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How and clear

Mother, writer and founder of Deaf Parenting UK, Sabina Iqbal, on how the only barrier for a deaf parent in bringing up two hearing children is the attitudes of others

At the moment life is a rollercoaster ride for my partner Asif and I. We're both deaf parents to two hearing children, Samaira (31 months old) and Areeb (nine months old). The reason things are so hectic isn't because we're deaf, nor is it due to having a small baby and a very active toddler, but because we've bagged seven awards in the last two months for our voluntary work with Deaf Parenting UK!

Being deaf parents was quite normal for myself and Asif as we've been deaf since birth. However, since deciding to become parents, access to services has been one of the biggest challenges we've had to face. It was fortunate that I founded the charity Deaf Parenting UK. This organisation aims to support and give confidence to deaf parents in getting information and services in an accessible format, so I knew how to get what I needed. I also wrote a book, *Pregnancy and Birth – a Guide for Deaf Women*, in association with the NCT,

“ I was very well-informed of the birthing options and choices available ”

which was the first book in the world targeted at deaf parents.

Although I wasn't a parent while researching for the book, I did get to meet and interview many deaf parents. It was the insight I gained from them that helped me enormously when I fell pregnant the first time. Their experiences enabled me to be more confident in my approach to health professionals and exercising my right to have a British Sign

Language (BSL) interpreter present at all my antenatal appointments as well as the birth.

Positive experience

My midwife was new to meeting deaf parents but at my first antenatal appointment I explained my needs and expectations. I even gave her a copy of my book, which includes a section for health professionals with useful deaf awareness tips.

My BSL interpreters were invaluable during my pregnancies and births; I had two during my antenatal classes; the group class was very comprehensive, involving group discussion, and it was impossible for one interpreter to cope without breaks. The class ensured that I was well-informed of the birthing options and choices available to me. I also had a BSL interpreter at the birth.

Both my antenatal and postnatal experience was extremely positive – the staff at the birthing centre where I had my two children were very supportive



THE RIGHT SIGNS

British Sign Language is the first/preferred language for more than 80,000 deaf people in the UK. Many hearing people also use BSL, meaning it is used more than Welsh or Gaelic.

Research shows that both hearing and deaf babies benefit from sign language before they learn to speak, as it reduces frustration and enables them to communicate their needs.

For deaf parents, it is best to communicate in the language that is comfortable for them. Don't worry if children, especially hearing ones, miss out on sounds. Those hearing children will pick up sounds from TV, radio and outside the home in school/nursery. They'll pick up spoken language at every opportunity in hearing/auditory environments.

Children of Deaf Parents (CODA) reported that many children benefited from sign language as the first language to communicate with their deaf parents, whereas research showed that if deaf parents attempted to speak to their child (on advice from non-deaf aware professionals), the child will miss out on home language development and attachment to their deaf parents.

Communicating with deaf parents: advice for professionals

For staff/professionals working with deaf parents, it is vital to be aware of their needs; communicate directly with them face-to-face and enable them to see your face when you speak. The onus is on service providers to book BSL interpreters to enable deaf parents to have the same access to your services as any other parents. This is in line with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995/2000.



It's important for Samaira to see that it's natural to have deaf parents

and deaf aware. I made an extra effort to meet them prior to the labour, making them aware of my needs. I was lucky, as I've known many deaf parents who have had experience of bad attitudes, little deaf awareness and a limited choice. The midwife/health visitors were fully aware of my needs and looked at me face-to-face so I could lip-read. If further discussion was needed, a BSL interpreter would be booked to meet our communication needs.

The right response

The obvious thing about being deaf is that we are unable to hear crying or baby sounds. But we are visual, so we can tune in with our baby's emotions visually, seeing if they are upset, happy, sad or tired and usually it works for us. It takes time and practice to get used to each baby.

We have a silent alert pager that alerts us of our baby crying and have two pagers, one for each child so we know which one is crying. This, although bulky, is useful for identification.

Sound development

As I mentioned earlier, both our children are hearing. Although we use BSL at home, our families speak Urdu and English with them. Our daughter is tri-lingual and learning French once a week at nursery (which she loves). We believed that it was essential for Samaira to start nursery as early as ten months old to aid with her spoken language development.

My background in social work, and current position as team manager for Sensory Team, has meant I've supported



Sabina makes sure she is tuned in to her children's needs

many deaf parents with hearing children to gain places at nursery, enabling those children to gain the language development that they would otherwise lack. We felt it essential for Samaira's learning and overall progress that she has the opportunity to meet and socialise with other children in the nursery. Our instinct was right; we discovered how well Samaira did at nursery and her language development soared so steeply – she's ever so chatty!

All staff at the nursery have been fantastic. We were actually the first deaf parents they have come across but they have taken us through Samaira's development, explaining and gesturing to us as well as using a communication book. Some of them are even learning BSL so they can continue using it with Samaira. It's important for Samaira to see that it's natural to have deaf parents in the same way as having parents from a variety of backgrounds, including cultural, religious or combinations of them all. We are now introducing Areeb to nursery and hope he will develop just as happily.

Other parents have also been great, with party invites galore for Samaira. I'm very relieved as I have known many other children of deaf parents who don't get invited to things because hearing people do not know how to communicate with the parents – it's a shame because it's the children that miss out.

The future

My maternity leave is coming to an end and, like many parents, I have mixed feelings about returning to work. Financial necessity aside, it will be good to get back to an adult environment after a year with a baby and toddler. I know, after my previous maternity leave with Samaira, it will take six months to settle back into the work routine and will be exhausting in the first few months, so I am a bit daunted at that prospect!

While our experiences as deaf parents have been positive so far, this doesn't mean we won't encounter some barriers. When we do, we don't make a big deal out of it – why make it worse? Unless of course, it has an impact on our children.



HELP IS AT HAND

Deaf Parenting UK is the first ever charity and small organisation run by deaf parents for deaf parents and represents the needs of deaf parents in the UK. The aims of Deaf Parenting UK are:

- To enable confidence, empower and support deaf parents and deaf parents-to-be.
- To highlight the gaps in UK services and address those gaps.
- To work with various organisations including health, social services, education, deaf and mainstream parenting organisations to improve access to information and services to deaf parents.

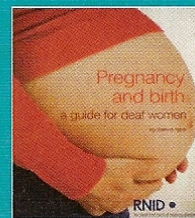
Deaf Parenting UK has also worked in partnership with the NCT by commissioning an NCT antenatal trainer for Deaf Parenting's prenatal course in Spring 2008. The classes gave deaf parents the opportunity to participate fully and exercise their right to make informed choices.

For more information and resources visit the website, deafparent.org.uk

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH A GUIDE FOR DEAF WOMEN

by Sabina Iqbal

Written for deaf mothers and mothers-to-be, the book provides clear information on pregnancy and your baby's first few days.



£14.99



**Available from nctshop.co.uk
or call 08458 100 100**