

Deaf Parents and their Hearing Children

A Research Report Prepared by

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One of the least understood aspects of Deaf life is the experience of Deaf people as parents. The vast majority, over 90%, have hearing children and this places inevitable pressure on child-rearing and family life. It is one of the features which marks Deaf people as different from other cultural minority groups and it emphasises the one-generational nature of the Deaf Community. Most Deaf people are born into hearing homes and themselves have hearing children. As a result, they are often under pressure from the two generations on either side, to give up their Deafness and to try to function on hearing terms. While this may seem realistic given the figures for minority-majority ratios, the result is isolating and debilitating. We have been unable to discover any research literature which focuses specifically on the issues for Deaf people who are raising hearing children.

Currently a great deal of research is directed towards hearing parents with Deaf children. Research has focused on the language development of the children, how parents adjust to their child and the effectiveness of services to families. But this may not be applicable to the situation of Deaf parents.

Although there are no formal reports of the difficulties Deaf parents may experience, informal evidence exists in the personal accounts of Deaf people, in the level of their requests for help to the BDA and in the stories of hearing children of Deaf parents (CODAs) discussing their childhood, to alert us to the fact that this situation is not without problems. In this small study we have begun to investigate Deaf people's views on family life in respect of their hearing children. This research was carried out by Lorna Allsop.

Aims

- To identify the range of difficulties Deaf parents might experience in bringing up their children

- To establish why they might experience these difficulties

Method Used

Two workshops were set up. Twenty invitations were sent out to Deaf parents to attend the meetings which were arranged from 10.30am till 12.30pm on Saturdays in November and February. A creche was provided with one qualified worker and four volunteers. A total of 13 Deaf people came to the meetings with their children.

The first meeting focused on introduction and their own experiences of their family life. The second meeting focused on a review of the groups comments and on producing an agenda for future meetings.

The sessions were designed to be informal and open with some brainstorming around the topics of their life before children and after having children. The first meeting was more extensive in terms of the insights offered yet at the second meeting, further strong feelings appeared concerning such aspects as the problem of their children refusing to use BSL and how the parents had to deal with language choice at home.

The Participants

Thirteen people participated in the meetings (all but one from hearing family):

- Couple - One child (8 months old girl)(Father from Deaf family)
- Couple - Four children (7, 11, 16 and 18 yr old)
- Couple - Four daughters (5, 7, 9 and 17 yr old)
- Couple - Three children (1, 5 and 7 yr old)
- Couple (Jamaican) - Three children (5 , 8 and 13 yr old)

- Single (mother) - Two sons (7 and 11 yr old)
- Single (mother) - Two daughter (1 yr Deaf and 2yr hearing)
- Father (divorced) - One daughter (16 yr old)

The recordings were analysed for identification of the main areas of concern.

Responses by the participants

Most of the points below were raised in the first discussion group and reviewed in the second. In the latter, more time was devoted to forward planning and formulating a regular programme for the future. The discussion topics are set out in some categories for clarity.

Some of the issues that emerged from this group were similar to those that arise for all adults becoming parents. However, some issues were highly specific to being Deaf parents. Some of the following categories overlap to some extent eg freedom and choice and individuality; financial and structural and access to information ... some statements can fit in to more than one category. We have not analysed the statements in depth, preferring in this instance to allow the Deaf persons comments to stand on their own merit.

Flexibility and Choice

Flexibility and freedom of choice were highly valued. After parenthood, these became more restricted. Perhaps this is a more telling issue for Deaf parents than hearing parents because Deaf people tend to be far more mobile and face to face social contact is of greater significance than for hearing people. Deaf people have limited contact at a distance eg through telephone or letters.

- "Before children, I felt I had more freedom."

- "I could be more flexible before I had children e.g. I could go to bed late if I wanted."
- "Last minute plans were OK, before I had the children."
- "I could plan to go anywhere I wanted before I had the children."
- "I could have a more varied choice of food before I had children."

Individuality

A feeling of no longer being the centre of ones world is fairly usual for a person becoming a parent, regardless of whether they are Deaf or hearing:

- "Before children, I could please myself."
- "I could get up in the morning when I liked."
- "Before I had the children I thought everything and anything was possible for me."
- "I had ambitions for myself before I had the children."

Social Life

These can be compared to the comments above with regard to flexibility and choice. These issues about restrictions on social life may be more difficult for Deaf parents

- "Before children we were going out all the time."
- "I spent more time travelling around, visiting people before I had children."
- "Before I had children I went to the Deaf Club regularly."
- "Life was more boring before I had the children."

- "I had time for hobbies before I had children."
- "If friends came round to the house, they could stay as long as they liked before I had children."
- "I went out less after I had children."

Relationships

These comments appear to be consistent with experiences reported by hearing parents also.

- "I could live in sin before I had children."
- "I enjoyed more sex before I had the children."
- "After having children I felt emotional and quite sensitive. I needed my friends so I could discuss with them how I felt."

Responsibility

These comments would appear to be fairly common to the general experience of parenthood

- "I didn't have any worries before the children."
- "I was only responsible for myself before I had the children."
- "I had not yet accepted I had responsibilities before I had children."
- "I had fewer responsibilities before I had children."
- "I had fewer appointments I had to keep before I had children."

Routine/ Habits (Domestic)

Although these comments do not appear to be exceptional, it would be interesting to consider what the consequences of these domestic/routine

changes are for Deaf households and whether the consequences are different than for hearing households.

- "I did more housework before I had children."
- "I used to sit at the table to eat before I had children."
- "The man left the woman to do the work, before there were children."
- "I used to have regular mealtimes before I had children."
- "After the child was born I ate with the children not with my husband when he came in from work."
- "After I had children I got far less sleep."

Financial/Structural Concerns

Although these are common effects for parents it is quite possible that Deaf parents disproportionately suffer from the effects eg comments below indicate the lack of access to information about benefit entitlements; and also the relative socio-economic position of Deaf households in comparison with hearing households

- "Life was cheaper before children."
- "Its difficult to bring up children on only one income."

Age related issues with the children

It is quite likely that the family interactions change with the age of the child. The baby is unlikely to pose any specific difficulties for the parents except comparatively in the sense that the parents have little access to information, guidance or support from services. As the child begins to come into contact with other children at nursery school and then into

school, the pull of the hearing-speaking community becomes much stronger. At this time a dilemma develops for the parents in terms of insisting on sign language use at home while at the same time needing the child's spoken language skills for informal interpreting of television, when visitors call and even in telephone use. By the time the child is a teenager, there are much more severe difficulties for both child and parents. At this time, the child will have mostly hearing friends and will have the dominating influence of the school and the educational process. This is significant since it will also tend to marginalise the parents as the child may feel that the parents' school experiences are irrelevant to that of hearing schools. For the parents, managing an adolescent may be a huge burden when the child's access to English and speech may upset the power relations at home.

Hearing Linked

These comments demonstrate that there are questions of adjustment that arise for Deaf parents when the child is hearing. There does not appear to be a particular problem over accepting that the child is hearing, rather difficulties arise in dealing with the consequences of that hearingness in a Deaf household. Deaf parents appear to be acutely aware that they are having to address something about which they have no knowledge e.g. the music comment below. They are also aware that they need very specific guidance to overcome confusions and worries with regard especially to appropriate communication and their child's development of language. These comments also indicate the lack of adjustment of services to meet the needs of Deaf parents.

- "Because my children can hear, we became worried they would hear us having sex."
- "I didn't have strong feelings about whether I wanted the child to be Deaf or hearing."

- "I wanted my child to be hearing and was relieved when he was."
- "I was put under too much pressure to make my child have an early hearing test just because I was deaf. My child should just have had a hearing test at the same time as anybody else did. It felt like discrimination."
- "Hospital procedures after the baby is born should be the same as the Deaf mother will encounter in her own home e.g. hospitals should get mothers used to responding to a flashing light if the child is crying and not just have a nurse come in and tell the Deaf mother the child is crying."
- "I don't know how to choose music for my children at home. It makes me feel stupid that I don't know what to buy them."
- "I can't tell if the children have the television on too loudly, which might cause the neighbours to complain."
- "Noise if it is too loud can affect the baby e.g. the baby becomes uncomfortable/ restless ... However, as a Deaf parent I'm not aware of what noise there may be around in the house."
- "Children are teased at school because their parents are Deaf."
- "I have concerns about whether my hearing child will speak properly, if all they hear is a Deaf voice which is not a proper hearing person's voice. Will they pick up the wrong sounds?"
- "If one parent uses speech and one parent uses sign the child will go to the parent who uses speech if the child wants something. The child doesn't relate to both parents in the same way."
- "I thought I should speak to my baby but when I did I was not relaxed with my baby."

- "If hearing children go to the nursery early, they will pick up speech no problem."

Access and Information

Although lack of access to information is a common concern for Deaf people, the experience of parenthood puts this experience into sharp focus. There are three issues with regard to access and information: (i) not being aware of the information needed in the first place; (ii) being aware of the information wanted/needed and not being able to obtain it; (iii) having approached the information source, only receiving partial information.

- "I didn't realise how little access to information I had e.g. about schools, until I had my own children."
- "I had no information about what to expect when I was pregnant."
- "I did not have an interpreter e.g. for ante-natal classes."
- "I did have an interpreter for ante-natal classes."
- "I felt very frustrated and angry because of lack of access to information I needed about my children."
- "I had no information about my child after I had given birth."
- "I had not information about benefits e.g. maternity benefit and if I was entitled."
- "I need to know what to do about language with my child. Should I speak? or should I sign? or what?"
- "It feels like there is all sorts of missing information e.g. how do I put my child's name down for a school; what do I do about injections?"

- "Deaf parents only ever receive partial information, they never have access to full information."
- "Need information about school bullying and how to deal with it."
- "Need to know about things before they happen to be prepared, not just as they happen."

Implications

Clearly, this touches only the surface of a very significant aspect of Deaf peoples lives. The family in which a Deaf person grows up can be something of a problem for the Deaf person. Here we see there are also considerable issues to be faced when the Deaf parents have children of their own. Since there are no particular services focused on the Deaf parents of hearing children, then we have never examined the issues involved. There is a great deal more to be discovered and more research will be forthcoming.