



# First Person: MINDY

## The Other Children

I first remember having a sense of special responsibility for my deaf sister when I was 3. It was my duty to keep her out of danger and mischief—a seemingly normal responsibility for an older sister. But the responsibility has at times felt unbearably heavy. As a 2-year-old, Mindy was not only typically rambunctious, she lived in a bizarre and often dangerous world all her own—separated from the rest of us by her deafness and her inability to communicate. It was a world of fascinating objects to handle, of races with Mother, Daddy, and big sister—a world, even, of nocturnal romps in the street while the rest of the family slept. And once, it was a world of pretty colored pills in the bathroom medicine cabinet.

### “Second Mother” to Mindy

When Daddy spent a year in Korea, I became Mother’s sole helper. My role as a second mother to Mindy held some prestige and much responsibility. It took away from play time with children my own age. And, just as a mother serves as an example for her children, I was expected to be an exceptionally “good” little girl. The high standards my mother set for my behavior, though, had not only to do with my setting an example; her reasons were also practical. Mindy’s impetuous behavior left her with little patience, energy, or time to put up with shenanigans from me. As I got older, problems resulting from my having a deaf sister increased. My mother began to attend college, and the new pressures and demands caused her to be demanding and dependent upon me. I did not understand why I would be severely chastised for the same behavior that Mindy, who embodied the behavior problems of three children, “couldn’t help.” My friends’ parents seemed less critical of their children than my parents were of me. Mother and Daddy “expected more” from me, but it seemed to me that they gave me less. The responsibility I felt for Mindy was tremendous. One year, when my “baby-sitting” duties involved periodic checking on my sister, Mindy wandered away between checks. After a thorough but fruitless search of the neighborhood, my mother hysterically told me that if anything happened to Mindy I would be to blame. I felt terrified and guilty. I was 7.

### Competition and Rivalry

Mindy’s achievements always met with animated enthusiasm from our parents. In contrast, it seemed, Mother and Daddy’s response to my accomplishments were on the pat-on-the-back level. I was expected to perform well in every circumstance. I wanted my parents

to be enthusiastic about my accomplishments too. I didn’t want to have to beg for praise. I didn’t want to be taken for granted. I wanted to be noticed.

### Babysitter and Manager

When I was not baby-sitting, there was my role of “fetch and carry”—sometimes literally. Mindy’s deafness prevented my parents from calling to her so I was appointed official messenger. “Go tell Mindy to come to dinner.” “Go tell Mindy to come inside.” “Go tell Mindy to clean up her room.” At first I probably gloried a bit in my “authority.” But that soon grew stale. I was expected to stop whatever I was doing and bear some message to Mindy. And I discovered that like the royal messengers of old, bearers of orders or bad tidings are not cordially received. In retaliation against the inconvenience and hostile receptions, I made a point of being as bossy in my deliveries as possible—which resulted in acute mutual aggravation.

### Love and Respect

In my junior year of high school, Mindy and I began to grow close as sisters. Our increased maturity and the circumstances of our father’s being away in Vietnam caused us to turn to one another for companionship and comfort. In the process, we began to discover one another as individuals. We took time to understand our mutual antagonisms and to forgive each other a little. Mindy now understands that as a child my responsibility for her was immense and often intolerable, and that she thoughtlessly made it more difficult for me. She has forgiven me for the hurt and resentment I caused her. Differences between us will always exist, but Mindy and I now understand and respect each other’s needs without resentment. The impact a disabled child has upon the other children in a family is tremendous—in both a positive and negative sense. Parents must not expect sainthood from their “other children.” Most likely many years will pass before their nondisabled children fully understand why their sister or brother “couldn’t help it,” why they were expected to be model children, why attention from their parents was rationed, and why their parents sometimes seemed unduly critical and impatient. Until the “other children” do understand, their reactions may be “thoughtless” or “unfair.” Before love can replace misunderstanding and intolerance, resentment must be recognized and accepted as a legitimate and even inevitable part of the struggle of growing up together.