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DINNER TABLE SYNDROME: “WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?”

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>> Hello, everyone!

My name is David Meek. I work at Lamar University as a professor, and I live in Texas.

I actually grew up about three hours away from here in Indiana. I'm close enough that I could probably go see my mom, but unfortunately I'm flying back to Texas. So that won't be happening. I'll have to see my mom next week or, you know, during spring break.

So this is my topic today. "Dinner Table Syndrome: What are You Talking About?"

First I would like to explain this artist is Warren Miller, and he drew this picture, and it's an image of people sitting around the dinner table during Thanksgiving. So you see the man who is sitting by himself and he's isolated and somewhat separated from the family. As you're aware, about three months ago, you know, we just finished the holidays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, other various holidays, where oftentimes families are gathered around the dinner table.

And for those of us who are deaf or hard of hearing, we are often missing or left out of those conversations that are happening at the dinner table.

This is my personal experience. This was me at the age of 10.

So I learned about this experience called the Dinner Table Syndrome I would say probably just a few years ago. We were in class and we brought up this discussion, talking about the Dinner Table Syndrome. I didn't really give it a lot of thought before. I thought, wow, there is a lot I do miss out on. I was raised oral, my parents spoke with me. And now looking back and realizing, I did miss out on a lot.

So I had a discussion with my mom more recently and I was asking her if she thought I was left out and she said, I thought you were on par with us, I thought you were keeping up. Sometimes I wondered why you didn't know about a specific thing. I thought you knew that information that we were discussing. You know, I didn't realize you had missed out on that.

My mom said, but now we realize that maybe you did miss out on some of those opportunities. But for me, it didn't occur to me and I didn't realize that until later in life. I later came to that realization that I was missing out on those conversations at the dinner table when I was younger.

So the Dinner Table Syndrome doesn't only happen at the dinner table. It's a metaphor for any communication that is happening.

So it could happen while people are eating, as you see in the image depicting here. It can happen in the classroom as you see in this image depicted to the right, with classmates or with the professor.

This bottom left image depicts friends socializing. It can also happen there.

And also in the car as you see in the fourth image that I just displayed.

I always had the problem of sitting in the back of the car and I couldn't hear anything. I would often ask ‑‑ I would have to ask my mom, what did you say? And she would be screaming into the rear view mirror saying, I said... blah, blah, blah...

And even though she was screaming and it was loud, I would still miss what she was saying. And my mother and sister would sit in the front seat together and have all these conversations and for a while I would make up the conversations in my head and after a while I just eventually gave up.

So, this led to part of my research for my dissertation. I'm not going to dive too deep into my dissertation. I'm going to give a brief overview why I'm interested in this topic.

So, incidental learning happens everywhere. And people's experiences vary. It's not planned. It's not intended. And it happens through overhearing conversations, through hearing speech. We overhear other language and exposure to various topics. And if we look at this picture depicted on the screen, we can see there are two kids here talking to each other, but we can also see that the parents are in the background. It's possible that the parents are talking about bills, and the children might not be paying attention and 100% in tune be what the parents are saying, but they still overheard that conversation and they could later think about, my parents were talking about bills, and they're picking up that knowledge incidentally.

For individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing, they're missing out on that incidental learning. And so they need to have that incidental learning by seeing or over‑seeing a conversation. So they have limited access to incidental learning or they're having to catch various parts of communication.

So, I put a note on here ‑‑ this is the Statue of Liberty because I wanted to share a story with you. I don't know if I was in kindergarten or first grade, but it was about 1984. If you do the math, maybe you can figure out how old I was.

So, in 1984, it was Centennial Reconstruction for the Statue of Liberty. I was sitting and watching two teachers have a conversation and they were talking about the Statue of Liberty and they needed to collect money to be able to fix the Statue of Liberty and fix the arm of the statue of Liberty.

I told my parents, we need to collect money because the Statue of Liberty is going to lose her arm. It's going to fall off. They were like... what!? What are you talking about!?

They had no idea. My parents sat down with my teacher and explained what happened about collecting the money because they were trying to do the restoration project for the Statue of Liberty. Obviously I missed something said during that conversation. That's one example of the Dinner Table Syndrome.

So world knowledge is information that is learned both formally and informally. It could be through socializing with others. It's also developed through socializing with family, friends, other children, peers, adults, what have you.

Now, for deaf and hard of hearing individuals, that is linked back to the Dinner Table Syndrome or the lack of incidental learning.

So that was the same example that I just used for the Statue of Liberty. The earlier access to language that children have, it helps to develop their world knowledge as well as their incidental learning.

So, now I'm actually going to get into my research a little bit.

I interviewed a total of six participants. I had three participants in a mainstream program and three participants that were from deaf residential schools. And one of the important questions I had is realizing what the individuals were missing out on. Or asking them when they realized they were missing out on information.

So, these are the themes that I found through my interviews with those participants.

All of my participants had a variety of background of communication. Some of them ‑‑ hold on one second.

Okay, so they had a variety of modalities used at home. Some of them were spoken English, some were spoken Spanish, American Sign Language, simultaneous communication, home signs or home gestures or home signs with family who didn't know American Sign Language but they would use gestures or pointing with the children.

One participant, her name is Ria, and she had a difficulty understanding social cues, and she would try to pick up on the social cues through watching TV programs.

So she mentioned here, in Disney ‑‑ it's true if you watch any of the Disney channel, you see they're expressive, very sarcastic and joking around. So that's where she picked up a lot of social cues from.

So during dinner, several participants said they felt the need to escape. They didn't want to be there. Because they weren't part of the conversation that was happening at the dinner table.

So this is happening in both participants via if they were mainstreamed or if they were at the deaf residential schools.

So, talking about a sense of exclusion... so often what was happening at the dinner table is people were telling the participants, it's no big deal, never mind, I'll tell you later... those were often the responses the children were experiencing.

Some participants try to have follow‑up conversations with the parents but they already missed out on the opportunity at the dinner table. And here are some examples.

If we look at Ria's comment, she mentions that she's sitting at the dinner table and her family is having a conversation back and forth and they're laughing and she's sitting off to the side and sees that they're laughing, but she's not understanding what is going on. So when she tries to get somebody's attention, they're telling her to stop and to wait and that they would tell her later. But sometimes that later never comes.

So, between some participants and their family members there was a sense of short answers. So in one example, they typically will give short answers by saying, you know "I'm just tired." If I'm trying to talk and trying to sign and make sure you're keeping up with the conversation, you know, a lot of the family, you know, maybe an uncle or something, doesn't know sign language, or if they do know sign language, it will just be like "how's school?" And then a thumbs up. That's pretty much the gist of the conversation with the children.

With holidays or family gatherings, I had three participants who responded to this particular question. And two of the participants said that other family gatherings, the family do try to pull them into the conversations and include them in what was going on for the holiday or family gatherings. One participant said, my mom is really the one responsible for pretty much pulling me into the conversation. The second participant said that they're sort of overlapping activities. Or, like, hands‑on activities. And here are some examples of the responses.

So you can see here in both of these responses that the children's family were trying to pull them and engage them into the conversation. And they were trying to make sure they were having fun and playing the games with family or maybe they were cooking together or various activities. The third participant, on the other hand, gave me quite a unique experience.

And this is actually a common experience for children who are deaf and hard of hearing.

I don't know if you're familiar with the game Mad Gab. It's not very deaf and hard of hearing friendly. It's a card game. And on the card it has a word, but it's not a real word. It's more like it sounds like something or it's spelled like something, but it's not a real word. So it's hard to include a deaf or hard of hearing. So Ria responded saying ‑‑ I believe she was 15 at the time, said it was the worst experience ever. And she was so dramatic. She was like... this the worst Christmas ever!

But every year, that's a repetition response, but this is... she ended up approaching her mom about the situation. And since then it has improved.

So other things that are happening at the dinner table that are shared experiences is that sense of exclusion. And looking at the impact that it has on deaf and hard of hearing children.

So as I mentioned, hearing individuals are picking up on world knowledge or other incidental learning that is happening at the dinner table. But deaf and hard of hearing individuals are missing out on that opportunity or understanding the impact of what is happening. So the next topic that we're going to be looking at is another participant named Luke. He's going to talk about his avoidance behavior he did at the dinner table.

So, he explains about a situation where he brought his girlfriend over to meet his parents for the first time. And his girlfriend is hearing. Let's look at his response first.

Luke shared with me that this has happened many times. He will bring a friend over and while he's eating dinner with his family, he often will eat quickly and go back to his room and doesn't socialize or engage in conversation with his family. But his girlfriend witnessed this happening and was in complete shock about it. And Luke was like, this is normal behavior, this is how dinner is. And at that time, Luke didn't really realize ‑‑ you know, he just went along with it, because that was his norm. That was the normal behavior of how dinner was at his house.

So those participants who went to the school for the deaf, when they're on campus, they're signing day in and day out. But when it was time to go back home, they had to do what is called code switching. Basically they had to change how they were communicating once they got back home to their family. They mentioned on the bus ride home, going back to be with their family, they noticed that they would have a sense of depression or that their mood would change because at school they were able to chat with people regularly through meals and in the classroom, but at home they had a deprivation of being involved in those conversations.

So for Ria in this example, she made that direct connection she said, you know, at school we can joke, we can be sarcastic and talk about everything under the sun, but then, you know, when she goes home and she wants to know what was so funny and what was going on at dinner or another activity, she was left out of that. So for participants that were mainstreamed, I myself was mainstreamed growing up, and I often missed out on specific words that were happening in conversations. And I had to try to fill in the gaps using context clues what was happening in that situation. Sometimes I would guess right and sometimes wouldn't.

And sometimes I would just miss the word altogether.

One participant mentioned that he realized he was missing out when he was watching a TV show.

So remember Luke's comment about bringing his girlfriend and explaining that was normal dinner behavior for his family. So his family would go on having a conversation and so he even relate related it now to TV sitcoms and says, my family doesn't do that, or maybe they did and I just didn't know.

So how many of you are parents of deaf and hard of hearing children in the room?

Just by a show of hands.

Or maybe even teenagers.

Okay. So now I'm going to challenge you, if you're brave enough, ask your child if they feel included. Sometimes they don't know. And some of them maybe do know. They might come to the realization later, realizing how much they did miss out on. And it's possible that they're too young right now to realize how much they're missing out on.

In my research, it seems that those who went to a deaf school did come to the realization a lot sooner than those who are mainstreamed on how much they were missing out at the dinner table or other social settings.

So those who went to social settings didn't realize it because they were not having that drastic transition between being at school, you know, for days on end and then having to transition back home. So like me, I didn't realize I was mainstreamed, so I went home every day after school, and so this was a normal behavior, normal activity for me.

And I didn't realize how much I was missing out on until about three or four years ago. This artwork is by Matt Daigle, and I have seen this artwork everywhere. It spread like wildfire on social media. I had friends who are deaf, who are hard of hearing, who had cochlear implants, who used hearing aids, who signed, didn't sign, it didn't matter, all of them were able to relate to this experience of the dinner table syndrome and wildly shared this picture. And one friend in particular explained his mom made a comment and said, "Oh, we never left you out." And I thought to myself... I just sat with that for a minute. And I wasn't sure if I should comment or not.

So, if this happens to so many individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing ‑‑ and I understand that it's not intentional. It's not intentional, but because they don't know. And that's okay. It's not intentional. But it happens. It is happening.

So this phenomenon does not capture my life experience, but it captures not just mine but my participants' life experience with access of communication, with access to language. We are struggling to be involved in dialogue with our families, with our schools, with our social settings.

We often have sense of exclusion and don't have a sense of belonging.

So this experience then realizes ‑‑ leads to the realization of missing out.

Often in the hearing world we are left out. We care about your lives. We care about the people in our lives that we want to converse with, but we also do experience frustrations, feeling of anger.

And families are aware of it ‑‑ if families are aware of it, they can reduce this feeling of isolation and exclusion.

We love our families and we want for them to understand that this is a part of who we are.

So with that being said, I wanted to add some tips. I'm not sure if any of you heard of a magazine called "The Endeavor," but I wrote an article for the Endeavor magazine or journal, and I picked a few tips that I shared in that article to share with you today.

So make sure that everybody has eye contact with each other at the dinner table. Make sure that only one person signs at a time or speaks at a time. I did add that in my slide actually, but this isn't the most updated version. And make sure that only one person is talking at a time, so you can take turns. You can also add in pointing cues to identify who is speaking, so a person knows where to look.

And that's not just for deaf culture. We often do that ‑‑ and we do that often in deaf culture.

So that's something you can add in at the dinner table.

If your child uses a new word or a new sign, ask them what it means if you're not sure.

The longer each conversational dialogue is, the better it is. The more turn taking and interacting you have with that child, the better it is, and they're able to learn how to be engaged and involved in that conversation.

And most importantly, the last tip I have to share with you is to laugh and have fun with your conversations.

Well, that concludes my presentation for this afternoon. I want to thank you all for coming. There's any questions, feel free... or any concerns as well, please feel free to share those with me.

I have five minutes left according to the room monitor.

A question over here?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you for the presentation. I grew up in a hearing family, I definitely had the experience of other people talking and having to get people's attention to fill me in upon what was being said and being told "never mind, we'll tell you later." I'll tell you that... "never mind" is a pet peeve of mine to this day. I do have a deaf son, and we from the beginning made sure he was involved, obviously, because we're using a common language, but here we are in the 21st century and technology has taken over. I mean, I'm guilty of it too. I let him play on his phone while conversations are happening around him. But he does have access should she choose to disengage from the phone, he can engage with our conversation. And if he asks what we're saying, I don't mind repeating what we've been talking about, my husband and myself.

So he sort of... he does self‑directed engagement as he wants. But I'm always thinking about ways for him to be involved. We have family dinner every Sunday, no electronics allowed. We tried a couple techniques that way. And the tips you shared, David, are important to think about and how they apply to the 21st century in an everyday context for families today.

>> DAVID MEEK: I saw another hand in the back. Do you need a microphone?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: [ off microphone ]

How do I explain to my son...

How do I explain to my son we love him...

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm having a hard time. I'm missing the point. I don't want to misinterpret you.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do I explain to my son that even though his family members don't learn sign, that they still love him and, like, how do I, like, bridge the gap and maybe encourage them to do sign? Like what do I say to him when he asks why they don't sign?

>> DAVID MEEK: How old is your son? Is he still relatively young? Nine?

He's nine, okay.

So with that, I mean, you could encourage family members to learn some basic sign language to be able to communicate with him, but if the family members, you know even signed a little bit, even if it's "hi, how are you?" A simple couple words here or there, anyone young who sees somebody is trying to connect with me and sign with me, I think that's really nice, I think that's really great. But I understand some family members will refuse. They think it's too hard and just forget it, they won't do it. But just go with it. Tell your son you know, someday they'll learn and some family members will and some families won't, and they still love you. That's who they are, and you can always just try to encourage them to continue to learn to be able to interact and communicate with your son.

Thank you.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is it okay if I stand here? Should I stay here?

I should come to the front.

So this idea, the dinner table syndrome, you shared only the tip of the iceberg. I'm very familiar with it. I went through it myself, like Heidi said as well. I come from a hearing family and my mom and sisters did learn sign, but the extended family didn't.

And what would happen is, you know, we gave them ABC books and ASL stories and basic sign. And, I mean, some... and a dictionary. And some of them did try. It wasn't they really learned fluently, but the fact they tried even just a little bit, I knew they loved me. I knew that attempt was their expression of love. But where it got difficult was at the holiday gatherings. You know, there would be the adults table and the kids table. I hated the kids table!

Because I would sit with all of my cousins, who are the same age as me. I was very fortunate, though, my sister was there as well who could sign and did sign, but my cousins would be talking about the latest gossip and sharing, you know, the hidden inappropriate stuff that, of course, I wanted to have access to, and it was really awkward. And my sister interpreted for me but she was younger than me. It was awkward to ask her to interpret things, especially things that were really inappropriate. But... and my cousins were mostly interested in learning how to sign the bad words. But, again, ‑‑ just the attempt to learn and not feeling excluded is an expression of love. So I feel you, that mom back there.

And I think, you know, just minimal things actually can have a large impact. That would be my contribution.

>> DAVID MEEK: Thank you for sharing that.

All right, I'm being told time the is up. The you have more questions, feel free to find me here or in the hallway. Thank you again for coming. I really appreciate it.