

February, 2011

Dear Derek,

I refer to your recent interview with Eithne Carroll and Liam O Dwyer concerning services for deaf children in Ireland. It is my opinion that a very one-sided and biased viewpoint was presented and I feel compelled to express another and possibly more representative view of, in particular, educational supports available to deaf children in Ireland. I am the mother of 2 profoundly deaf children now aged 11 and 8, both deaf from birth.

We made the decision that we wanted our children to speak if it was within their ability. We chose to have them wear hearing aids and to have our daughter fitted with a cochlear implant. We did use a little sign with her as a baby but she quickly left it behind once she started to hear with her implant and then speak.

We wanted to raise our children ourselves at home with their family. Both of my children communicate orally and are attending our local mainstream NS. They are both doing very well in school and are very happy there. They belong to our local community, take part in activities with their friends and belong to local clubs. They are no different to any of their friends except that they are deaf but this has never held them back. They are also members of our local Deaf Association.

As parents we had to make choices for them along the way, the same as any parent has to for any child. However we were very lucky to have the support of professional experts to help us make those decisions, the Visiting Teachers Service. Contrary to Liam O Dwyer's comment in reference to expertise in teaching deaf children "this expertise is not available outside those schools" (St. Marys, St. Joseph's and the Midwestern School), these teachers are experienced, knowledgeable people with a deep interest in the children on their caseloads and in deaf education.

To use Eithne's own words, they "know what they are doing and they know how to educate" deaf children. Moreover, they are non-directive but are instead supportive of parents wishes and help to facilitate them where possible. They are a support to the mainstream teachers who teach these children in classrooms every day. They provide information and advice and are advocates for parents, teachers and children.

They are our children's first teachers and they are loved by those pre-schoolers they regularly visit at home before they ever enter a classroom. They are also a lifeline for parents of a newly diagnosed deaf child at a time when the parent is still reeling from shock, panic, hopelessness and terror. They are the ones who calmly come into our homes and assure us that one way or another it's going to be alright. And then they teach us how to make it alright.

They tell us all of our options, they gently advise what might be best for our child and help us make informed decisions. And they are there again next week and the next. They are only a phone-call away through our children's entire educational experience. And when they don't know the answer to our questions, they find us someone who does. Their value should not be underestimated.

Our experience with state support for the education of our deaf children has all been positive. We are lucky that our school teachers are open to accommodating our children's extra needs but do not treat them as special. We have a SENO who is accessible and fair despite constraints on his budgets. We have assistive devices provided by DoES) to facilitate listening in the classroom (FM personal radio aids and sound field systems).

An SNA is funded by DoES where the need is shown. Resource hours are available to help ensure our children reach their full potential. And we have been truly blessed with our visiting teachers, the cohesive forces linking the entire system together and without whom I'm not sure our outcomes would be so positive.

Eithne Carroll is happy with the choices she made for Callum and I wish him well within the Deaf community. I commend her dedication to drive Callum from Longford to Cabra every day, I'm glad she lives close enough to do that. I wonder what she would do if she lived in West Cork?

Liam O'Dwyer emphasises the importance of deaf children being part of the Deaf community "it is critical for any child". He is entitled to his opinion. I have the highest regard for the work done in the schools for the Deaf and obviously they have their place and need.

Thankfully however, for those of us who want it, we have left behind the days when the train to St. Mary's was the only option for heartbroken parents sending their 3-year-olds off to boarding school.

For parents of a newly diagnosed deaf baby or toddler, who are struggling to come to terms with their lot, it is important to highlight there are other educational choices available and that should a parent choose an alternative, they will be well supported by the state. To present a one-sided argument to these parents at their most vulnerable is a disservice.

Thank you,  
Orla Sexton,  
Co. Cork