



CAMP CODA: CHILDREN OF DEAF ADULTS



STUDY GUIDE

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Camp Coda

Jodee Mundy travels to Pennsylvania to join the first Asian-American CODA camp for Deaf parents and their children. Can an immersive experience in sign language and Asian family values help these pre-teens connect more deeply with their Deaf parents? Jodee Mundy OAM is an Australian theatre performer and a proud CODA (Child of Deaf Adults). Raised with Auslan as her first language, she grew up in a Deaf family with Deaf parents and older brothers.

Camp Coda: Children of Deaf Parents

CODA is an abbreviation for “Children of Deaf Adults.” Sometimes the term KODA is also used, meaning “Kids of Deaf Adults.” A CODA can have one deaf parent or both can be deaf. Researchers estimate that about 90 percent of deaf parents have children who are not deaf.

Causes of Deafness

A person can be born deaf for many reasons. Deafness can be caused by a complication during pregnancy, but it is often a result of genetics. The National Deaf Children’s Society explains, “We have around 20,000 genes. Of these it’s estimated that at least 200 are involved in the ear’s development or function. A variation in either one or both of a pair of genes (depending on the role of the protein that gene pair codes for) can cause deafness.”¹ The organization explains that there are a number of different types of genetic variations that can cause deafness, some of which may be passed down by parents, and others that can appear for the first time in a child. Deafness can also be caused by many different syndromes such as Alport syndrome, Crouzon syndrome, and Down’s syndrome. Syndromes may or may not be caused by genetics. Experts find that there is about a 10 percent chance of deaf parents having a child who is deaf.

The Health Resources & Services Administration reports that screening reveals more than 6,500 deaf or hard of hearing newborns in the United States every year. It says, “About half of babies are deaf or hard of hearing because of changes in their genes.”² According to the 2023, American Community Survey (ACS), about 2% of the U.S. population is deaf or has serious difficulty hearing.

Sign Language

Sign language is a way for people to communicate by using signs and visual gestures. The National Deaf Children’s Society defines it as “A visual language that uses hand shapes, facial expression, gestures and body language.”³ There are approximately 300 different sign languages, and they are used by more than 70 million people worldwide. Like spoken languages, sign languages have their own unique syntax, vocabulary, and grammar, and they change over time.

¹ <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/childhood-deafness/causes-of-deafness/genetics/genes/>

² <https://newbornscreening.hrsa.gov/conditions/deafness-and-hearing-loss>

³ <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/language-and-communication/sign-language/what-is-sign-language/>

Visual clues are an important part of sign language. These include eye movements and facial expressions. The State of Rhode Island Commission the Deaf on the Hard of Hearing stresses, “Because ‘listeners’ must use their eyes to ‘receive’ the information, this language was specifically created to be easily recognized by the eyes.”⁴

American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is the most commonly used sign language in the United States. The State of Rhode Island Commission the Deaf and Hard of Hearing reports that after English and Spanish, ASL is the third most common U.S. language overall. It also explains that ASL is its own unique language, not just a form of English adapted for the deaf. It states, “Contrary to popular belief, ASL is not representative of English nor is it some sort of imitation of spoken English that we use on a day-to-day basis. For many, it will come as a great surprise that ASL has more similarities to spoken Japanese and Navajo than to English.”⁵

Like English, ASL has a variety of regional differences. There are different slang words, signs, and signing rhythms throughout the country. There are also differences between people. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders explains, “Just as with other languages, specific ways of expressing ideas in ASL vary as much as ASL users themselves.”⁶

The Deaf Community

Deaf people are often referred to collectively as the Deaf community. The Deaf community includes family members and others who are not deaf but who are close to people who are. “Deaf” is capitalized when it is used to refer to this community, while it appears in lowercase when used to reference the physical lack of hearing.

Deaf people prefer specific terms, and may be offended by others. The National Association of the Deaf explains. It says, “The National Association of the Deaf strongly urges the use of ‘deaf and hard of hearing’ when referring to the community or individuals in the community. Many in our community find other terms outdated and/or offensive including but not limited to: ‘hearing impaired,’ ‘deaf and dumb,’ and ‘deaf-mute.’”⁷

Study Questions:

1. What are some of the specific challenges that CODAS face?
2. What about their parents?
3. What additional responsibilities do some CODAS have, as explained in the film?

⁴ <https://cdhh.ri.gov/information-referral/american-sign-language.php>

⁵ <https://cdhh.ri.gov/information-referral/american-sign-language.php>

⁶ <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/american-sign-language>

⁷ <https://www.nad.org/about-us/faq/>

4. Can you think of any unique benefits that might come from growing up as a CODA?
5. How do you think smartphones have changed communication for deaf people, as revealed in the film?
6. As shown in the film, what are some of the challenges involved in communication between CODAS and their parents?
7. What are some benefits of connecting with other CODAS, as shown in the film?

Additional Resources

Books

- Ruth A. Reppert, *Adventures of a CODA: A Child of Deaf Parents*. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2016.
- David Sorensen, *Between Two Worlds: MyLife as a Child of Deaf Adults*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2019.

Online Sources

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<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/news/22/08/complexity-coda-experience>
- Jamie Korf, "What This Local Child of Deaf Parents Thought About 'CODA,'" Mpls.St.Paul Magazine, April 13, 2022.
<https://mspmag.com/arts-and-culture/what-this-local-child-of-deaf-parents-thought-about-coda-movie/>
- Summer Lomendehe, "What the Term "Tone Deaf" Means to Deaf Asian Americans," Mochi Magazine, June 6, 2022.
<https://www.mochimag.com/activism/deaf-asian-american-experience/>
- National Deaf Center, "Deaf Awareness." <https://nationaldeafcenter.org/resources/deaf-awareness/>
- National Deaf Children's Society, "How Genes Can Cause Deafness." <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/childhood-deafness/causes-of-deafness/genetics/genes/>
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, "American Sign Language," updated October 29, 2021.
<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/american-sign-language>

Contact

For inquiries, please contact:
EPF Media - info@epfmedia.com

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