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One Size Does Not Fit All: How Early Decisions Influence Lifelong Outcomes for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Children



Michel Brummer

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Who am I?

Michael Brummer serves as NCDHH's statewide liaison for education, youth, and family support. He's here to help you navigate the systems, services, and decisions that come with raising and educating a Deaf, DeafBlind, or hard of hearing child.

He brings more than 20 years of experience working with deaf and hard of hearing children in educational settings. Michael and his wife, Anna, have been married for over 30 years and have two children, along with two dogs—Einstein, a Golden Retriever, and Olive, a deaf Bernedoodle.

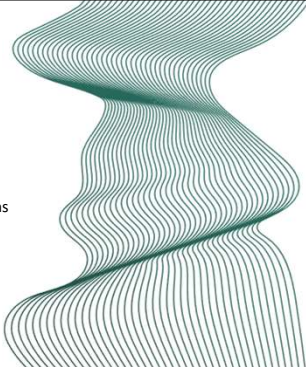



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Objectives

Participants will:

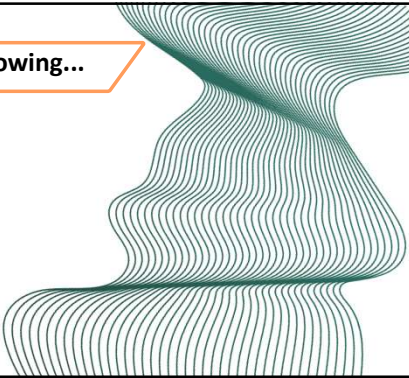
- Understand communication and language pathways for Deaf/DeafBlind/Hard of Hearing children
- Examine how early systems shape decisions
- Analyze disparities in long-term outcomes
- Apply strategies to support informed, equitable decision-making
- Reflect on their role in influencing family choices



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Define the Following...

- Deaf
- Hard of Hearing
- DeafBlind
- Others
 - Hearing loss
 - Hearing differences
 - Hearing Impaired




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When a child is identified as being deaf, what is the very first decision that comes to mind?




Technology



Speech



Sign Language




Something Else?

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This session is not just about decisions...

It's about:

- What information is available
- Who influences decisions
- What assumptions are present
- What constraints exist



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Early decisions are not just clinical

They shape:

- Language access
- Cognitive development
- Identity
- Lifelong outcomes

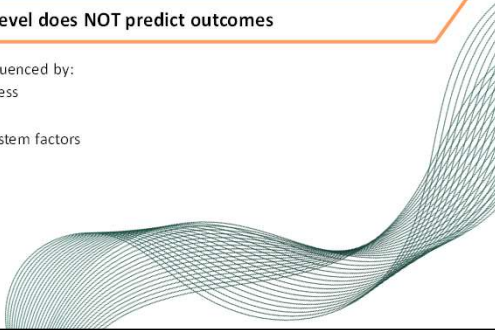


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Hearing level does NOT predict outcomes

Outcomes are influenced by:

- Language access
- Early support
- Family and system factors



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Nebraska Context

- Early Hearing Detection & Intervention (EHDI)
- Early Development Network (Birth-3 services)
- Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Nebraska Regional Programs

Reality:

- Access varies across the state
- Rural vs. urban differences matter



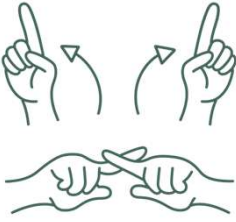
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Language Matters

Language ≠ Speech

Language is:

- Access to communication
- Foundation for learning
- Basis for relationships and identity



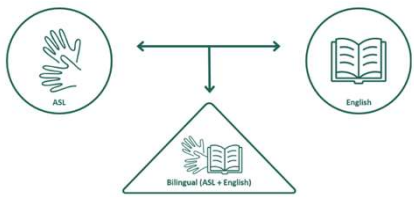
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No one-size-fits-all approach

- Spoken language (with or without amplification)
- American Sign Language (ASL)
- Bilingual (ASL + English)
- Signing Exact English (SEE)
- Total Communication or Sim Com
- Pidgin Sign Language
- Cued Speech

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Language Acquisition Pathways & Communication Options



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Critical Period

The brain is time-sensitive for language development
Delayed access = long-term impact



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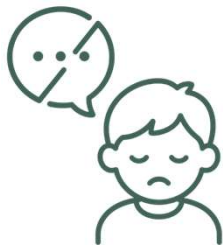
Access to sound ≠ Access to language



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Impact of Language Delay


- Literacy challenges
- Academic delays
- Social-emotional impact
- Employment limitations



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Nebraska Reality

- Limited specialists in rural areas
- Travel burden for families
- Uneven access to language models



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Prioritizing...

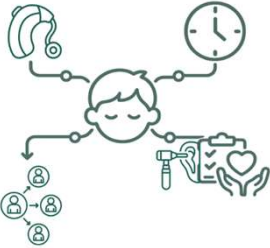
Am I prioritizing what is visible (speech) over what is essential (language access)?



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Early Systems

- Newborn hearing screening
- Referral pathways
- Early intervention services
- Decisions happen quickly



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“ Families are making major decisions before they fully understand the landscape. ”

Often made within:

- Weeks
- Months

Under:

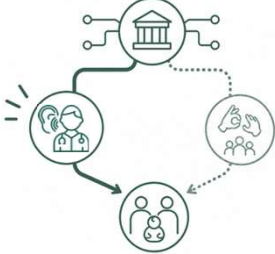
- Stress
- Limited information



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System Influence

- Medical model often dominates
- Technology emphasized early
- Limited exposure to Deaf perspectives



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Are families truly choosing... or being guided?



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Factors Influencing Decisions

- Access to services
- Rural vs. urban location
- Insurance coverage
- Provider knowledge and bias
- Cultural beliefs



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Equity vs Equality

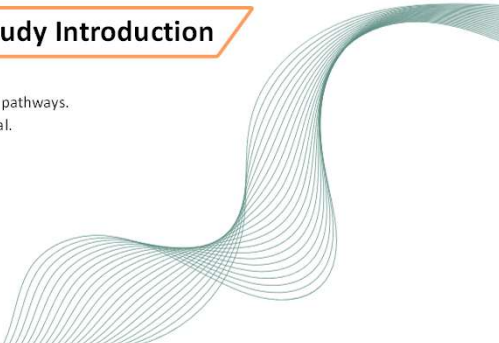
- Equality: Same options
- Equity: Real access to those options



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Case Study Introduction

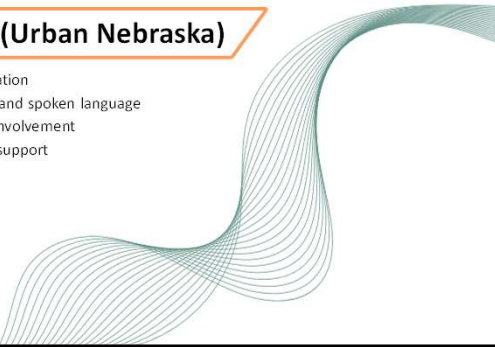
- Two children.
- Two different pathways.
- Same potential.



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Child A (Urban Nebraska)


- Early identification
- Access to ASL and spoken language
- Deaf mentor involvement
- Strong family support



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Child B (Rural Nebraska)


- Delayed follow-up
- Limited access to specialists
- Speech-only approach
- Minimal early language access



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Outcome Comparison

- Child A:
 - Strong language
 - On-grade literacy
 - College pathway
- Child B:
 - Language delays
 - Literacy challenges
 - Limited postsecondary options



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Key Insight

The difference is NOT ability

- The difference is:
 - Access
 - Information
 - System support



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Reflection

- Where did the paths diverge?
- Were these truly "choices"?



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Systems & Bias


- Medical vs cultural perspectives
- Authority bias
- Limited Deaf representation
- System-driven recommendations



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Nebraska Barriers


- Rural isolation
- Interpreter shortages
- Limited Deaf/Deafblind resources



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Implication of Limited Language Access

- Limited early language access may contribute to:
 - Delays in cognitive development
 - Academic challenges
 - Reduced comprehension levels
 - Social disconnection from family and peers
 - Increased behavioral and mental health risks
- Potential long-term risks may include:
 - Substance misuse
 - Truancy
 - Victimization
 - Suicidal ideation



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Choices are only as real as the access behind them



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How might my role influence what families believe is possible?

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Strategy 1: Balanced Information

- Present ALL communication options
- Include Deaf perspectives
- Avoid modality bias

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Strategy 2: Build Decision Capacity

Help families ask:

- What are the long-term outcomes?
- What are all available options?
- Who benefits from this recommendation?

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Strategy 3: Improve Navigation

Connect families to:

- Deaf mentors
- Parent networks
- Early intervention services



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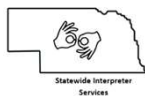
Strategy 4: Language-Rich Environments

- Consistent exposure to language
- Accessible communication
- Strong family involvement



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Nebraska Resources



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Core Message

- One size does not fit all
- Early decisions are system-shaped
- Outcomes are predictable—and changeable



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Incidental Learning

What is Incidental Learning?

- Incidental learning occurs when children naturally acquire information by observing and overhearing conversations and interactions.
- Many D/DB/HH children:
 - Miss environmental language exposure
 - Receive incomplete incidental information

Providing accessible language ensures full participation in everyday learning.



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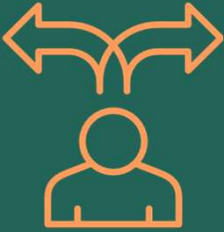
Non-Negotiable

Full access to language



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What is ONE thing you will do differently after today?



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What the Data Shows in Nebraska

- According Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation,
- **Data collected from July 1, 2020, through June 30, 2025**

Deaf & Hard of Hearing (only impairment)	
• Applied and eligible for VR Services	469
• Attend vocational/postsecondary/technical training	25
• Entered in workforce	306
• Received job retention services	392

Deaf & Hard of Hearing With Additional Disability	
• Applied and eligible for VR Services	255
• Attend vocational/postsecondary/technical training	9
• Entered in workforce	136
• Received job retention services	186

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The Impact of Early Decisions

Gaps in degree attainment don't start in college. They reflect earlier differences in:

- Language access
- Educational placement
- Communication access

Early barriers → long-term outcome gaps

Key Insight:

- Systems produce predictable results
- When supports are inconsistent, outcomes are inconsistent

Visual Idea:

- Pathway comparison:
 - Path A: Early access → strong literacy → college completion
 - Path B: Delayed access → gaps → reduced degree attainment

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Thank You

- Questions?
- Discussion?



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Scan to Stay Connected with NCDHH

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Thank you for attending this session.
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