

THE TRIPOD STORY

BACKGROUND:

TRIPOD is a nonprofit organization committed to helping families raise their deaf children in an informed and positive way. TRIPOD is the only educational organization of its kind in the United States and its programs are now models for national replication. TRIPOD receives no federal or United Way assistance, and we have been most fortunate in receiving the committed support of many notables in the entertainment, civic, corporate and foundation communities.

"The TRIPOD Story" is extraordinary. In 1981, Megan Williams and her husband, Michael Shamberg (producer of "The Big Chill") discovered that their son Jacob, then three years old, was profoundly deaf. As is most often the case with hearing parents, the Shambergs had no previous knowledge of deafness or how to help their child. They began searching for information and options, and were dismayed to find that there was a maddening controversy surrounding the issue of deaf education. There was no "Dr. Spock for the Deaf Child" to which they could refer. There was no central source of objective information about raising and educating deaf children. There were many more questions than answers.

In search of information and help, Megan documented more than 200 phone calls around the country until she was referred to Carl Kirchner, Associate Professor of Special Education at California State University, Northridge. Carl is the hearing son of deaf parents and had been involved in deaf education for 25 years.

While Carl helped the Shambergs wade through a sea of information, Megan was busy exploring all existing programs in Los Angeles. She learned that there were no programs -- public or private -- which offered the type and quality of education they wanted for Jacob.

In the meantime, a friend of the Shambergs, introduced them to an east coast venture capitalist who took an interest in the Shambergs' problem and offered to make a major financial contribution to help Jacob. This pledged support encouraged the Shambergs and Carl Kirchner to develop the idea of a new organization which would provide a national clearinghouse of objective information pertaining to all aspects of childhood deafness, as well as a family-oriented preschool program for hearing impaired children that would offer the most innovative methods and the most qualified professionals.

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TRIPOD was incorporated in December, 1982. With a major gift from a benefactor and proceeds from the Los Angeles premiere of "The Big Chill", the TRIPOD Preschool opened its doors for the first time in February 1984. Six students were then enrolled, and by the following September, the school was operating at capacity with fourteen children.

In an extremely short amount of time, TRIPOD has gained national recognition and commendation from educators, parents, and the deaf community. Because of its immediate success, TRIPOD is now experiencing a tremendous growth period characterized by program expansion, growing numbers of children served, new projects, plans to move to a larger building in order to accommodate more children, and greater national visibility.

TRIPOD PROGRAMS:

When a deaf child is born into a hearing family -- which is the case over 90% of the time -- communication and normal interaction do not come naturally. They must be learned. The learning process involves overcoming the emotional impact of discovering a child's deafness, understanding what the deafness means, deciding how to adapt to it, and developing new ways to communicate.

TRIPOD is the only total-family, educational organization for deaf children in the United States which combines the Total Communication philosophy with Montessori teaching methods. The Total Communication philosophy stresses deaf children's use of all vehicles in order to communicate (speech, lipreading, audition, sign language, mime, reading, and writing). Montessori methods are particularly well-suited for deaf children because instruction is primarily visual; self-expression is part of all activities; and children develop self-confidence and independence since activities are based upon the child's interests.

TRIPOD's roster of services continues to expand in order to help families. This year, TRIPOD began a Parent-Infant/Toddler Program for hearing impaired babies from birth to two years of age. This program was a direct result of the success of TRIPOD's Preschool Program. TRIPOD had been approached by families whose children were too young for the Preschool. They wanted the total-family, total-child, total-communication approach for which TRIPOD had become known. The Parent-Infant/Toddler Program offers home visits, weekly center-based group classes, and weekly sign language classes for parents.

The TRIPOD Preschool is flourishing. It serves children from two to six years of age and there is a waiting list. In addition to the hearing impaired children in the classroom, TRIPOD has enrolled two hearing children, whose parents are deaf. We have found that this kind of integration is mutually beneficial.

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Two years ago, TRIPOD began an elementary program in conjunction with P.S. #1, a private elementary school in Santa Monica. This program enables hearing-impaired children to be mainstreamed into a school setting with hearing children. Four hearing-impaired children are now enrolled in a classroom with fourteen hearing children and by September 1988, this program will have the capability of serving eight hearing-impaired children. Enclosed please find an article entitled, "Enjoying Each Other's Company", which describes the success of this program to date.

TRIPOD's programs are based upon the belief that family involvement is the cornerstone in helping deaf children overcome their handicap. We believe -- and research confirms -- that easy communication and relaxed interaction within the family enable children to experience the greatest success as they grow and learn. The Parent Support Program consists of weekly sign language classes for all family members; the only extended Day Care Program for hearing-impaired children in Los Angeles; a Parent Lending Library of books and videotapes about child rearing and deafness; a nationally circulated newsletter called Sense; Parent meetings which help families to learn more about deafness and to share ideas and feelings with other parents, professionals, and deaf adults.

The TRIPOD GRAPEVINE is the only national and local toll-free hotline in the country. The GRAPEVINE is for anyone who has questions about childhood deafness. Since its inception four years ago, the GRAPEVINE has provided information to more than 4,000 callers from fifty states and several foreign countries. TRIPOD's Public Service Announcement publicizing the GRAPEVINE was written and directed by Lawrence Kasdan (director of "The Big Chill" and "Silverado"). The spot stars Chevy Chase, Jo Beth Williams, Jeff Goldblum and deaf actor Herb Larson. It first aired on ABC directly following the 1985 Superbowl and it continues to be shown throughout the country.

TRIPOD's founding parent, Megan Williams, produced a documentary film for parents and teachers of deaf children entitled, "Language Says It All". The film sensitively focuses on the impact of deafness for young children and their parents. Parents candidly talk about their feelings and the frustrations of communicating with their deaf children. The film has won the highest awards bestowed by several international film festivals and was nominated for a 1987 Academy Award.