

Being a child of Deaf adults – what I learned

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One officer's insight on interpreting as a child of Deaf parents

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I thought I knew a lot about British Sign Language (BSL). I am a child of Deaf adults (CODA) and I assumed the de-facto interpreter role as a child, conveying personal and complex information. I happily carried out this role, as it gave me a sense of independence and responsibility. This article is a reflective piece on what I learned from being a CODA and, later on, as a police officer.

Interpreting as a CODA

CODAs sometimes interpret information they are not emotionally or developmentally able to fully understand. CODAs may also not possess the necessary language skills to interpret what was required effectively. As I facilitated communication between hearing adults and my Deaf parents, I saw how reliant professionals were on me as the language broker.

There are many issues with this, including the negative impact on a child's wellbeing and the potential for vicarious trauma. Another issue is the inference of influencing a child's evidence – for example, when a child witnesses domestic abuse and is then expected to manage communication between victims and professionals. Having experienced domestic abuse as a child, these situations resonate with me.

There should also be consideration relating to the version of events being passed between the CODA and their parents, concerning any clarifications that took place and the use of language. CODAs can have a vested interest in the situations they are interpreting, so they cannot be expected to be impartial. CODAs can also be vulnerable to editing information in an attempt to minimise circumstances, including any potential impact on their relationships and dynamics with family members.

Complex language

Deaf people, especially those with limited vocabulary, can find complex terminology and nuances in questioning styles difficult to comprehend. BSL has its own grammatical and sentence structure. This, combined with interpretation by a CODA, can further add to difficulties with comprehension. An example of the limitations of language is the historic sign for domestic abuse. A common sign for 'domestic' is the same as the one for 'home', with a different lip pattern. The sign is interchangeable, but you would mouth the word you wished to convey. As a result, Deaf victims who have additional cognitive needs may not identify themselves as victims of domestic abuse, as their interpretation may be that abuse can only occur within the home.

Reliability

My knowledge of BSL suggests that vulnerable Deaf victims, specifically those who encounter abuse, neglect or sexual abuse, may provide accounts that could prove to be unreliable. This is due to the potential for conversation in sign language to be unintentionally suggestive or speculative, and because of the introduction of new language.

From my experiences, the consequences of allowing a CODA to assume the de-facto interpreter role could be significant, with inaccurate recording of evidence and the subsequent consequences. In my view, a qualified BSL interpreter should be used to properly support victims at the outset, to protect the integrity of the enquiry and to ensure the admissibility of evidence.

For further information see:

- [British Deaf Association](#)
- [Sign Health](#)

For more information about:

- Police Link Officers for Deaf people (PLOD) – contact dei@gmp.police.uk
- Police Scotland guidance on how to support Deaf persons – contact PPCWdiversityunit@scotland.police.uk

This article was peer reviewed by Chief Inspector Emma Gilbert, Greater Manchester Police and National Coordinator for PLOD.

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