

## **DESCRIPTION**

Roots and Wings is a weekend long workshop that is designed for families with newly-identified children who are deaf or hard of hearing. The workshop is coordinated and led by parents in collaboration with professionals, veteran parents, and members of the Deaf community. This family support experience offers an opportunity for families to learn about the child's needs, network with other families, explore ways to support their child's development, and learn about educational advocacy. Roots and Wings is founded on the following guiding principles:

- Respect the child who is deaf or hard of hearing as an individual whose unique nature, strengths, and learning style are to be celebrated.
- Honor each family's unique beliefs, traditions, and strengths, as it is the family's right to incorporate these values into their decisions for their child.
- Empower the family by providing unbiased and up-to-date information to support the promotion of optimal social, emotional, communicative, and educational development in their children.

The workshop is funded and implemented through collaborative efforts of the Nebraska Department of Education, the Nebraska Regional Programs for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Nebraska Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Program, and the Boys Town National Research Hospital. By pooling various resources, families are able to attend the event at no charge.

Childcare (including siblings) is provided throughout the weekend event to allow parents full participation in networking and learning experiences. Each workshop has the capacity to serve 20 families. Roots and Wings is typically offered annually, but two workshops have been offered in years where needs exceed the capacity.

## LOGISTICS

Parent leaders of the Roots and Wings workshops are Teresa McEvoy, who is a Continuing Education specialist at Boys Town National Research Hospital (BTNRH) and the parent of three deaf children (two young adults and a high schooler). She is joined by Chris Grassmeyer, who is also a Continuing Education Specialist and the parent of a deaf young adult. They work in close collaboration with Dr. Catherine C. Carotta, Associate Director of the Center for Childhood Deafness at BTNRH to plan, organize and implement the event.

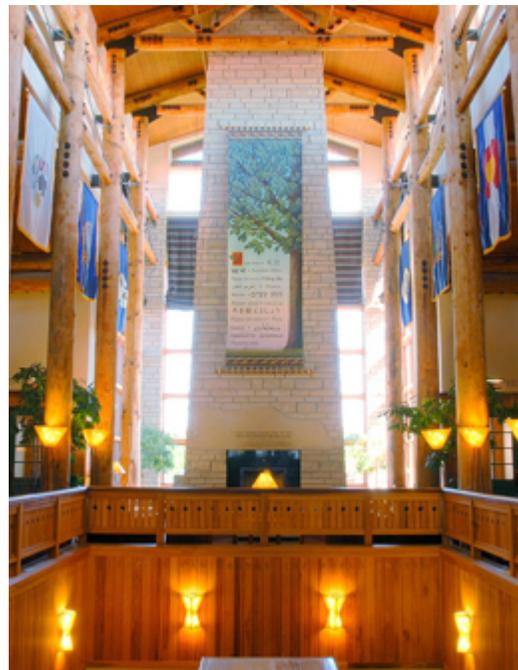
Several of the workshops have been held at the Lied Arbor Day Lodge in Nebraska City (southeastern part of the State). This is a rustic, forested setting, which is particularly conducive for interaction, both informal and formal (see photos below).



Lied Arbor Day Lodge



Meeting Rooms



Lobby Area



Favorite recreation place for children and families

Although the Nebraska City location is ideal, the Roots and Wings team is committed to moving the event to other locations in the State to provide access to families living in western parts of the State. For example, a recent highly successful workshop was held in Kearney, Nebraska which is located more centrally. Families resided in a comfortable hotel that adjoined a modern conference center. This location also provided an optimum context to learn, play, share, and develop connections.

Families arrive at the venue on Fridays in time for dinner, followed by social time. The formal aspects of the program run all day Saturday and through noon on Sunday.

The program has become increasingly inclusive over the years. Spoken language interpreters are provided for Spanish-speaking families to afford them full access. Host families also represent this community. Sign language interpreters facilitate interaction between families and our Deaf community members throughout the weekend.

### **PROGRAM CONTENT**

The program content is designed to address the needs of families of young children (birth to three). However, we routinely adapt the content to make it relevant for families with children who may be later identified. The overall program is planned over the course of about 12 months – as soon as a workshop ends, we begin planning the next.

We conduct ongoing assessments of the program, based on feedback from the families who participate and all the stakeholders involved in the program. A formal report is generated for the Nebraska Department of Education (primary grantor) and the planning committee uses the summative evaluation to adjust the program. Our goal is to align the program content to the

needs of the presenting families and to changing needs and developments in the field. In essence, over the years, the program has evolved and changed in response to feedback.

In its current version, it includes the following core elements:

- ***A meet and greet time*** – This informal session provides a comfortable forum for meeting other parents around the state and learning their stories. This is also a time when the families meet “host families.” The host families are experienced fathers and mothers, who participate throughout the weekend, offering both formal and informal supports. A key component of Roots and Wings is the opportunity to interact with these host families. Approximately six host families typically participate. They have children with varying hearing levels, communication approaches, and educational histories. They also include families of children with additional special needs.
- ***Panel discussions*** – We have discovered that facilitated panel discussions remain a highlight of the weekend. These discussions are moderated by Dr. Carotta and Dr. Mary Pat Moeller. Three panel discussions are integrated during the weekend (See workshop schedule below, which includes abstracts for these panel discussions):
  - ***Practical issues facing families whose children use hearing aids or cochlear implants***
  - ***Student and community members who are Deaf or hard of hearing*** – Several of the students on this panel provide support in the childcare program when they are not interacting with families. Two leaders from the Deaf Community participate in all family sessions throughout the weekend. This allows for many incidental opportunities for them to provide support in addition to their involvement in the panel discussions
  - ***Host family panel*** – This is always held at the end of the workshop. It provides an opportunity for emotional support and typically leaves families with feelings of optimism about their journey ahead.
- ***Learning lectures*** – Interactive presentations are provided on the following topics:
  - ***Parents the Language Partners*** – This workshop focuses on strategies for promoting communication and language development and includes hands-on practice activities, supported by host families and Deaf community members.
  - ***Learning about My Child’s Hearing and Listening Development*** – This is a nuts and bolts, practical and accessible discussion of hearing and the audiogram. Parents have a hands on activity where they plot their child’s threshold on an audiogram form, which promotes understanding of what the child hears and what the symbols mean.
  - ***Book Sharing with Babies and Toddlers*** – This is a practical, hands on workshop about developmental strategies for book sharing. Practice with developmentally appropriate books is incorporated.

- ***Where are you now and where are you going? – After a day of learning, Dr. Carotta implements an activity where parents answer basic questions, like: What did you learn that was new? What surprised you today? What information do you want to share with someone else? What did you learn that you want to try with your child? Their answers tell us volumes about what aspects of the content were useful. Dr. Carotta asks families if they heard us say that “one approach is better than another.” Fortunately, families respond that we said quite the opposite. This helps us ensure that we are as neutral as possible in discussing communication opportunities.***
- ***Networking with others*** – All meals are shared together. Pool time has been invaluable for promoting informal interactions. Depending on our site and season, activities like hiking and roasting marshmallows have also been offered to promote networking.
- ***Making agency connections*** – Representatives from our state department of education, our regional programs for the deaf and hard of hearing, and our EHDI program are also active throughout the weekend, offering supports, linking families to services and to each other. This informal support helps families become aware of essential resources in our state.

Parents receive a directory of families and other individuals who participated in the weekend. This provides the possibility of ongoing networking with others.

Feedback from families about their experiences at Roots and Wings is overwhelmingly positive. Their feedback provides incentive for our respective agencies to pool our resources, talents, and energies so that we can continue to offer this unique experience for families.

