

Moog School for Deaf Education helps children with hearing impairments learn how to speak

By JESSICA BASSETT



Charlotte Brumfield instructs a student while the class paints jars that were to be given as Mother's Day presents at the Moog School for Deaf Education. Brumfield is careful to look her students in the eye and speak clearly to make sure she has their attention. (KRISTIN SWANSON/ Missourian)

With her typically cheerful voice and manner, Charlotte Brumfield provides a homelike atmosphere for her students. She calls everyone "friend."

"It's so good to see all my friends on this happy Monday morning," Brumfield says in a voice friendly enough to make a person forget it's 8 a.m. on a Monday.

The Moog School for Deaf Education is just down the narrow, rocky path alongside the Evangelical Free Church of Columbia on Silvey Lane. The small, private institution is home to about two dozen children and seven teachers. Although the children come from all over mid-Missouri, they unite in this single building for one common goal: to learn how to speak.

Brumfield's preschool classroom is filled with colorful pictures and interesting gadgets that bring a burst of energy to the room with shapes, colors, numbers, letters, books, calendars and stuffed animals. This year's "World's Best Class" — Colten, Timothy, Sariah, Emily, Tony, Devyn and Brandon — file into the room to prepare for another day of listening, interpreting and speaking.

At the beginning of each day, Brumfield uses her stethoscope to check the students' hearing aids. She checks the battery and then the volume. She recites a series of six sounds — "sh, ss, mm, ah, ee, oo" — and has each student repeat after her.

Teachers at the school think most children, no matter the severity of their hearing loss, have the ability to talk. Children are encouraged to listen to the questions, interpret the meanings and speak in complete sentences. They must express themselves using speech before their classmates or teachers respond to them.

"Sariah, what do I want?" Brumfield projects questions distinctly, with intonation. She enunciates every word so the shy, blond 6-year-old can understand her.

Sariah, with a small smile on her face, quickly takes out her hearing aids and puts them in Brumfield's hands.

"What do I want?" Brumfield asks twice more.

"Two hearing aids," Sariah finally says in a fuzzy yet understandable voice.

"Yes, that's right," the teacher responds. "I want two hearing aids."

Students at the school are reminded to use their words. They are taught how to ask questions, share stories and express feelings — all by speaking.

As the children sing a cleanup song while they put up their toys, volunteer Holly Miller walks into the room.

“Hi! I missed you,” Devyn says as he runs over and gives her a big hug. Unlike many of the children at Moog, he is far from shy.

“Oh, I missed you, too,” Miller says.

He points to her bright gold belt. “Belt,” he says.

“Yeah, belt,” she says, smiling.

So teachers can help students fill in gaps in their sentences and pronounce words correctly, much of the instruction is one on one. Each child attends individual speech therapy for at least 30 minutes each day to help with auditory, articulation, speech, syntax and vocabulary skills.

“Sariah, what number are you sitting on?” Brumfield asks as part of a daily exercise.

“One, two, three, four, five, xix,” Sariah counts, mispronouncing the last number.

“Six,” Brumfield says. “Look at my mouth. Sss ... six.”

“Six,” Sariah repeats in a low voice.

Jean Sachar Moog founded the Moog Center for Deaf Education in 1996 in St. Louis. She thought that regardless of the severity of hearing loss, most children can learn to speak and to understand the speech of others. The Columbia satellite program began in 2001, and Brumfield joined that year. Because she liked the idea of working with multiple age groups and seeing progress in each child, Brumfield, a former preschool teacher, switched to deaf education. To learn the auditory/oral teaching method, she trained in the toddler program at the Moog Center in St. Louis.

The school in Columbia, one of 10 Moog schools nationally, serves families from a 90-mile radius. It is the only program in mid-Missouri where the focus for deaf or hard-of-hearing children is on learning how to talk. It adheres to the auditory/oral approach to teaching children with hearing loss, emphasizing listening and speaking. The Missouri School for the Deaf in Fulton, by contrast, uses total communication, which includes speaking but emphasizes sign language.

The demand for oral-based schools is linked to the growing use of cochlear implants. First approved in the United States for adults in the mid 1980s, these implants were approved in 1990 for children and can now be used in patients as young as 18 months, Brumfield said. The children attend school about 30 hours a week. The teacher-to-student ratio is sometimes better than 1 to 3. There are several older children at the Moog School who attend mainstream schools and come back periodically for tutoring in speech therapy.

The educational programs include the parent-infant program for families with children up to 2 years old, the toddler program for children from 18 months to 3 years old and the preschool program for children ages 2 to 5. The program is designed so that most children will go to schools with hearing children in their age group by the time they are 5 or 6 years old.

Children at the school are immersed in spoken language throughout the day. They participate in a variety of activities designed to improve their listening and speaking skills. Speech is incorporated into all classroom activities, even playtime.

After lunch and nap time, the children wake up full of energy. Brumfield and the teaching assistant, Amy Neal, lead the children into the gym to play. They chase the red, yellow and blue balls that roll and bounce across the hardwood floor.

Colten kicks the red ball to Brumfield and she stops it with her foot.

“Colten, you kicked me the ball, now what should I do with it?” she asks.

“Throw it,” Colten says.

“Do you want me to throw it or kick it?”

“Throw it.”

“OK,” Brumfield says, tossing him the ball.

The end of the day brings a new kind of communication with the good-bye song and a hug or high-five from Brumfield. “Happy Monday, friend,” she says in her cheerful voice. “Tomorrow is Tuesday.”