

Editorial - Personal thoughts from Anne Worsfold

How wrong can professional advice be? On my desk is an article which was published some time ago and which still pains me. It also inspires me to try my best to make things better for deaf children and their families. The article, in a magazine for parents of deaf children, is a question and answer session with hearing parents of a deaf child – a child with apparently no other problems.

The parent was asked 'what is some of the best advice that you have been given?' They replied that the advice was: 'that there is no quick-fix; that her development is going to be slow and sweet and at times painful; to have hope for the future....'

This is the worst piece of advice I have ever heard. And to make matters worse the advice came from their child's teacher of the deaf – the very person who should be looking for ways to ensure that the child's development is NOT 'slow....and at times painful'.

I would have advised the parents: 'Do not accept that delayed language is part and parcel of deafness. It does not have to be so. Deaf children can have normal language development IF they have early and complete access to language. Cued Speech in the hands of hearing parents can give full and complete access to English just as BSL in the hands of deaf parents can give access to sign.'

The parent went on to write: 'as parents we subconsciously tend to compare our (deaf) children with other hearing kids and feel bad at the huge gap in their development'. This statement makes me feel even sadder. As the parent of two profoundly deaf cueing children I compared them to their hearing peers and, whilst their diction was poor in the early years (they are very deaf!) I knew that their language levels – in written and spoken English - were at least equal and in some areas better than their friends. In contrast with the parents in the article I felt only happiness when I compared my children with hearing children. I wish that, and I work towards the goal that, all parents will have such positive experiences and all deaf children will have the same opportunities as mine and other cueing children.



But why do teachers, of all people, encourage low expectations? The teacher in the case above had a pupil who was a toddler, whose language delay was recoverable – IF she had access to language.

Teachers who work in schools must work with the child's existing language level but even then low expectations may adversely affect pupil's achievements. Forgive me for telling another personal story: in my youngest child's final year at primary school (i.e. after having one or other of my two deaf children in school for 7 years) the head went on her first deaf awareness training day. She came back amazed. She said to me later, '*I didn't know deaf children had problems with English, or with literacy or with understanding the curriculum... I kept saying, well, I've got two profoundly deaf children in my school and they are not like that...I wonder how I would have been with them if I had known all this before they came*'. I wonder too. Of course, through Cued Speech, the boys had full access to the lessons; but were my children's achievements (literacy and grammar considerably better than age appropriate in comparison to hearing peers) in some way helped by the head's ignorance of the accepted expectations of deaf children? I suspect that they were.