

Early Years in Doncaster

Seanne Grant, EY QToD, shares the voices of parents regarding the reasons behind their successful preschool group

In Doncaster, our Preschool Hearing Impairment Group (PHIG) is doing well. PHIG is held fortnightly on Thursday afternoons at a local Family Hub, run by our fabulous Deaf Instructor, Clara Allardyce, and myself. We sing, sign, play, talk and offer advice and assistance with hearing equipment, communication and language development. It is usually chaos and always lively. Our local deaf specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Clare Attrill, attends when she can. Sometimes we have guests; recently we invited someone from the local council to discuss our Local Offer and we have held an entertaining BabyBeats session.

I have spoken with fellow QToDs from other regions, some of whom are struggling to get a preschool HI group together. It is curious: why have we been so fortunate? The answer is simple – it comes down to the amazing families of our deaf children. Without the time they put aside in their busy lives to attend, PHIG would not exist. For this reason, it seems logical to ask them for their thoughts on why our group succeeds. Here are some responses we received:

One dad commented that he has 'learned a lot from PHIG about development, BSL, support, etc.' [He] enjoys coming. Another dad suggested we should hold PHIG every week.



A mum who is new to the group (and who is deaf herself) said that all baby groups are useful as they help children make friends and you can meet other parents and get out of the house. However, PHIG is useful to get support for equipment, saving you from having to make hospital appointments. Her mother added that, when her daughter was young, there were no HI groups. The other children did not accept her daughter's deafness and there was bullying. She likes that parents at PHIG can share ideas, problems and experiences they have had, to help support one another. Another mum echoed these last thoughts: "We attend your lovely group because you are warm and friendly, easy to talk to and a great support."

One grandmother shared: "I have been attending the Thursday afternoon sessions with Seanne and her team for over a year now with my three year old grandson who has hearing loss. I feel that I have learnt so much from these sessions and have a far better understanding of hearing loss, not only in my own child, but that of others. It is a warm, friendly group that I will miss very much when my grandson starts fulltime school next year. Well done to the team for being so supportive."

From our families' feedback, it seems Clara and I simply offer a venue where parents can support one another.

Over the years, however, I have discovered a couple of things that seems to have helped make this group work:

1. Repetition has always been considered a beneficial way to teach deaf children, as it allows them not only the time to learn the language, tune, rhythm and actions, but also gives them confidence to know they are doing the right thing. Clara and I vary the songs and offer different bits of information, but due to audience (ie children's!) demand, we always sing the parachute song, and most recently 'monkey on the bed'. The younger ones watch the older ones sing/gesture/sign/shout "up, up!" and "down, down". Eventually the younger ones step into the places of the older ones who leave, and the cycle continues – the observers become the leaders. It is a lovely thing for us (and for parents) to observe. In one mum's words: "I like that my child is enjoying PHIG now [that she is older]. I like to see her happy in the group, signing and singing and getting involved in the actions of songs."

2. Don't take yourself too seriously. Adults need to have fun just as much as their children and the parents in our group like to laugh. Sometimes being professional means you have to let yourself be a bit silly (bad singing along with the HI



support and signposting). My job as EY QToD is to help families of deaf children become confident advocates for their children. PHIG definitely helps this to happen because we are relaxed in our approach; we neither pressure parents into making a decision as to how to communicate nor tell them off for not having hearing aids in. They tend to learn from us and other parents modelling good habits.

We have a wish list, of course: audiologist attendance at every session to take mould impressions and help support hearing aid checks (which can take up to half an hour some days!); more staff to watch the children so parents can focus during information sessions; and, especially, all of the parents being able to attend from time to time to meet other families. There is always room for improvement and we are open to suggestions. ■

A mum sums up our group: "For us, PHIG is the place where, if my little boy's hearing aid falls off, another parent will put it back on his ear. Where, if I wasn't watching him for two minutes and he puts his hearing aid in his mouth, another parent will alert me without judging because they know how hard it is. It's the place I went with my newborn and saw the older deaf kids talking, playing, singing, laughing and felt relieved he would do the same one day. It's the place where there is support on tap whether it be hearing aid or sign language related, Seanne or Clara will have the answer. If my kid doesn't want to join in one day that's ok too; the atmosphere is different to any baby group I've ever attended. We find PHIG welcoming, relaxed, and our safe place – like a special club we are privileged to be invited to."



Seanne Grant is a Qualified Teacher of the Deaf at Doncaster Council's SEND Service for Children with a Hearing Impairment and holds the EY and Deafness qualification.

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