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25 November 2015

Dear Catrin,

The Case for Play – Sense Public inquiry

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) Cymru is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We support and represent the interests of deaf children and young people from birth through to independence. In referring to "deaf" we refer to all levels of hearing loss, including mild, moderate, severe, profound and temporary hearing loss.

We are pleased to respond to your inquiry in to play and have structured our response based upon the specific questions you have posed.

What is the impact of play on children with multiple needs and their families?

All children learn through play, from the earliest developmental stages. They learn about how they can affect the world around them and the consequences and impact of their actions. Through play children gain confidence in their abilities and their place in the world.

The positive impact of play is the same for children with multiple needs. However, it is evident that activities may need to be adapted and children may need to be given more time.

Young children with complex needs attending NDCS family weekends play with other children and adults in the crèche, enjoying a variety of sensory experiences, turn taking games, and exploring their new surroundings.

Staff, volunteers and parents describe the positive impact this interaction has on the children, helping them to develop their waiting and social interaction skills. Many parents have also said their children have slept better after the sessions. Children themselves have engaged positively in play and enjoyed the opportunity to play.

The benefits of play extend to the wider family: parents foster and strengthen

relationships with their children by engaging with them in regular play, and develop support networks with other families when attending play activities with their children.

These relationships can be particularly important for families of children with multiple needs as they can often feel isolated. Peer support and understanding can have a positive impact on the wider family and help parents to develop their parenting skills and confidence in raising a child with multiple needs.

Do barriers exist to young children with multiple needs accessing play settings and activities? If so, please describe these.

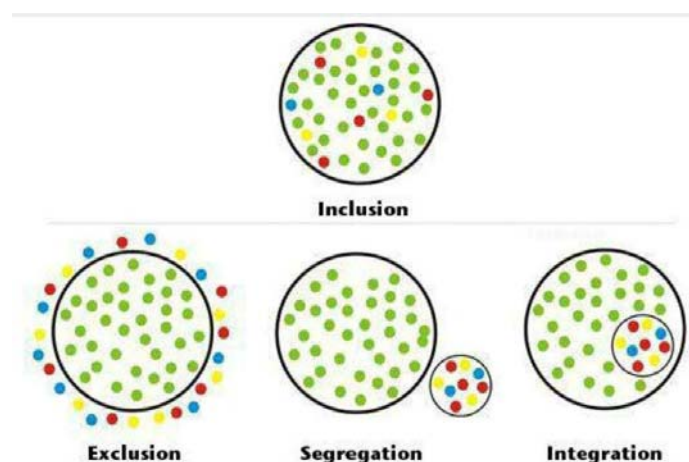
There are particular barriers for children with multiple needs, which will differ depending on their specific need. Children with hearing difficulties may not be attracted by the music and sound effects that will often attract hearing children. Similarly, children with visual impairments may not be interested in the bright colours or different shapes that so many children will reach for.

If a child has multi sensory impairment, it may prove harder to engage children in play in the ways which might work with other children. For example eye contact, smiling, sing-a-long activities may not be appropriate or engaging for a child with MSI. Adults need to be creative in how they approach engaging children with multiple needs, particularly in a group setting where these needs may differ between children.

For children with physical disabilities access to or performing of activities may be difficult. Children with autism may find social interaction difficult which can provide a challenge for those attempting to engage with them in play activities.

It is important that the child is considered holistically and that play activities are sufficiently broad so as to be easily adaptable to fit the needs of a range of children. Some basic principles, which we outline in answer to the next question, can help to develop a good play environment for all children. When seeking to address barriers to accessing specific play activities it is important to support play leaders to fully develop their skills and understanding so that they can develop activities which maximises opportunities to engage for all.

When accessing settings there can be barriers beyond those of physical access. Although it may be less obvious in an early years setting attitudes toward children with disabilities can vary widely and although settings may be 'inclusive', this can mean different things to different people. SEND have this diagram explaining Inclusion



Promoting social integration is an important part of play. For children to learn effectively through group interaction children must be able to get along. Social inclusion is an important element of emotional well-being and learning. Understanding social norms and behaviour is often acquired through incidental learning that deaf children, or those with multiple needs, can often miss out on. In our experience, deafness can impact on how well a deaf child is able to integrate socially, increasing the risk of isolation and low self-esteem.

For deaf children one of the main barriers in fully accessing play opportunities is deaf awareness. It is crucial that play leaders, and other children within the group, are encouraged to be deaf aware.

The development of effective communication and language skills is at the heart of learning, as well as the social and emotional development of all children.

It is important that play leaders are aware of the child's communication preference and have appropriate training in a particular mode of communication support.

What can be done to increase play opportunities for young children with multiple needs? If you have any examples of good practice, please describe these in your evidence.

Whilst much of the advice below relates specifically to deaf children, the clear communication described would undoubtedly be beneficial for all children including those with multiple needs.

A good listening environment benefits all children. Children with any level of hearing loss will experience particular difficulties in accessing sound if there is a lot of reverberation or background noise in the room.

Background noise can drown out the speaker's voice. Hearing adults can understand what is said even when the background noise is above that of the speaker. However, all young children require the speaker's voice to be above the levels of background noise to understand what is said. Controlling background noise is therefore critical for children with a hearing impairment.

It is important that play activities are organised in spaces that have good acoustics.

Reverberation can be reduced by:

- Fitting curtains or blinds
- Using soft furnishings such as cushions or rugs
- Using display drapes on walls
- Covering hard surfaces with fabric
- Padding the bottom of toy storage boxes or pencil/pen pots with felt or foam
- Installing specialist acoustic treatments e.g. acoustic tiles, panels and door seals.

Background noise can be reduced by:

- Closing doors to noisy areas or corridors
- Closing windows, curtains and blinds if necessary
- Position full bookshelves and cupboards against partition walls (to minimise noise transfer from other rooms)
- Ensuring heating and air conditioning systems operate within acceptable noise levels through regular maintenance

- Turning off equipment such as computers when not in use
- Avoiding playing background music

It is helpful if those leading play sessions work together to make sure that a quiet story session isn't being held at the same time as another group begins a task with musical instruments.

Above all it is important that play activities are appropriate for the children they are seeking to engage. For a deaf child, it is particularly tiring to listen. They have to work hard at watching lips and listening out for signs and sounds. Listening tasks may need to be shorter than those for their peers.

During free-flow play a deaf child may require support to access language and be aware of messages such as "tidy time soon" warnings. Clear communication is essential for deaf children to get the most out of play and to avoid confusion and upset when a child doesn't understand what is going on or what is expected of them.

In any play environment that encourages group time, it is important to make sure that all children feel included. Children should be encouraged to sit in a circle so that they are more able to see or hear one another. If questions are asked care should be taken to ensure that all children are made aware of who has asked the question, what the question is and that they understand the answer. It is important to try and encourage children to communicate one at a time so the whole group's chance of understanding is maximised and so that the child has sufficient opportunity to make themselves heard. If a group is too chaotic the experience for the child may be frustrating.

For story times it is important to make sure that deaf child are in touching distance so that their attention can be redirected as appropriate. It is a good idea to encourage all children to look at, or speak about, the book beforehand so that they have some context to work from. It is important to engage the children in the story by discussion, asking questions to reinforce meaning and encouraging the children to share their views and understanding.

Fundamentally, play activities need to be held in an appropriate environment with an aware and engaged staff delivering accessible opportunities for play. If the environment is suitable and children are clearly communicated with so as to engage them in activities and encourage interaction with their peers, the benefits are substantial.

It is important that there are opportunities for play for all children and that family can have confidence that these opportunities are suitable for and beneficial to their child.

If we can be of any further assistance during the consultation process please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Cabbage
Policy and Campaigns Officer