



Our submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning represents the views of three key groups representing parents of deaf and hard of hearing children and deaf or hard of hearing parents:

- Parents of Deaf Children (www.podc.org.au)
- Australian Federation of Deaf Societies (www.afds.org.au)
- Deaf Australia. (www.deaaustralia.org.au)

In this document we seek to highlight the needs and challenges facing these parents and their children in relation to their access to childcare and the quality of the service that they receive. Included are five case studies from parents of deaf or hard of hearing children, and deaf parents, who are using childcare services.

Parents with deaf children accessing childcare services

Congenital deafness is a relatively uncommon disability – one in a thousand babies are born with a hearing loss - and most parents of deaf children are hearing themselves with no previous experience of deafness. There is much to learn and understand in those first early years. Universal newborn screening of babies for deafness has been rolled out across Australia with the vision that early screening, early diagnosis and subsequent early intervention coupled with technology, would result in important gains in the language and developmental outcomes for deaf children. We know both anecdotally and via current research (i) that these outcomes are still variable, and on average the outcomes for deaf children are still behind the national population norms. There is also a lack of awareness about the needs of deaf children who access mainstream childcare and education services. We know too that families are the constant in the child's life. For children with a hearing loss, the potential impact of that loss can be mitigated by the capacity of the family or primary carer to adapt to the unique needs of the child.

Placing their child into childcare is never an easy decision for parents but for parents of deaf or hard of hearing children there are added pressures. Early intervention services for deaf or hard of hearing children suggest that the primary carer stay home in the early years to assist with their child's development and to provide an environment best suited to acquiring age appropriate speech and language. Additionally there is a lack of awareness in childcare services of the needs of deaf or hard of hearing children and parents are aware that this could impact their child's developmental progress. This places added pressure and guilt on parents who require two incomes and so must return to work.

Childcare centres are noisy places, and this can impact on all children's ability to learn and hear well, but is particularly challenging for deaf or hard of hearing children who use

technology and who are developing speech and language. There are reasonable adjustments that can be made to create an inclusive place for them to learn and develop. Parents report that simple adjustments, like finding appropriate funding support, along with making the environment more acoustically appropriate are generally not accommodated by childcare centres and early learning centres. This is despite these adjustments being recommended by the child's early intervention service.

Additionally, in those early years, deaf or hard of hearing children are often still learning to adjust to their new technology. This is not an overnight adjustment, with many families finding it a struggle to keep hearing aids on small children as they make this adjustment. Parents rely on their childcare centre or early learning centre to support their wishes for their child's use of technology and this does not always occur. These two case studies (1 and 2) highlight some of these issues:

Case Study 1

Christine* is Mum to Gemma*, who is almost 2.5 years old and started mainstream daycare at 12 months of age, for 2 half days per week. Gemma has a bilateral moderate loss and wears hearing aids.

"We enrolled Gemma in a centre very well known to us - it was the same centre that my older daughter had attended and my older son was still attending. The management and staff had known Gemma since she was a baby (she was with me when I dropped off and picked up her siblings) and I felt confident about her going there.

It started off well. The room leader ensured everyone knew how to put in and take out Gemma's hearing aids. The Shepherd Centre, Gemma's early intervention centre for speech and language therapy, were invited to visit and subsequently submitted a report with recommendations to make the room a better listening environment for all children, not just Gemma. The report also noted that while the room acoustics were pretty terrible, the staff were great and very sensitive to Gemma's hearing loss. Unfortunately none of the recommendations from the report were taken up (things like soft rugs on the hard floor and walls) and this was put down to cost.

Things went fairly well despite this until 6 months later when Gemma moved up into the toddler room. Things deteriorated fairly quickly in that room. Every time I picked her up there was music blaring. I asked time and time again for them to turn it off or turn it down but was ignored. At the same time, Gemma never seemed to wear her hearing aids in the new room. When I asked why not, they'd say 'she didn't seem to want them'. I was dubious: at home Gemma would wear her hearing aids from the moment she woke until bedtime. She was very possessive of them and hated them being removed. I suspected that they simply didn't bother to put them in after her naps, or she couldn't tolerate the loud music with them in.

I made repeated requests for them to ensure she was wearing her hearing aids, to both the staff and management. The management were apologetic but blamed the

'young and well-meaning staff'. Tellingly, Gemma became increasingly reluctant to be left at daycare, and would cry when I dropped her off. This had never happened before.

I was so frustrated that her needs, which were really fairly simple, we're not being met. My son, who was in attendance in another room at the centre, is asthmatic, and his needs we're being met without question.

The final straw came after she'd been in the new room for about 8 weeks. One of the carers asked me when Gemma would start talking. Huge alarm bells - Gemma was a very chatty little girl at home and it sounded like she either wasn't talking or wasn't being listened too at daycare. The next day I picked up her 'school photos' and noticed right away she wasn't wearing her hearing aids. I went straight to management and asked them why not, and their answer was 'we just took them out so she'd look nice in the photo'. I withdrew her from that daycare centre the next day.

Thankfully, we were accepted into a new service very quickly. I met with the director and she was appalled by the care at the other centre. They had another child there (a couple of years older) who wears bilateral cochlear implants, so I felt somewhat reassured (this was another mainstream centre).

Our experience at the new centre has been a good one so far. The staff are understanding of Gemma's needs but don't mollycoddle her or treat her too differently to the other children. I want people to see my little girl before they see her hearing impairment and the new centre does this. They ensure she wears her hearing aids and is sitting near the front for story time etc, but other than that she's accepted as just another little member of the class.

So we have had both good and bad experiences with childcare (both mainstream services). I think the best thing governments could do is make childcare centres more accountable, or give parents somewhere to take their concerns other than the Childcare management (perhaps there is somewhere, but I'm not aware of it). I found it really frustrating that the previous childcare centre were able to pick and choose which additional needs they would accommodate (eg, my son's asthma was no problem; my daughter's hearing loss was largely ignored). When I withdrew her they agreed it wasn't the best centre for her... But it could have been! If they had been aware of and responsive to her needs it would have been fine."

Case Study 2

Emma and Glen* are parents of Christian* who is 4 years old, with a mild to moderate hearing loss. Having decided on an independent mainstream preschool, they met with the preschool director in the first week of Term 3, to discuss the needs of their son. The director seemed very open to meeting his needs and she suggested that the school apply for SCAN funded *Inclusion Support*, to provide an extra support person at the preschool. The parents left that meeting feeling confident and happy

and with a plan for their son to come back later in the year to see the school and for him to start an orientation program. At a second meeting later in the year, they discovered that no progress had been made towards seeking the *Inclusion Support* funding.

This experience has subsequently been compounded by other factors that have highlighted the lack of interest the centre has in meeting their son's reasonable needs. They now feel very anxious about the service that they have chosen and at late notice, has prompted them to try to find another more responsive preschool for him.

Parents recommend that childcare centres:

- Inform families upfront of the avenues for complaints or where they can to escalate issues if they are not happy with the support of their child.
- Make reasonable adjustments, such use of soft furnishing and carpeting or mats to reduce the noise in the centre.
- Work with families to ensure that staff fully understand and support the child's use of hearing aids and/or cochlear implants.
- Staff are made aware of need to use visual cues, such as lip reading when working with deaf or hard of hearing children.
- Be aware of the extra funding avenues for inclusion support for children with additional needs and ensure funding avenues are put in place before child attends the service.
- TV or music can make it harder for deaf or hard-of-hearing children to hear, so centres need to keep noise levels down.
- Are taught techniques/strategies for encouraging hearing children in the centre to develop behaviours that include the deaf or hard of hearing child/ren in their play/activities
- Use visual aids, such as pictures and posters and gestures to show what the day's activities will be. This will help all children, but particularly the deaf or hard of hearing child.
- Consider the layout of activities and seating of children so that visual access is maximised at all times. For example, a circular layout for time on the mat is much more inclusive than a traditional row by row layout.
- Ensure that the captions on the TV, DVDs etc are turned on at all times. This will benefit all children as a learning to read tool, especially those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Lack of deaf awareness by staff

Parents report that childcare centres often display a lack of awareness of deafness and an ignorance about the deaf or hard of hearing child's needs and the needs of the family. Whilst this may be understandable due to the low incidence of deafness in the community, parents report a lack of interest by childcare staff to learn more about the needs of their child and to be more deaf aware. Deaf parents in particular experience barriers in this regard, particularly in having equity of access to the same level of information and support as hearing parents in their child's centre. Case study 3 highlights the issues that deaf parents can encounter in finding childcare services for their children that are respectful,

inclusive and have even a basic awareness of their deaf culture and their language, Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Case study 4 highlights how childcare centres can work with a deaf family to meet their needs.

Case Study 3

Debbie* and her husband are a deaf couple who recently moved from Adelaide to Sydney where Debbie took up a full-time job. Debbie's daughter had previously attended a childcare centre in Adelaide where the staff had embraced Auslan and learnt some signs and encouraged other children to sign songs as part of the activities of the centre. Debbie's daughter then attended a new childcare centre in Sydney, where staff unfortunately proved unwilling to learn any signs, or to acknowledge or show appreciation of the home culture of Debbie's child. Without an awareness of deaf culture, they were unaware that tapping others on the knee or shoulder was an appropriate way for Debbie's daughter to ask for attention in the home, and that when she tapped other children on the shoulder at preschool, she was displaying appropriate behaviour for her home culture. Budgetary constraints also meant that the centre was unwilling to pay for interpreters for meetings. While other parents were able to meet with staff and discuss their child's progress, Debbie had to write notes to teachers to ask about her daughter's progress. This did not provide the same depth and breadth of information which other parents were able to receive through meeting with staff. Although it would have been possible for Debbie to pursue this further through the centre's complaints system or through the Australian Human Rights Commission, she decided not to do so because of the time required.

Case Study 4

Linda* is a deaf parent whose son attends a local childcare. The childcare centre has been open to learning more about deafness, and asked Linda, who is an experienced teacher herself, to give a short deaf awareness training session to the staff. Linda has not felt the need for an interpreter in meeting with teachers, but the staff, being aware of the fact that she is deaf, have made small adjustments such as writing notes, facing her when they speak, and providing a seat at the front of the room and notes about what is going on for the small end of year graduation event.

The only barrier in this case is one of physical infrastructure – the intercom to let parents into the centre relies on the parent being able to hear and speak. This has been a barrier in accessing the premises.

Parents recommend that childcare centres:

- Respect the decisions of the child's family with regards to language or choice of technology and learn about and make reasonable adjustments, to accommodate the needs of the child and the family.
- Provide staff training on deaf awareness, and basic sign language instruction to staff if the deaf child uses Auslan.
- Display family centred practice in respecting the culture of the family and the language that they use at home and working out with the family the best ways they can communicate with the family.

- Provide at a minimum NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) accredited Auslan interpreters or real time captioning for deaf parents to allow them to meet with the childcare centre about any issue relating to their child's care and education, such as parent teacher interviews and to allow them access to events run by the centre, such as end of year concerts.
- Ensure that activities that involve the use of DVDs and other electronic equipment use captioned versions.

Limited specialised childcare options

Early intervention services for deaf or hard of hearing children suggest that families try to have the primary carer stay home with their deaf child in the early years. This is perceived as optimal for acquisition of age appropriate speech and language. Whilst families would want this in an ideal world, this is not always possible for a family needing both incomes. This sets up an added pressure of trying to find a service that not only has a space available but would be aware and open to meeting the needs of their child. There are limited options for specialized services to meet these children's needs, and as a result many families in this situation need to navigate the mainstream childcare settings. Sometimes the services are just too far away to be of benefit to the family. Some families may be lucky to find family day care that meets their needs, and many families would prefer family day care as an option due to the smaller, quieter environment for their deaf child. However spaces are very limited and hard to find. This case study (5) highlights the challenges of accessing specialised services:

Case Study 5

Tim and Carol are deaf parents of a deaf child, Harry*. They enrolled their son in RIDBC (Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children) Early Learning Program to receive learning support for Harry to develop his speech and listening skills while Auslan (Australian Sign Language) was used as a primary language at home. When Carol returned to work, Harry was enrolled at a mainstream long day care centre at 14 months for 3 days per week. Harry was very unsettled for 6 weeks so Tim and Carol explored family day care and at 16 months, Harry attended family day care until he was 3.5 years old which was a good solution for him and the family. At two, they received a place at RIDBC Roberta Reid Preschool, which was based at North Rocks, about 1 and ½ hours away from their Bondi Junction home. They wanted Harry to benefit from the specialised services that this preschool could offer him but the logistics of both parents having to take turns driving him back and forth (up to 4 hours per day in peak hour traffic) took its toll. While the preschool program was very inclusive for Harry, there is no financial compensation for loss of income due to reduced working hours in order for their deaf child to attend this specialised program. When Harry turned 4.5 years of age, the parents became aware of special transport service and this had made a huge difference to the family especially for the parents being able to keep their work commitments.

Parents recommend:

- Deaf or hard of hearing children are given priority in placement for family day care places in their area.

- Auslan and Deaf awareness training to be funded and available for family day carers.
- Transport to be available for families where both parents work and cannot take time off to drive the deaf or hard of hearing child to and from the specialised program.
- Appropriate after hours child care program in place for deaf or hard of hearing children who attend the specialised program which opens from 9am to 3pm (which is the case for the RIDBC preschool programs).

¹ **Longitudinal Outcomes of Children with Hearing Impairment (LOCHI).**
www.outcomes.nal.gov.au

* Case study names have been changed to protect privacy.

Thank you for considering our submission. For further information you can contact us via PODC at info@podc.org.au

Sincerely,

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