



Hearing and listening difficulties often co-occur with other conditions, including autism

Autism and hearing difficulties

Hearing difficulties frequently co-occur with other neurodevelopmental conditions. The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) has been looking at the issues faced by families whose child has autism and hearing difficulties. Judy Trayford from NDCS tells us more.

BY JUDY TRAYFORD

RECENTLY, NDCS commissioned a literature review which indicated that the prevalence of deafness in children with autism is somewhere between 2% and 4.2%. It was interesting to note that the older children with autism (aged 12-17) had a higher incidence of deafness.

However, the research refers to children who have received a diagnosis of both autism and deafness; there may be younger deaf children who are also on the autism spectrum but have not yet been diagnosed.

Hearing and listening difficulties often co-occur with other neurodevelopmental conditions,

including autism. However, it will generally be the deafness that is diagnosed first. Since 2006, all newborn babies have been offered screening, so deafness should be detected very early in a child's life – although we know this is not always the case and of course, sometimes deafness is not present from birth. It may occur later, as a result of infection or illness, such as meningitis.

There is considerable variation in the levels and types of childhood deafness. Children may have a permanent mild, moderate, severe or profound deafness in one or both ears, or temporary deafness such as glue ear. The different levels of deafness are measured in decibels (dB): mild (21–40 dB), moderate (41–70 dB), severe (71–95 dB) and profound (95+ dB).

If a deaf child also has autism, it will often be detected later. Some of the indicators of deafness are similar to those of autism, and this may lead to delays in diagnosis.

When a child is diagnosed with hearing loss an audiologist will refer them to their local Sensory Support Service where a Teacher of the Deaf will give advice on encouraging good communication, using hearing aids, and making sure the child has →

→ the support they need in school. Children may also be referred to a speech and language therapist.

Any child at risk of delays in speech and language development should have their hearing assessed by an audiologist experienced in working with children with complex needs. If your child has autism but you are concerned about their hearing, ask your paediatrician or GP to refer them to an audiologist for an assessment.

At home, parents may use a variety of approaches to communicate with their deaf child. Young children will respond to facial gestures, body language and play activities as well as to speech or sign language. If parents have knowledge of British Sign Language (BSL), they may choose to use this. However, many deaf children will be born to parents who are hearing and not used to signing. They may decide to learn to sign as a family, or to encourage their child to speak and lip read. Most families use a variety of methods to communicate with their deaf child.

If a child has additional needs, such as learning difficulties or autism, families may prefer to adopt a 'total communication approach' including a combination of symbols, pictures, BSL, Makaton or objects of reference, in addition to speech.

It can be challenging to communicate with a child who is deaf and has autism, so the important thing is to find out what works for the individual child. As well as using a combination of speech, signing, symbols and pictures, make sure that your child is looking at you and can see you clearly when you speak. Visual clues can be very helpful to reinforce messages. NDCS has booklets called *Communicating with your deaf child* and *Deaf children with*

additional needs.

These are free to NDCS members.

When it comes to services, access can be difficult. In 2010/11, NDCS and Manchester University conducted research into the experiences of families who had a deaf child with other disabilities or complex needs. We interviewed 50 families and the results were analysed in the report *Complex needs, complex challenges*. The findings indicated that whatever the primary disability, there were barriers to accessing support for both the deafness and the additional needs. While some areas provide particularly good services for children with a range of disabilities, including deafness and autism, provision does vary across the UK.

Any family of a deaf child, including those with additional needs or disabilities, can become a member of NDCS for free and access a range of support. As well as the services NDCS offers, there are activities including:

- **events that are geared towards meeting the needs of children with a range of disabilities. Support is provided by a team of volunteers who are trained in managing behaviour and providing personal care**
- **twice-yearly newsletters**
- **a dedicated section of our website plus a variety of free publications and resources**
- **a technology loan service and information on technology that may be of particular interest to families**
- **a family weekend where children engage in a range of activities while their parents attend workshops and meet other families.** ●

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Find out more

NDCS

Membership of NDCS is free and open to the families of any deaf young person or the professionals who support them. The reports mentioned in this article are also free to members of NDCS. Visit www.ndcs.org.uk/membership.

For further information about hearing difficulties, visit www.ndcs.org.uk or call **0808 800 8880**.

The National Autistic Society website

Our website has an information sheet about autism and hearing difficulties. Visit www.autism.org.uk/deafness.

A Teacher of the Deaf can give advice on encouraging good communication, using hearing aids, and making sure a child has support in school.