

# Deaf Mentor Family Program (DMFP)

By: Danelle Gournaris, MA, MS

The main goals of the DMFP are to facilitate early language acquisition through American Sign Language (ASL) instruction and for Deaf Mentors to share their own life experiences with children who are D/HH from birth to 21 years old and their families. The DMFP also provides resources on social and emotional developments as a D/HH person that will enormously benefit the D/HH children and their parents.

This program through Lifetrack, a non-profit organization based in St. Paul, brings together the love of family and the wealth of knowledge from a trained mentor who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing to provide a rich language environment for children who are D/HH. The Deaf Mentors are trained to use the SKI-HI Deaf Mentor Curriculum, the only curriculum designed for ASL instruction and Role Modeling within the Early Intervention system. The goal of the DMFP is to work closely with families to improve their child's access to language within their home environment. Deaf Mentors make home visits once a week for up to two hours per session for the duration of two years. We know parents are the best models and the services provided by the DMFP can help D/HH children to reach their full potential. Deaf Mentors are trained to shadow the parents in utilizing ASL. Not only are the Deaf Mentors a language model, they also help and guide the parents in understanding their child's hearing loss and their life experience based on Deaf Mentor's personal life sharing stories of what it's like to be Deaf. Deaf Mentors are also available for older children (age 7-21) who may need more than just a language model. The DMFP has more than one curricula/guidelines to use when assisting those families with Deaf children through their phases of life. The DMFP has 25 Deaf Mentors serving statewide. For more information on our Deaf Mentors and their biographies, please go to <http://www.lifetrack-mn.org/deaf-hard-hearing/deaf-mentor-family-program/deaf-mentors>

## **Benefits of DMFP**

The parents, D/HH adults, Lifetrack staff, and national experts agreed that the benefits to children and families who participate in D/HH mentoring programs will experience:

- Improved language acquisition
- Positive self-esteem and stronger sense of identity
- Stronger connections in the Deaf Community

## **Testimonies**

Testimonies shared by families who participated in DMFP:

- This program is fantastic especially if you do not have access to other resources.
- We love this program. We were told by our first D/HH teachers that there was no such program. I'm very pleased to know there is such help especially living this far north. I'd be very upset if it was discontinued.
- Benefit is the gift to be able to communicate to our daughter and teach her how to communicate with sign.

- The ASL lessons created an open and fun environment that helped build our child's language. We also attend deaf events that connected us to the community and opened our child's world to people that communicate similarly!
- Prior to the deaf mentor program my son was very frustrated. He and I were unable to effectively communicate. I am so thankful for this program. It has given me the ability to finally communicate with my son. Learning ASL has given me and my son not only the ability to communicate but has also improved our relationship. His frustration has greatly decreased.
- Seeing a smart, functional, successful deaf person is really important to reduce fears or stereotypes to the family and their network. It gives a good role model to for our child it provided us direction and action in a time of uncertainty. We knew regardless of what mode of communication he might have in the future, he would have ASL for sure! it was a positive encouraging person making us feel we were making the best educated decision!

Video of testimonies from our families in the DMFP are also featured here at this

link: <http://www.lifetrack-mn.org/child-family/dmfp/family-testimony>

## **Funding**

The DMFP grant was awarded to Lifetrack in 2012 with only \$100,000 by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division. Within 7 months of statewide operation, DMFP served 25 families and placed approximately 30 families on the waiting list. Because of the long waiting list, DMFP went to the state legislation in 2013 to request for more funding specifically from the Minnesota Department of Health's Newborn Hearing Screening/Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Program (MN Statute 144.966). The law was amended to include a provision for individualized Deaf Mentors to provide education including ASL as one available option for families of children who are D/HH. The legislation allocated approximately \$155,000 per year, collected through newborn screening fee dollars, and is targeted for children birth to six. Since then, the DMFP has served a total of 135 families.

The DMFP is still in need for additional funding to serve more families who are on the waiting list. At the time of this writing, we are serving 47 families statewide with 25 new families on the waiting list. Securing more funding will go a long way for D/HH children and their families. Thank you very much for your support.



Danelle Gournaris earned her Master of Arts in School Counseling & Guidance and Master of Science in Supervision and Administrations from Gallaudet University. Danelle has worked as the Program Director for a psychiatric treatment center at Family Services Foundation in Maryland prior to moving to Florida where she was a Family Counselor at a middle school with a deaf and hard of hearing program. While living in Florida, she also became a Deaf Mentor for families serving Miami-Dade and Broward Counties for two years. When Danelle moved to Minnesota in 2007, she continued on as a Deaf Mentor for the Central and Metro areas of Minnesota for five more years before accepting the Deaf Mentor Family Program Supervisor position under a state grant through Lifetrack for another four years. Danelle and her husband who is also deaf have three hearing children. They reside in Lakeville, Minnesota.