

Parent choice: a buzz word or buzz kill?

Michelle Atkinson argues the case for informed choice in the early years for families with deaf children, replacing the limitations of 'parent choice' with 'parent opportunity'

When I began researching my dissertation into the local offers available to families of early years' deaf children across England, I was hopeful to uncover a landscape rich with strategies and systems that truly recognised the individuality of each deaf child and their families. After all, every family is different. Every child is different. And every deaf child, especially in those crucial early years, deserves a nurturing environment that's responsive to who they are, not just as a statistic but as a human being with unique potential, strengths, challenges, and ways of experiencing the world.

So surely, the services they're offered should reflect that?

Instead, as I read through policy documents, spoke to professionals, and connected with parents, I found a phrase that appeared over and over again – used by services and authorities alike – 'parent choice'. It looks great on the surface, like parents are in control, selecting from a full menu of options. A term that resonates with empowerment and suggests freedom. But, when I scratched beneath the surface, it became clear that this so-called choice was anything but complete. The reality? Many families were being offered only a narrow slice of what could support their deaf child. It seemed that 'parent choice' wasn't about selecting from a full, diverse menu of options, it was about choosing from what the services were willing or able to provide. That's not freedom. That's not empowerment. That's a pre-fixed meal disguised as choice. You either take it or leave it.

It became clear that the term 'parent choice' was anything but a choice. It's a carefully managed illusion of it, quietly limiting the options available.

Behind the reassuring language of 'parent choice' was a tightly controlled set of offerings, often dictated more by resources and policy than by the actual needs or wishes of families. Many services claim to offer 'parent choice,' but what that often translates to is: 'Here are the limited services we provide, take your pick'. This narrow interpretation frequently excludes vital approaches like sign language or bilingual communication strategies. Sign language offers immediate, full language access regardless of hearing levels. It supports early brain development, identity, and confidence. Yet, my findings found that it's the most underrepresented in early years' services – it's often offered as an afterthought, minimal, patchy, or delayed. Is the idea that sign language delays speech still widespread, despite extensive evidence to the contrary?

Parents need information, access, flexibility, and time – not the pressure and limitation of 'parent choice'. It cannot be claimed parents are choosing freely if they haven't been shown all the possible paths ahead. Raising a deaf child shouldn't feel like heading down a one-way

street, locked into one direction. No left. No right. Just forward, on a predetermined path. Many parents often feel overwhelmed into early decisions, there's often little opportunity to pause, reassess, explore, or pivot. Parents need opportunities – real, flexible, well-supported ones.

I began to wonder... What if instead of 'parent choice', we reframed it as 'parent opportunity'?

'Parent opportunity' reframes the conversation. It moves beyond the illusion of choice and opens doors to something far more meaningful. It says: 'Here is a range of pathways. Explore them. Learn from them. Combine them if you wish.' Parents are not being asked to choose and commit to an exclusive route. Instead, parents are invited to build a flexible, responsive web of support around their deaf child, a dynamic toolkit that can grow and shift as they do. This isn't just a semantic change; it's a cultural shift. It encourages families to think beyond controlled options and to embrace the full spectrum of opportunities that can support their deaf child's development. It's about laying out a rich, interconnected landscape, and not a single track with fixed stops.

And what's more, as a deaf child grows, that landscape matters. Life doesn't move in straight lines. It curves; it bends; it fluctuates. Having free access to a diverse range of opportunities means that deaf children and their families are better equipped to navigate those twists and turns, not forced to choose between this or that, but empowered to draw from many sources, as and when they're needed. When we frame this landscape not as a list of mutually exclusive choices but as a web of parent opportunities, everything shifts. We empower families not to pick the 'right' path, but to access a range of tools that suit their deaf child's evolving needs.

Local services must be honest about the gaps in their offerings and advocate for broader inclusion. If services are serious about putting families first, we need to stop treating 'parent choice' as a buzz word.

Imagine being offered a rich, empowering toolkit the moment your child is diagnosed as deaf; resources that include affirming, positive language around deafness; access to sign language training from day one; speech therapy; connections to deaf mentors; inclusive audiology services; bilingual education pathways, and strong family support networks. Not a token six-week sign language course as frequently found in my research, but real, ongoing, accessible support. Compare that to being offered a single route and told, 'This is what we do here'. That's the difference between parent choice as it's currently framed, and parent opportunity as it should be.

When we give families a full toolkit, they don't have to place all their bets and gamble on one path or hope for

the best in a game of wait and see. Too often, this roulette approach leads to missed opportunities and unmet potential. The real magic happens when families are empowered with meaningful opportunities, not confined by someone else's 'choices'. Not just what's available, but what's truly possible. Only then can we say we're truly serving deaf children and not just the system built around them.

At the end of the day, it's not about fixing ears or debating the 'best' approach. It's about something much deeper; giving every deaf child opportunities to learn, connect, and fully be themselves.

Because every deaf child deserves not just a voice, but a language. Not just a choice, but a future full of opportunity. And more than just the tools to survive, they deserve to truly thrive.



Michelle Atkinson, a graduate of the University of Leeds with a Master of Arts in Deaf Education, is a Qualified Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People (QToD) at the Royal School for the Deaf, Derby, with a deep-rooted commitment to enhancing outcomes for deaf children. She recently completed a dissertation exploring local offers for deaf children, adding to her growing body of work in the field. As a deaf parent of deaf children, Michelle brings invaluable personal insight and lived experience to her professional practice. She is passionate about creating environments where deaf individuals can truly thrive and remains dedicated to driving innovation in deaf education for future generations.

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