

Cindy Dickeson

President & CEO

Center for Early Intervention on Deafness

Interviewed by William Zhang

Please share a little about yourself. As the President & CEO of the Center for Early Intervention on Deafness (CEID), what keeps you motivated to continue expanding sign supported English and American Sign Language (ASL) access?

I am the CEO of the Center for Early Intervention on Deafness, and we are a nonprofit agency in the Bay Area. We provide a variety of education and support services to young children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families. In addition, we have two community audiology clinics, one in Berkeley and one in Oakland. They both support people of all ages with basic audiology services from diagnostic testing to hearing aids. That is our way of supporting language and communication for the entire community. Our audiology clinics also focus on serving people with low income because they would otherwise not have access to these services. Our main goal in the community is to aid young children into gaining language access early on. It is important for them to be able to communicate from the beginning, so that they can develop fully and have rich, incredible lives. We are really proud to be able to partner with parents and family members to support language development for children who are deaf and hard of hearing. By doing so, CEID can utilize a family-centered approach to support families and figure out how the families will teach their children language, whether it is through spoken language with a focus on listening and speaking, a sign supported language or with American Sign Language (ASL). The focus is to promote language and communication development for their child from the beginning.

What brought you to work at CEID?

Through my stepson, I was introduced to CEID, sign language, and the world of deaf education. I had a great experience with the staff, and what I saw the program do for my stepson made me believe very strongly about CEID's positive impact. Many, many years later, CEID was looking for a program director. My background is in social work, and I had focused on nonprofit management in my graduate studies. I worked primarily with homeless families and domestic violence in addition to a variety of work supporting families in different ways. When CEID was looking for a program director, I thought it was a perfect way to use my professional background to not only support a program I knew personally, but to also help other students and families that CEID connected with.

Do you know another language? If so, how did you learn it?

As a parent of a child who is deaf, I learned a lot of sign language vocabulary. My stepson was attending CEID's pre-school, and I attended CEID's Signing Exact English classes to help support his language development. Throughout my 20 years at CEID, I have continued to use sign language everyday. I use it in my work with families, our staff who are Deaf, and with Deaf professionals in the community. In addition, I also know Spanish at a proficient level. It enables me to connect with families who speak Spanish as their primary language. By being able to support families directly in their language, just by answering the phones or talking to any of our audiology patients in the front office, helps them feel supported.

How has incorporating sign supported English, ASL, and Spanish supported your field of work? Is knowing ASL part of the job at CEID?

Even though I may not be fluent in every language, but by having a sense of other languages, I am able to connect with people, and this has been really important to my work. Whenever I am able to share simple greetings or make connections with someone else through their language, I can begin to build what is really important: the collaboration, support, and most importantly trust, particularly with the families that CEID works with. As a whole, I think being able to speak to someone in their language, can build connections better than through an interpreter. I would characterize CEID as being very flexible around knowing ASL. Because we have hearing children on site and we have deaf children, a variety of different people join us with different skills. We definitely ask that people use sign language when they are around deaf and hard of hearing people to the extent that they can. We have parents who are new to learning sign, so they are not going to be able to sign all the time while they are talking. For our staff, if they do not have a strong sign language background or any background, we ask that they take classes, online or in person, to get more support. They can also learn it on the job, but we want them to be really using sign and being able to use it correctly. I think that the most basic question we ask someone in an interview is if they are motivated to learn sign language. If they say yes, then that would not preclude them from going further in the process. As long as someone is willing to learn and be interested, then we can work with them. We have had some good success with people who did not know much early on and then became avid signers who were really passionate about it.

How many people has CEID served?

CEID has been in existence since 1980. As an organization, we will be arriving on our 50th anniversary in a few years, which is exciting. In the meantime, for 46 years, across all of the different programs, CEID has served over 10,000 individuals and their families. As for our

education programs, we provide support for an average of 100 families each year with intensive education services. Our audiology program sees around 1,200 patients each year. It is a great amount of people for a relatively small organization.

Does CEID provide ASL workshops to families with deaf or hard of hearing members? If so, are these workshops open to all?

CEID does a couple of different things. To start, we have family sign classes. I call them sign classes because we are not using ASL, instead the teacher is focusing on some basic sign vocabulary and teaching parents how to use a sign supported language. It could be spoken English, spoken Spanish or another language that the family uses and then adding sign to the spoken language. This creates communication forms like sign supported English or sign supported Spanish. For families who want a focus on ASL, through our Deaf coaching program, our Deaf staff members will support the ASL language development of the children and their families. They do this through visits to the child's home, engaging with the community, or by bringing families together to learn ASL. What is important about the program is that there are important cultural aspects of ASL and the Deaf community. The program is also about bringing hearing parents and families to learn and understand more about what it is like to be deaf. This allows families to learn more about their child, learn ASL, and the important cultural aspects of the rich and diverse culture of the Deaf community. It is a really important part of our program and for the families to be able to connect with their child so that their child can be a part of the community.

Is there anything you would like to highlight about CEID?

The most important thing for people to understand about young children who are deaf and hard of hearing is that language access has a big impact on them as babies at the very beginning. If they only have auditory language around them but can not hear sufficiently to be able to access the spoken language, then, it is really important to help them figure out how to give them language access. Some families choose to have hearing aids or cochlear implants, other families might also use a visual language like ASL or use some sign supported English. The key is that language development is so important early on. It does not matter what the language choice is or the communication choice. It is a matter of making sure that you are getting rich, intense language support to those children and those families as soon and as early as possible.

What makes CEID unique amongst other organizations?

I think there are lots of organizations that are doing great work in the Bay Area and connecting deaf children and families with the resources that they need. I would say that CEID is a leading

organization in the Bay Area supporting young children who are deaf and hard of hearing in their families. There definitely are not programs that utilize the same family-centered approach to provide tailored language access and flexibility to families. We also are one of the few centers that work with children who are Deaf-plus - children who are deaf and have other disabilities. For example, they might have autism or cerebral palsy and be profoundly deaf. A lot of other deaf and hard of hearing programs solely work with kids who are deaf. We have become known as a program that will work with a very diverse group of unique learners.

What happens to the children that age out of CEID programs?

CEID works with the family and the school district to figure out what the child's next step is. Some students might be mainstreamed into a general education kindergarten classroom at their local school. Many other students, because they are still learning language at 5 years old, as they transition out of CEID's preschool, need more intensive language support taught by a teacher of the deaf and with a team of specialists. I think that is often really important for our young students to still be in a specialized program. That can be at their local school district or in their region. For example, there are some children who go to the California School for the Deaf in Fremont. It is a state school for deaf and hard of hearing children that uses ASL and is a great, intensive wraparound service similar to CEID. Though it is a bit of a different approach, some of our students go there because they want to continue with signing and using ASL. That would be an example of a specialized school. At the end of the day, it really depends on the child's needs. In general, it can be difficult for our Deaf-plus students to find a program right for them. For example in kindergarten, the school district has to think, whether or not a student who is both deaf and autistic should belong in a program for children with autism or a program for children who are deaf and hard of hearing. The program for autism will not be able to provide language access because they are not using sign language or they don't know how to deal with the cochlear implants or how to support auditory training. There is definitely a lack of programs in our area so families often have to make a trade-off. The families have to decide whether or not they want to focus on the deafness or other disabilities. Sometimes, the only choice is a classroom for children who have multiple special needs, which can lack the support for the child's deaf identity, devices, and language development. I wish there were better options, but it is all about providing help to unique students and trying to kind of figure out how to meet their different needs.

How does CEID hope to expand in the coming years?

For CEID as an organization, all of the work that we do continues to be focused on how we best support families and children with their needs. We are always constantly adapting as those needs

may change, which is a reason for why we have expanded to support more of the Deaf-plus population. We are seeing more and more help needed as we see less support for those families and children. For us, it is about how do we expand support? We have done that through training other professionals on how to support these students. We can only serve so many kids in our building and in our classrooms. I think sharing some of the secret sauce or the magic in what we do with other providers is helpful. I also believe in training and supporting parents in being strong advocates for their children and being able to educate other professionals who work with these children. It is about having a ripple effect beyond our walls. I am also proud of how we continue to push to have more deaf and hard of hearing staff in our team and in our communities. It is to make sure they are engaged and at the table when decisions are being made about policies or programs that impact them. I think that is very important to me and important to us as an organization that we continue to work on.