

THE DEAF CHILD AND HIS EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

PATRICK G. P. COYNE, *Principal, Fulton School for the Deaf, Gillitts, Natal*

It has been estimated recently that the incidence of deafness among South African children, taking all races into account, is as high as 1 in 500. Bearing in mind this figure, which may come as a surprise to many, it is worth while to consider the needs of the deaf child, viewed in relationship to his handicap and in the light of modern educational practice.

Diagnosis

A deaf child's needs cannot be assessed until it has been established that he is deaf. Unfortunately, this step, which must come first, is probably the most difficult; so much so, that one is justified in regarding more efficient and earlier ascertainment of deafness as almost the greatest need of deaf children. The importance of the time factor will be apparent. By the sixth month, when hearing babies are interpreting and reacting to sound, a congenitally-deaf child is already being handicapped mentally, socially, and emotionally.¹ His education, therefore, should begin from this stage, if at all possible, or else the length of the delay before his deafness is first recognized should be reckoned from this time.

However, the grosser effects of the handicap are usually noticed only after the 18th month, by which time, when hearing babies are using, or responding to, a vocabulary of half-a-dozen words or more, the deaf baby is still uttering primitive, instinctive, babbling sounds.

Timely Special Training

This, then, is the point at which it is practical and logical to begin the special training which the deaf child needs. Under optimum conditions, the mother will receive guidance on how to adapt herself to a completely new approach to her baby, entering a world where vision and light are primary considerations, her first task that of attracting her child's eyes towards meaningful actions, timely facial expressions, and movements of the visible speech organs used in simple words and phrases. If this were done—and it has been done with success on a considerable scale overseas—a start would be made in whittling down the lead which the hearing baby of this age already has over his deaf brother.

But these are optimum conditions. A great many deaf babies in this country are not recognized as deaf until they are more than 3 years of age. The reasons for this are several. Wilful blindness on the part of the parent, well-meaning but incorrect advice on the part of friends, and procrastination in consulting a doctor, are a few. However, even where medical advice is sought in good time, and the child is proved or even strongly suspected of being deaf, *all too often nothing is done and no use is made of the knowledge gained.* This cannot be too strongly stressed. The mere fact of having established the child's deafness is no achievement at all unless steps are taken to act upon the information from that very minute. To advise the parent to 'wait until he is 5 and then bring him back', or to defer action because of the future possibility of remedial surgery, is to deny the child his right, and his urgent need—that of special educational treatment from the earliest possible age.

Educational Needs

In considering the educational needs of the young deaf child, it is not the *obvious* effects of deafness that are important. The child's lack of speech is but a symptom of his handicap, and speech training alone will never remedy it. It is in the psycholinguistic aspect of a child's development that deafness does the most damage.

Not to hear speech is not to hear language, i.e. words, names, phrases, and the countless ways in which these can be joined together meaningfully. An untrained deaf child who has never heard words will never think in terms of words, he will think in a series of vague, uncaptioned pictures, and his thinking will never progress beyond this primitive and inefficient level. The urgent need of the deaf child is to be introduced to language early through lipreading, with speech, reading, and writing following later. The growth of his understanding will depend upon the speed of his learning 'to make intelligent use of words for the purpose of defining his thoughts and feelings as clearly as possible to himself, and of expressing them as clearly as possible to others'.² All this the hearing child will pick up naturally, but to the deaf child it has to be taught artificially and systematically. The deaf child's greatest need, therefore, is early training in the elements of his mother tongue, and this can only be given to him by trained teachers of the deaf or by the parents themselves under special tuition.

For the preschool child much can be done in homes where parents are willing to cooperate. School principals will always give advice and help. For example, I myself undertake to train any parent recommended to me in this important matter of starting young deaf children on the first steps in their cruelly steep educational ladder, either by personal interviews or through the post.

The usual age for admission to a school for the deaf is 3 years. At the Fulton School for the Deaf, Gillitts, Natal, the fees are £15 a quarter, inclusive of board and tuition. For those unable to afford this, Government grants are available, for which application should be made through the principal.

SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF IN SOUTH AFRICA

Transvaal

European: St. Vincent's School for the Deaf, Johannesburg; Transoranje Skool vir Dowes, Pretoria.

Non-European: Kutlwanong School for the Deaf, Roodepoort.

Cape Province

European: Dominican Grimley School for the Deaf, Tuin Plein, Cape Town; Worcester Skool vir Dowes, Worcester.

Non-European: Dominican School for the Deaf, Wittebome; School for the Coloured Deaf, Worcester.

Natal

European: Fulton School for the Deaf, Gillitts (near Pine-town).

REFERENCES

1. Levine, E. (1959): *The Maryland Bulletin*, 3, 35.
2. Watts, A. F. (1944): *The Language and Mental Development of Children*. London: Harrap.