

Asking to be heard

There are 2,000 deaf children in Ireland, 80% of whom are educated in mainstream schools. Does this lead to these children feeling as if they are "in two worlds": belonging to neither the hearing nor deaf community? Margaret Hawkins speaks to two mothers and a service provider about whether supports are adequate.



Babies' hearing should be checked soon after birth. Intervention to help with language development should follow soon after. A "one-stop support shop" for parents of deaf children should also be available in Ireland to guide parents on the path to helping their deaf child reach his or her full potential.

These are the urgent requirements needed to help those who are born deaf in this country and their families, according to umbrella lobbying organisation The Education Partnership Group.

The group includes service providers like DeafHear.ie, The Irish Deaf Society, the Centre for Deaf Studies and the Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP).

At present, deafness may not be picked up on until the child's nine-month developmental check-up – or even later. "We have seen children who haven't been diagnosed until they are two and three," says Liam O'Dwyer, CEO of the CIDP, which runs two schools for the deaf in Cabra – St Joseph's for boys and St Mary's for girls.

"That's a huge impairment for those children – ultimately because their communication and cognitive development is impeded – and that has really serious repercussions. That's why we're calling for universal newborn screening," says Liam.

90% BORN TO HEARING PARENTS

Parents not being able to get good information and advice is another huge issue, he says. "Ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents who have no experience of deafness and often do not know where to turn for help."

The challenges and concerns

they face can be considerable, and Ireland falls down badly in terms of this kind of help, according to Liam O'Dwyer of the Education Partnership Group.

The need for a new approach to education policy for the deaf and hard-of-hearing was highlighted at a Croke Park conference this year.

A strong case was made for the Department of Education to treat the education of deaf and hard-of-hearing children as a distinct and separate area within the education system. This is so that they will have the same chance in life as hearing children.

The "one-stop support shop" – in the form of a new national centre for deaf education – is vital, Liam O'Dwyer believes.

NEED TO THINK OF THE LONG TERM

"Parents need information of a more independent, balanced nature that says, here is the gambit of what's available, here are the issues you and your child are going to have to face in three, 10, 20 years time.

"They need to think about the long term, about where their child is going to be in terms of their community. Are they going to be able to communicate with hearing people, or is their community going to be deaf people?" he stresses.

Ideologically, Liam O'Dwyer agrees that mainstreaming is the ideal in terms of education policy for the deaf. "However, what's become very apparent is that some children require specialised work and a specialised social and educational environment," he says.

"One of the serious issues now arising is that, because so many children have been mainstreamed educationally, they are finding



Avril Madden, who suffers from acute deafness, with her mother Marie, dad Benny and brother Niall, at their home in Naas.

that by the time they are in their mid-teens they are neither members of the hearing community nor members of the deaf community," Liam explains.

ONLY 70 IN EACH SPECIALIST SCHOOL

Only 140 children now attend St Joseph's and St Mary's schools for the deaf in Cabra. In the 1960s, the figure was over 700.

"What's happened is that government policy is now for mainstreaming, so parents have the option to send their child to a more local school," the CEO says. "Eighty percent of deaf children go to these mainstream schools (10 primary schools across the country have specialist units attached)."

No, Mr O'Dwyer says, schools like St Joseph's and St Mary's are not in danger of closing. "That's because specialist education is necessary, and all of the reports written most recently by leading educationalists have advised government that special schools provide an environment and an education

system that is very difficult to match in a mainstream setting."

So what are the advantages to a specialist school, in his opinion? "There is a uniqueness about the needs that deaf people have, in the sense that it's not a disability, as such; it's a communication issue.

"The child needs to communicate properly with both sign language and orally, and a lot of work needs to go into a child very early to enable their proper cognitive development," Liam explains.

"Teachers are specially trained and communicate orally – in writing and in sign language – with the pupils. It's a bilingual education, and that's what makes it so different."

But is there a stigma attached to going to a school for the deaf?

"I think there is no parent who wants to send a child away to a school, particularly a young child. It's a very normal reaction, and ultimately mainstreaming is an appropriate policy if it's resourced properly. We are not an organisation that says there shouldn't be mainstreaming.

"We are saying that if you

mainstream you must resource it properly, but it's not being resourced properly, and that is the top and bottom of it in this country," he explains.

The 10 specialised units around the country are reasonably well set up, but the problem is that once children hit 12 or 13, they have to go to second-level school, he adds.

"Then they are into mainstream secondary school, and they are coming up against nine or 10 different teachers in a day. Communication can be very difficult with teachers and peers," says Liam.

So why do many deaf children and their families not learn sign language earlier? "We tend to look at deafness as a medical problem that can be alleviated in terms of a hearing aid or a cochlear implant or assisted by speech development through lip reading, etc.

"The medical models out there tend to push sign language to the side a bit. We believe deaf children need access to sign language from the very start. That's why hearing impairment must be identified early," he stresses. **CL**