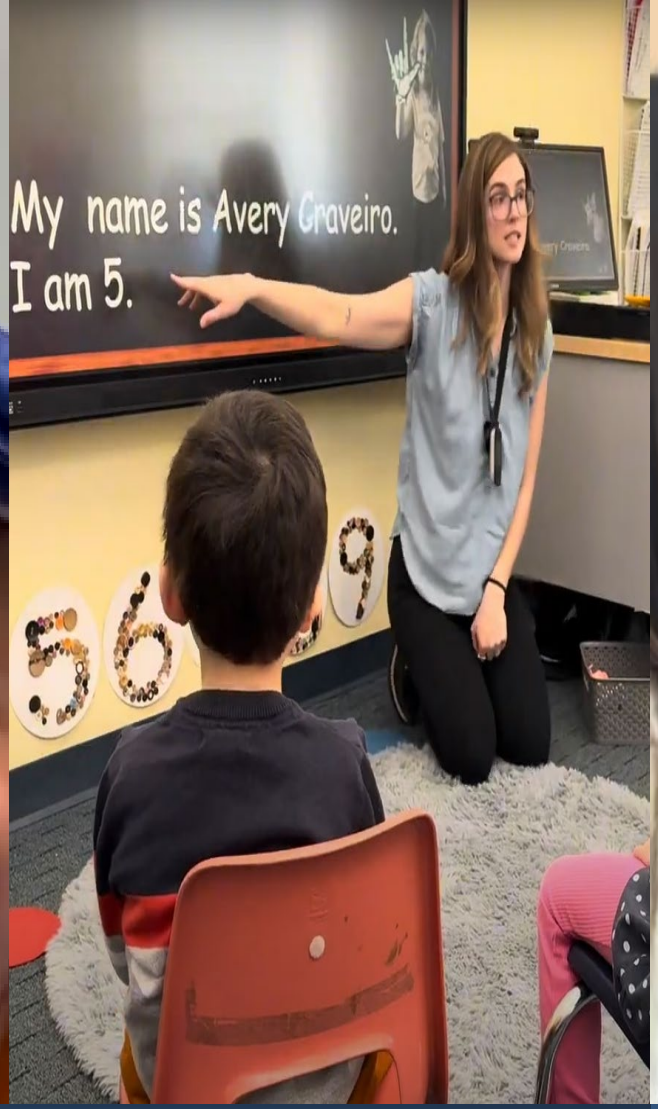
Alex





Encouragement to explore







The key is to continue the connections and exploration







Don’t stop in early childhood….





Opportunity framing encouraging exploration Over time






Supporting children and teens in the Exploration of Identity & Belonging builds confidence

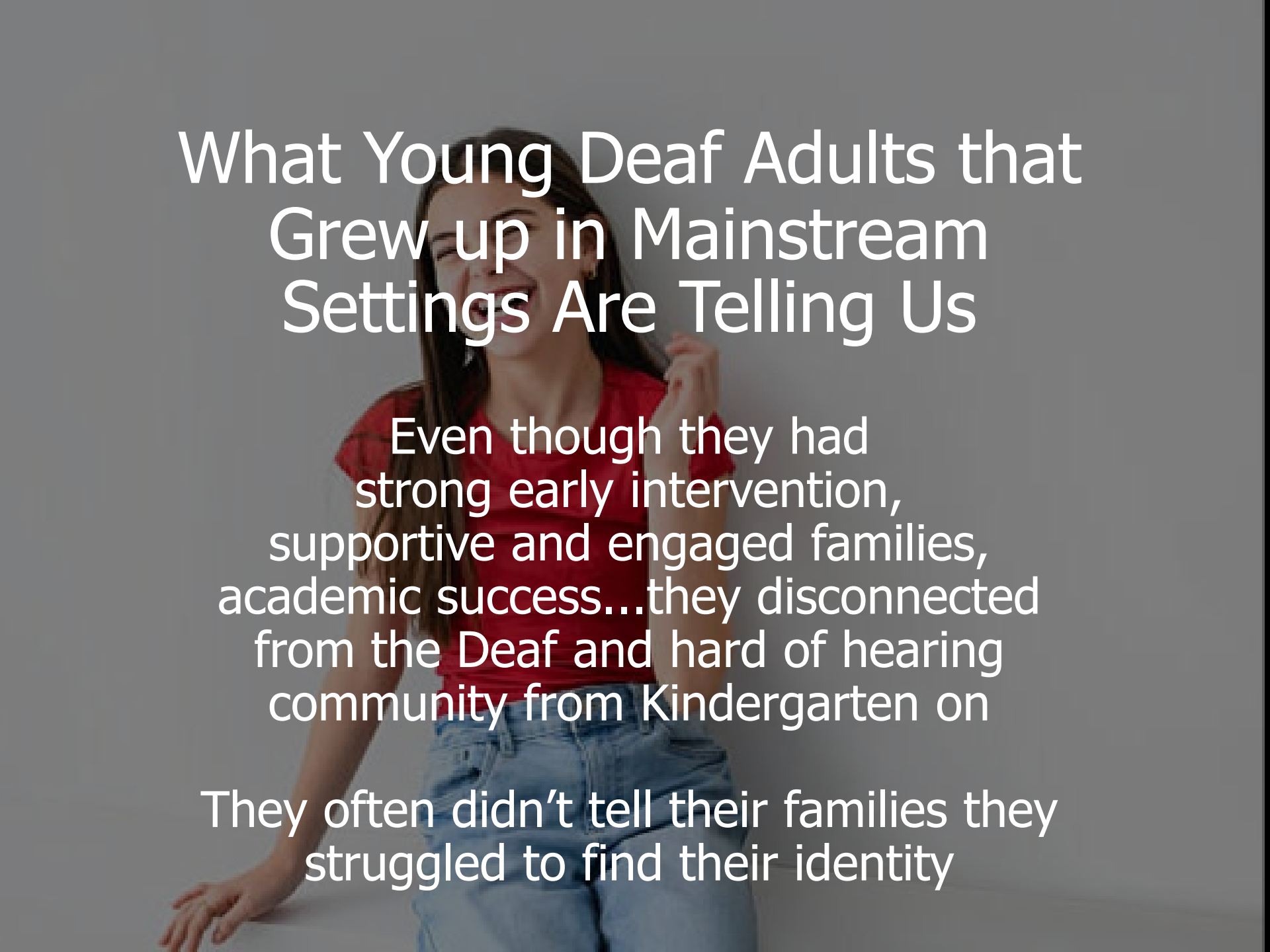
- Authentic connections
- Engagement with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Peers and Community
- Exposure to multiple languages and strategies

How can professionals expand opportunities for identity & linguistic exploration and competence?

Model	Model separation of language
Embed	Embed DHH adults meaningfully in children's lives
Promote	Promote inclusiveness and belonging
Support	Support exploration, communication, and connection with Deaf peers, DHH community
Establish	Establish consistent assessment schedules
Guide	Guide parents in learning how to observe their child

Encourage families to follow the path that seems right and never stop exploring others





What Young Deaf Adults that Grew up in Mainstream Settings Are Telling Us

Even though they had strong early intervention, supportive and engaged families, academic success...they disconnected from the Deaf and hard of hearing community from Kindergarten on

They often didn't tell their families they struggled to find their identity



Tales From the Hot Tub

Advice From Young Deaf Adults



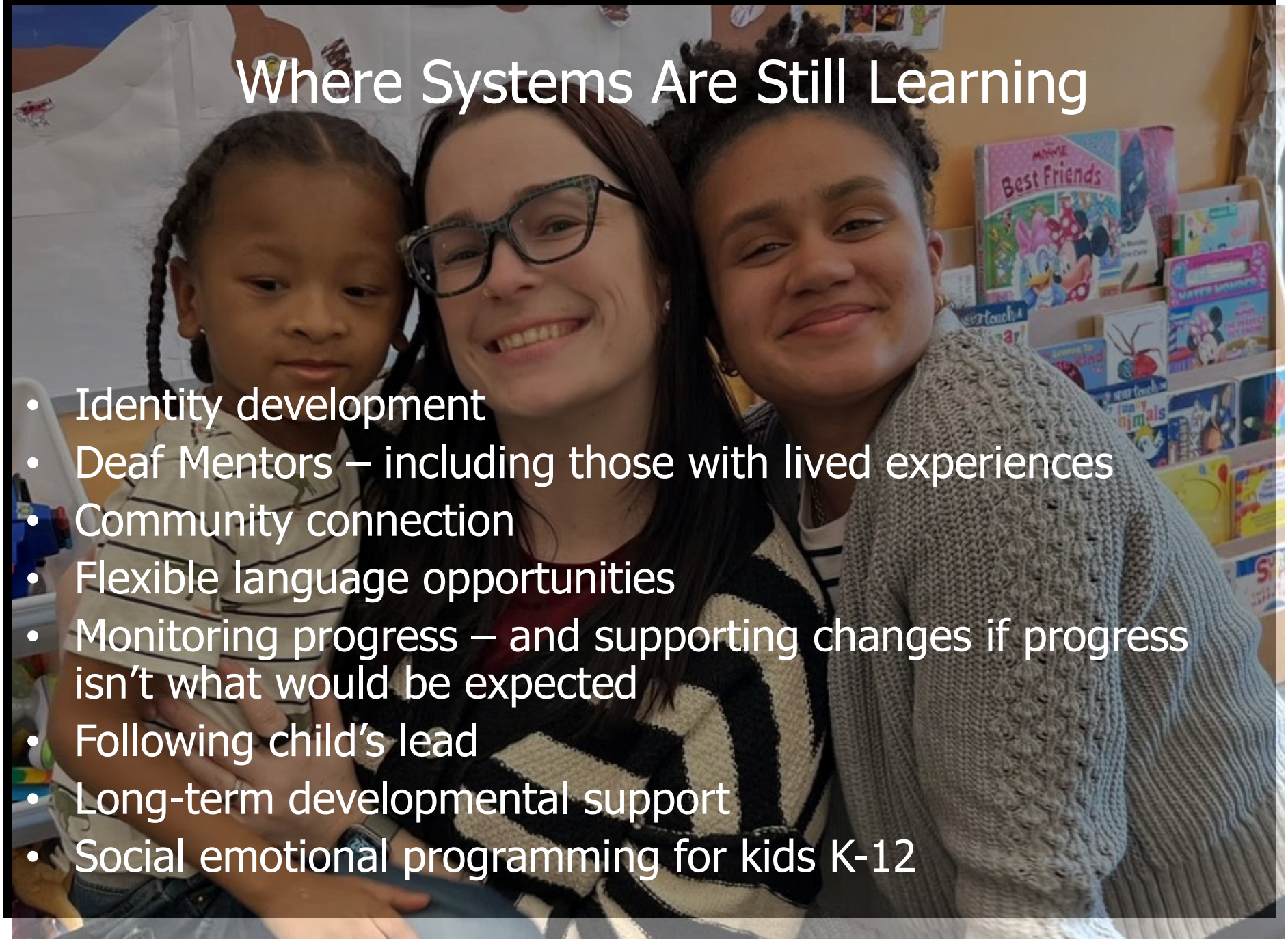
- “Stay connected with Deaf and Hard of Hearing peers and the Deaf community”
- “Build relationships with Deaf adults”
- “Explore different language opportunities – see what works best for you – it may change”
- “Identity matters as much as academics”



- How can systems support language exploration?
- How can we strengthen Deaf and hard of hearing community connections with children?
- How can professionals guide families through this journey?
- How can we support families in understanding the importance of staying connected?


Language • Identity • Community
Thriving Child

Where Systems Are Still Learning



- Identity development
- Deaf Mentors – including those with lived experiences
- Community connection
- Flexible language opportunities
- Monitoring progress – and supporting changes if progress isn’t what would be expected
- Following child’s lead
- Long-term developmental support
- Social emotional programming for kids K-12



Contact us:

Dr. Karen Hopkins – karenhopkins@cccbsd.org

Amy Spencer – amys.pencer@mecdhh.org

Cathy Lushman- catherine.lushman@mecdhh.org

References

Hopkins, K., & Puhlman, J. (2026). Empowering families of deaf children: A qualitative study on parental experiences in early intervention. *Journal of Early Intervention, 48*(1), 3–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/10538151241304752

Nanny ‘n Me. (n.d.). *Socio-emotional development in early childhood*. https://nannynme.co.za/wp/socio-emotional-development-in-early-childhood

Spencer, A. (2016). *Exploring language and communication opportunities (ELCO): A process document for professionals working with children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families*. Maine Educational Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Early Childhood and Family Services.