

Reaching all parents

Isolated and ignored – or welcomed and included? Working with deaf clients

Deaf parents often find it more difficult than other parents to join support networks and get information about pregnancy, birth and parenting. Several NCT antenatal teachers have experience of adapting their classes to welcome and involve deaf women. Kim Thomas reports.

More than 100,000 people in the UK aged between 16 and 60 are severely or profoundly deaf, while many more are hard-of-hearing. Yet deaf people often face a lack of understanding from people working in the health service.¹ Antenatal teacher Sarah Field recounts the experience of a deaf woman in her antenatal class: 'During her pregnancy, she had always found that healthcare professionals talked to her partner rather than to herself, meaning she felt isolated and ignored in her wishes.' Another woman, Hester, reports that on one occasion a maternity care assistant 'didn't understand that I needed to lipread to have any chance of understanding her, and when she realised I was deaf started shouting in my face very slowly.'

Asking the parent

Working with deaf parents requires a particular sensitivity to their needs, and it's important to consult the client before making assumptions about what they require. While some deaf people benefit from having a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter, for example, not all deaf people use BSL. When Hester enrolled on a course with antenatal teacher Sophie Dekker, Dekker emailed her to ask what she could do to help in classes: 'Hester had been deaf since childhood and wore a hearing aid. At times she used BSL, but mainly relied on lip-reading, which meant she needed to be able to see people's faces clearly. At the beginning of the first class, she asked the group to remember that she wouldn't be able to tell what they were saying unless she could see them. I normally have chairs arranged in a horseshoe shape, and Hester chose to sit at one end of the line to give her the best view of the group.'

Planning and summarising

Elodie Nelson, also an antenatal teacher, had written about deafness for her NCT Diploma in Antenatal Education, so felt well-prepared when a profoundly deaf woman, 'Jacqui' enrolled in her class: 'I knew that I needed to consider my teaching environment – acoustics, light – and visual aids and handouts.' Jacqui was able both to read and to understand sign language.

"I had brushed up on a few "labour" hand signs that would be helpful in communicating the reality of labour. I believe these may help hearing parents too. You end up using your own body a lot as a visual aid."

Sarah Field's client, Sam, used speechreading (similar to lipreading, it involves reading the whole face, rather than just the lips). 'During the classes, I ensured that she always had my face in view, and that the other clients knew to turn to face her when they talked,' says Field. On the evaluation form, Sam wrote: 'I really appreciated the teacher contacting me before the course to ask about my needs. Many people just assume they know what a deaf person needs, but we were able to work together to make sure I got the most out of the course. The small group meant I could keep up with conversations, which I found difficult in a larger group. It was good that I felt included, not that the whole course had to change because of me.'

Learning from the experience

Working with deaf clients can help teachers think about their communication strategies. Tailoring the class to the needs of a deaf parent often entails speaking more clearly, increasing the use of visual aids, and making sure that what you say has been understood. Field, as a student teacher, felt she had certainly learnt from the experience: 'I learned to slow my speech and change my teaching activities in a way that benefited the whole class, and challenged myself to reflect in a way I hadn't done before.'

References

1. Royal National Institute for the Deaf. A simple cure: a national report into deaf and hard of hearing people's experiences of the National Health Service. London: RNID; 2004. Available from: <http://tinyurl.com/RNID-SimpleCure>

Elodie Nelson's tips for working with deaf parents

- Contact the parent beforehand and ask about their communication needs and preferences.
- Use a lot of small group work.
- Keep the lighting in the room higher than normal.
- Face the deaf parent when you are talking.
- Keep jokes and irony to a minimum.
- Limit the use of technical vocabulary as much as possible.
- Avoid using distracting mannerisms when talking.
- Use lots of handouts and visual aids in the session.