

CASE 15

A Silent World

Fed up with the fast-paced lifestyle of southern California, Lynn Budzynski and her ten-year-old daughter Becky have just moved to Sugar Springs, a small town in the Rocky Mountains. Two days after their arrival, Ms. Budzynski brings her daughter to Sugar Springs Elementary School. She fills out the paperwork to enroll Becky, then asks Ms. Bohlender, the school secretary, if she can speak with the interpreter for hearing impaired students.

After pausing to think for a moment, Ms. Bohlender smiles and says, "Why don't you both have a seat for a minute? Let me see if I can find someone to speak with you."

Lynn turns to her daughter and repeats, both verbally and in sign language, what the secretary has just said, then mother and daughter sit down on a couch by the office doorway. Ms. Bohlender disappears down a hallway behind the counter and returns soon after with a man whom she introduces as Mr. Hardwick, the school principal.

Mr. Hardwick smiles at Lynn and Becky. "Welcome to Sugar Springs Elementary School. I'm afraid that we don't have an interpreter at our school right now, but I'll get on the phone this morning to make arrangements for one. In the meantime, why don't we get Becky started in her classroom so she can get acquainted with her new teacher and classmates? I think the best place to put her might be Mr. Matherson's fifth-grade class."

Mr. Matherson is caught completely off guard when Becky arrives at his door a short time later. As someone who has grown up in the same small town in which he now teaches, he has never before met someone who is deaf; as a result, he has no idea how to communicate with his new student. While Becky stands at the front of the room waiting for instructions on where to sit, she watches her new teacher push a button in a metal box on the wall and then speak to it.

While Mr. Matherson is busy with the box, Becky observes the other children in the room. Some of them are talking with one another, whereas others are staring at her. She jumps, startled, when her teacher comes up behind her and unexpectedly puts his hand on her shoulder. The other children seem amused by her reaction. Mr. Matherson looks at her and points towards the door.

"Oh, whew!" Becky thinks. "I'm in the wrong place." She starts to walk out the door, but her departure is blocked by a desk that the custodian is carrying inside the classroom. As she tries to walk around him, Mr. Matherson gently grabs her by the arm. The custodian sets the desk in the front row, winks at her, and walks out of the room. Mr. Matherson gestures for Becky to sit down at her new desk.

Before Becky arrived, the class had been in the middle of a lesson on long division, and the lesson now resumes. Seeing that the other children have their math books open on their desks, Becky signs for a textbook of her own. Mr. Matherson shrugs his shoulders to indicate that he doesn't know what she wants. Becky points

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to another child's book and then to herself. Mr. Matherson smiles and hands her a math book from a pile on the bookshelf.

Mr. Matherson says something to the class, then he writes a long division problem on the chalkboard. He slowly works through the problem, talking to the class as he does so. The other students occasionally nod their heads to indicate that they understand what he is showing them; observing their actions, Becky nods as well. Because she mastered the process of long division last year in California, she has no trouble understanding the process her teacher is demonstrating.

Mr. Matherson writes three more long division problems on the board. Becky sees several of the other children raising their hands, so she raises her hand as well.

Mr. Matherson calls on two other children, who go up to the board and begin working on the first two problems. Mr. Matherson then points to Becky, motions for her to come forward, and directs her to the third problem. Understanding what she is supposed to do, Becky grabs a piece of chalk and solves the problem with ease.

As she and the other two children return to their seats, the girl sitting behind Becky smiles at her and gives her a “thumbs up” sign.

Mr. Matherson talks to the class for a few minutes longer and then stops. Becky sees her classmates pull sheets of paper out of their desks and begin to write down several long division problems. She gives Mr. Matherson a puzzled look because she doesn't know where the problems are coming from. Finally realizing that his new student would not have heard the instructions he just presented, he writes on the chalkboard, “Do problems 8-20 on pages 58 and 59.”

Becky pulls a sheet of notebook paper from her backpack and quickly completes the assigned problems. When she is finished, she looks around the room and sees that most of her classmates are still hard at work. After waiting patiently for a few minutes, she leans across the aisle to see how the boy next to her is doing. Mr. Matherson comes up to her, puts his hand on her shoulder, waves his index finger back and forth, shakes his head no, and then points to her paper.

Not understanding, Becky gazes at a bulletin board at the side of the room until Mr. Matherson walks away. Then she gently tugs at the shirt of the boy beside her in an attempt to get his attention. He doesn't seem to notice her, so she tugs his shirt a little harder. When he still doesn't look her way, she smacks him on the arm in desperation and points to an incorrect math problem. The boy yelps in pain and pushes Becky away from him. Mr. Matherson is instantly at Becky's side once again. She smiles at him as she watches him move his lips and shake his index finger at her. Although she's confused by her teacher's reaction, she's pleased that she's finally learned how to get people's attention.

Suddenly, the children head for the back door. Before Becky can get out of her seat to join them, she feels a familiar hand on her shoulder. Mr. Matherson motions for her to remain at her desk while the other children leave the room. Through the open door, she can see playground equipment and so correctly guesses that it's time for recess. Yet Mr. Matherson insists that she sit at her desk for several minutes

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before he permits her to join her classmates outside. She doesn't understand why she has to miss some of her recess.

As Becky surveys the school grounds, she sees most of the girls in her class standing in small groups and talking. Because she has no way of communicating with them, she decides not to join them. Instead, she walks over to the swings and stands beside a girl in a red jacket to wait for a turn. She gently touches the girl's sleeve, but the girl doesn't seem to notice her. Becky pinches the girl to get her attention; the girl turns around with a scowl on her face and then says something while holding her fist close to Becky's face. Becky is delighted to get the girl's attention and so smiles at her new “friend.” When the girl turns to talk to someone else, Becky pinches her again. This time the girl runs to Mr. Matherson and points to Becky.

Over the next three days, Mr. Matherson continues to see instances of inappropriate behavior in Becky's actions. For example, she frequently looks at her classmates' work, a response that he interprets as cheating. In addition, her hitting and pinching other children to get their attention seems to have escalated. Mr. Matherson has used his usual bag of tricks to try to discourage the problem behaviors—he has tried tapping her on the shoulder, shaking his head, scolding her, keeping her in the classroom during recess—but nothing seems to be making a difference. He's at a loss as to what to do next.

During lunch time of Becky's fourth day at her new school, a young woman appears at the cafeteria door and speaks briefly to Mr. Matherson. She then approaches Becky, stoops down, and signs with her hands, “Hi, I'm Miss Hunter. I'm your new interpreter. Instead of going to recess after lunch today, how about if you stay inside with me so that we can get to know each other?”

Smiling, Becky signs, “Okay.”

Becky is delighted that she finally has someone with whom she can communicate. She has many questions to ask, but she starts with the one that's puzzling her the most. "Why do I have to stay in from recess every day? Is it because my teacher doesn't like me?"

"I'm sure that Mr. Matherson likes you very much, Becky," Miss Hunter responds. "I don't know why he's keeping you in from recess. Perhaps we can ask him after he finishes his lunch."

When the rest of the class returns from their lunch break, Becky returns to her seat. As the afternoon's lessons proceed, Miss Hunter continually uses her hands to interpret what Mr. Matherson and the other students are saying.

At one point during a lesson on air pollution, Mr. Matherson asks, "What happens when fog and smoke in the air mix together?" Miss Hunter translates the question for Becky, and Becky quickly shoots her hand in the air. Mr. Matherson points in her direction. She signs to Miss Hunter, who translates for the class, "We get smog."

Mr. Matherson smiles at her and says something in response, which Miss Hunter signs as, "Good job, Becky. You're the only one who knew that." **46 Case15** Becky beams with pleasure and signs back to Miss Hunter, "**Anybody** from California would know that!"

After school, Mr. Matherson and Miss Hunter finally have a few minutes to touch base on how the two of them can help Becky change her inappropriate social behaviors. "She's trying to make new friends, but she hasn't had any luck," Miss Hunter explains. "For example, she told me that the other day she tried to help the boy next to her with his long division, but it only seemed to upset both him and you. I think that perhaps Becky just wants to interact with her classmates, but she doesn't know how to go about it."

"So **maybe that's** why she's been hitting and pinching the other kids so much," Mr. Matherson responds. "We...the children and I...thought that Becky was being too **aggressive**. We need to do something to help Becky and her classmates communicate more effectively."

"How about if I teach you and the other kids to sign?" Miss Hunter suggests. The following morning, Miss Hunter begins the first of what will be many 30-minute lessons on American Sign Language. Among the first sentences that Miss Hunter teaches the class are, "Would you like to play with me?" and "Would you help me? She also teaches them to coach Becky on more appropriate attention-getting behavior by saying such things as, "That's not nice. This is what friends do...."

At recess a short time later, Becky pinches a boy on the monkey bars. He immediately turns to her to sign, "That's not nice." He takes Becky's hand, places it on the monkey bars, then signs, "Better. Friends play together-not hurt each other."

Possible questions for "A Silent World":

- 1. Operant conditioning occurs when a response increases after being followed by a reinforcing consequence. What instances do we see of operant conditioning in this case study?**
- 2. Why are Mr. Matherson's attempts to punish Becky not having an effect on the behaviors he's trying to discourage?**
- 3. What instances of modeling do we see in the case study?**
- 4. On what occasion does Becky's behavior illustrate that she is accustomed to somewhat different standards for appropriate classroom behavior than exist in Mr. Matherson's class?**
- 5. How might Mr. Matherson have better helped Becky adapt to her new**

classroom?