

September 3, 2012, 1:25 pm ET

FOLLOW-UP MEDIA ADVISORY

Parents: School asked to change deaf son's name sign

Note: Below is a "quick answer" to a reporter's inquiry. The answer is only provisional and should not be considered authoritative in any respect. Any members of the community wishing to communicate their take on the issue to the reporter are welcome to click Reply and send a note which will be forwarded to the reporter who made the inquiry.

Hi Mr. -----,

Yes, it does have many complications about it. For one, I would guess that culturally Deaf people would not come up with that sign (rotating "R" handshapes) as a name sign, though it's barely possible. There are some unusual name signs out there.

In one video the father said that his name sign is "a registered S.E.E. sign." That kind of gives us a clue. There are no such things as "registered signs" and the concept doesn't make sense. That stems from the misapprehension that sign language is something akin to shorthand or something like that, which is far off the mark. True American Sign Language (ASL) evolved as a normal human language through social intercourse, and has nothing at all to do with invented coding systems like shorthand or braille or whatever.

Later on in the evolution of the story (in this video) we see the reporter referring to ASL, so I'm assuming that in the meantime that the father has become more educated on the issues and has clued the reporter in to the prior mistake he made. He should have never mentioned S.E.E. (Signing Exact English). That was a (now abandoned) attempt in the 1970s to modify ASL signs to supposedly expand the vocabulary of signs by using handshapes representing the 26 letters of the alphabet. It was a debacle and culturally Deaf people were highly critical of the effort. The whole S.E.E. sign movement is "dead in the water" now. Nobody really talks about it anymore or attempts to use those signs.

When I look at the few videos available, the conclusion I draw is that the parents might have looked up a sign in the Signing Exact English book by Gustason (not sure, because I don't have the book handy) and then made up a name sign for their boy that way, and then later forgotten how they came up with the sign. The thing about all signs

in sign language is that they are symbols just like all spoken and written words are symbols. As such, there is an arbitrary aspect to the symbolism. (This is a well-known part of language that was first described by Ferdinand de Saussure almost 100 years ago.)

So this means that actually the initial rationale for the creation of the boy's name sign can become obscured and forgotten. What makes this all doubly and triply complicated was that in some ways de Saussure was wrong about arbitrariness, and there is a way to speak of iconicity and systematicity in language without resorting to arbitrariness being the sole and reigning factor. In other words, there's nothing wrong or strange about a combination of arbitrariness in symbolism plus some degree of iconicity. This truth becomes easier to see by the linguistic study of natural signed languages.

So putting it all together, your remark about the English name Patricia is right on the mark. The origins of the name (from long, long ago) are obscured and forgotten. A woman named Patricia might have been given that name by her parents for a specific reason, but even then, that reason is rarely, and probably almost never, called to mind once the name comes into everyday use and she grows up using it.

There's another phenomenon in language involving changing verbs into nouns, for example in spoken English when the suffix "-ment" is added to a verb like "measure" to create the noun "measurement." Once the suffix is added, the original verb origin of the term may be forgotten -- at least it's not called to mind even time the noun is used.

There are a lot of processes like that in language in general (spoken or signed) and the custom of culturally Deaf people creating name signs is another such linguistic-cultural process, partly rule based (based on linguistic rules) and partly not (partly based on whatever the specific circumstances are).

In this case, we have hearing parents (presumably) inventing a name sign for their child. This is a problematic, because they are not doing it within any cultural tradition at all. Being new parents of a newborn Deaf child, they apparently attempted to do it while harboring all kinds of misconceptions about Deaf people and language. Typically, name signs are created within the traditions of Deaf culture through a long process of waiting to see what the personality characteristics of a person turn out to be, even if they are only very young and in school (if they had hearing parents and didn't socialize with Deaf people before) -- or Deaf parents might carefully observe their newborn Deaf child and look for clues about the child's personality and create a name sign on that basis. Sometimes it is not personality based, but just something more conventional, perhaps a sign that the parents like, etc.

Sure, Hunter's parents were not "wrong" to create the name sign, and there's nothing inherently "wrong" with the form of the sign itself. That sign could have conceivably been created in a social context involving culturally Deaf people. But as you can see by the scenarios given above, it (name signs) is a complicated phenomenon, especially when you factor in extra complications such as problematic (and stillborn) efforts in

pedagogy (i.e., "S.E.E. signing") and other complicated factors, such as hearing parents conceiving of their deaf child as being disabled, when culturally Deaf people do not generally perceive themselves as being disabled (i.e., do not perceive themselves as being in need of an artificial coding system like braille, etc., which is a false context.)

As you sensed, it's a very involved and complicated issue.

From: brian@gallyprotest.org

Subject: PRESS RELEASE -- (NBC, Today Show transcript) Parents: School asked to change deaf son's name sign

Date: Friday, August 31, 2012, 1:53 AM

Friday, August, 31, 2012, 4:53 am ET

PRESS RELEASE -- (NBC, Today Show transcript) Parents: School asked to change deaf son's name sign

Today Show,
National Broadcasting Company (NBC)
Aired on August 30, 2012

Parents: School asked to change deaf son's name sign

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE (host): Back now at 8:20 with the controversy at a school in Nebraska. The family of a three-year-old Deaf boy claimed that administrators wanted to change the way he signs his name, because they say the gesture resembles a gun, according to the parents. We are going to talk to the parents, exclusively, in a moment. But first with the story, here's NBC's Ron Allen.

RON ALLEN (reporter, voiceover): Hunter Spanjer is a happy, playful three-year-old who was born Deaf and hears nothing. He uses this gesture, crossing his fingers, to sign his own name. His dad, Brian, says it's the only name Hunter has ever known.

RON ALLEN (reporter, on location): Show me how you sign his name.

BRIAN SPANJER: OK, that would be like this. It's crossed fingers like this, thumb on the inside and then just up and down like this.

RON ALLEN (reporter): And this is what has caused the issue?

BRIAN SPANJER: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

RON ALLEN (reporter): Because that looks like a gun.

BRIAN SPANJER: That's their statement.

RON ALLEN (reporter, voiceover): He says the principal at Hunter's preschool told them Hunter's name sign violates a zero tolerance weapons policy and therefore he can't use it.

MORGAN HURT: That's the name we gave our son. That's how I communicate with him since day one. I don't see why we should have to change it.

RON ALLEN (reporter, voiceover): The toddler goes to a public preschool where about two percent of the kids have hearing disabilities. Spokesman emphasize that the school teaches American Sign Language, or ASL, but said privacy laws and school policy forbid him from talking specifically about Hunter's family's claims.

JACK SHEARD (spokesman): The Grand Island Public Schools have never required any student to change their name sign. We've never required them to change the way they sign their name.

RON ALLEN (reporter, voiceover): But Hunter's parents insist, after several phone calls and meetings with school officials, the principal insisted Hunter use a different sign for his name.

RON ALLEN (reporter, on location): How do you account for what seems to be a huge difference of perspective about what happened?

JACK SHEARD: I can tell you that how any parent perceives something is going to be different from any other parent.

RON ALLEN (reporter, voiceover): Hunter's family says the principal offered several options for Hunter, like spelling his name. Or --

BRIAN SPANJER: Like this ["H" handshape], except it would be pointed forward, and to me that's more of a gun than what his name sign now is.

RON ALLEN (reporter, voiceover): Now after nearly a week of no communication, Hunter's parents say school officials have asked them to come in and talk and they say they're willing, but they also insist Hunter's name will remain what it's always been. For "Today," Ron Allen, NBC News, Grand Island, Nebraska.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE (host, in studio in New York): Hunter Spanjer and his parents Morgan and Brian are with us now, exclusively. Good morning to you.

MORGAN HURT AND BRIAN SPANJER: Good morning.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Brian, let me start with you. This is one of those situations where you have two totally differing accounts of what happened. You say the school said Hunter could not use that sign for his name. What do you say the school officials said to you exactly?

BRIAN SPANJER: At the meeting with the principal, the quote from the principal when I asked which policy we would be in violation of was: "Well, technically, it's a violation of our weapons policy."

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: And you saying they told you he can't use that sign anymore.

BRIAN SPANJER: Right. They said in school it is unacceptable.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Well, the school has said flat out they never made such a request and if you take the school at its word, Hunter would be free to go to school today or tomorrow and continue to sign his name that way. Have you have tried to do that?

BRIAN SPANJER: We've been sending him and to the best of my knowledge at this point they're still fingerspelling his name and they've actually made conflicting statements at this point.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Morgan, when you heard this, how did you feel about this request you say the school officials made?

MORGAN HURT: I was hurt and upset at first. I'm kind of just overwhelmed mainly right now. I really don't know how to feel.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: For both of you, I mean, can you put into words how important this is? He's Deaf. This is his name, and for you does this feel like the school's asked you to basically to change his name?

BRIAN SPANJER: Yeah, because, if he was a hearing child, you would say his name and that would be--He doesn't hear so we sign his name. So yeah, that's the way we feel.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Morgan, Hunter's just 3 years old. Does he have any idea or any sense about what's going on here?

MORGAN HURT: I don't think he does. He's been around the camera a lot lately, but I really don't think he's knowing exactly what's going on. We've kind of been sheltering

him a little bit when it comes to all this.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Brian, were you pretty upset when you had these meetings with the school officials?

BRIAN SPANJER: I was disappointed in the schools definitely. I couldn't believe that that would be a request that somebody would make.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: In your view what's the solution here? I understand the school wants to meet with you. They want to resolve this. They say they never made this request. Would you be willing to meet with them?

BRIAN SPANJER: I returned their phone call yesterday and had gotten the voice mail, left a message. I'm hoping to be able to have that meeting today at some point. Hoping to get a return phone call, but as of yet haven't made contact with them.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: Alright, we'll see what happens. Thank you for your story, and we'll be back right after your local news.

LINK TO VIDEO:

<http://video.today.msnbc.msn.com/today/48840996#48840996>

(Transcript is unofficial.)