

# Caring for Communication: *Debra Harms, M.A., CCC-SLP*

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The parents of a two-year-old anxiously greet Debra Harms as she arrives at their home to evaluate their child. They have been worried about his development. He does not seem to have the same skills as their other children did at the same age. They are relieved to have this professional here at their home to give them an expert clinical opinion on what could possibly be wrong. The parents watch in anticipation as Debra finds the child in the living room, and cheerily plops down on the floor next to the child and starts playing. Debra tells the parents that she is going to look like she is just playing but not too worry she is learning about how their child communicates.



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CCC-SLP*

Despite this reassurance, the parents wonder, isn't this speech pathologist a leader in the field of Early Intervention in Sacramento? Doesn't this speech pathologist supervise clinics and teach graduate students at CSU, Sacramento? Why is she just "playing" with their child? Debra finishes with the child and proceeds to thoroughly interview the parents about every aspect, every detail, of their child's development. She even probes about the foods their child eats. These parents will soon understand that Debra is piecing together a very complex puzzle of their child's language and cognitive-linguistic development. Every movement, every second of eye contact, every gesture he makes is significant and has meaning in this assessment. Debra Harms is not only a speech pathologist, but she also is a keen scientific observer and detective. But you'd never catch this charming woman saying, "Just the facts, ma'am."

Someone like Debra Harms is just the kind of person to take on such a clinically challenging task. She has had an exceptionally wide range of experiences in our field. Debra began as a teacher in a Spanish speaking only severely language delayed preschool class in a rough part of East Los Angeles. She then moved on to work as an itinerant SLP (working with students from birth up through high school age) while also teaching college courses in communication disorders at Walla Walla College in Washington. Debra continued to expand her clinical diversity by becoming a director of speech-language pathology program at a skilled nursing facility and developing the Modified Barium Swallow Study program at Walla Walla General Hospital. She relocated to Northern California and began working at the Mercy Outpatient Rehabilitation Center with patients from birth up through adulthood.

The opportunity to make a difference through Early Intervention drew her to her current position with Alta California Regional Center. This position offers her the opportunity to be a part of a multidisciplinary assessment team that assesses the birth to age three population. Debra humbly remarks, "After all, I get paid for playing!". With her "playing", Debra changes these families' lives for the better. Her "playing" addresses issues and establishes treatment plans at a very effective age for these children. Early intervention can remediate deficits during the critical period of speech and language development and prevent the need for services later in the child's life.

Thankfully, Debra is now sharing her knowledge in this specialized area with graduate students at CSU, Sacramento. She is helping future professionals embark on this new frontier in speech pathology. She is making sure that they learn about infant/child swallowing and feeding characteristics as well as motor-sensory development. She emphasizes the importance of integrating treatments with occupational therapy to ensure a more clinically comprehensive approach. One of Debra's greatest desires is that other SLP's learn more about this very critical branch of our profession, Early Intervention. As Debra says, "every day is rewarding for me...and because I continue to learn and grow, I could see myself doing this for many years to come." Well Debra, with the knowledge and clinical expertise you are contributing to the field of speech-language pathology, we all hope you do! ♦

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