Deaf, not 'hearing impaired': The power of words

Michelle Atkinson, a Qualified Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People (QToD) and a deaf mother of deaf children reminds us that language matters

Deaf, not broken

When I recently walked into a school and saw the name of the resource base, I paused. There it was in bold letters: Hearing Impaired Unit.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. The words hit me like a punch; heavy, outdated, a reminder of the language that once shadowed my own childhood.

Words matter

Growing up, I spent my days in what was then called the 'hearing impaired unit'. That label followed me everywhere: across report cards, medical files, and rolled off the lips of QToDs so easily that they didn't realise what those words do to a child's sense of self.

'Hearing impaired'. Impersonal. Official. But when you sit with it, when you live under it, it carries one message: you are broken.

To be impaired is to be less than whole, something to be fixed. As a child, I absorbed that meaning without question. I apologised for my deafness as if it were an inconvenience to others. I felt small, fragile, like damaged goods wrapped carefully in pity.

It took years, and the strength of being born into a deaf family, to unlearn that. To understand that I was not broken. I was simply deaf.

Can't vs don't

Society measures deafness in the currency of hearing, as if it has less value or worth by comparison. But being deaf isn't about how much you can or can't hear, it's about how you experience the world.

From a hearing perspective, the term hearing impaired frames deafness as a lack, a 'can't' measured against a hearing standard. From a deaf perspective, it's much simpler: we don't hear. That's it. Just a difference, not a deficiency.

This shift in perspective might seem subtle, but it changes everything. When children first encounter their deafness through negative language and constant comparisons to hearing standards, they begin life carrying the weight of being 'less than' before they've even started. Before they've even discovered who they truly are.

Language that heals, not hurts

Across the United Kingdom (UK), attitudes are shifting. Deaf-led organisations, universities, and educators now use 'deaf' to describe the full spectrum of hearing levels. 'Hearing impaired' lingers in some schools and council services, but its days are numbered. Just as 'deaf and dumb', once a standard medical term, is now unthinkable, so, too, must outdated labels fade.

The Oxford Dictionary defines impairment as "a condition that means part of your body does not work correctly". Deafness is not a malfunction. It's not something that can be repaired. We wouldn't say someone who uses a wheelchair has a walking impairment, nor that a male is woman impaired. We recognise that our bodies simply move differently through the world. Deafness is a difference, not a defect.

So why do we still define deaf people through the lens of what's 'wrong'?

Discovering Deaf Gain

I love discovering Deaf Gain, a celebration of the advantages of being deaf. I smile reading examples: the ability to focus in noisy offices, a peaceful night's sleep during loud storms, communicating across distances and languages, and much more.

Deaf Gain flips the script: deafness is not a deficit; it's a different way of being with its own strengths. Maybe hearing people are the ones who are 'deaf impaired'. A play on words, yes, but powerful all the same. Every way of experiencing the world comes with its own kind of strengths.

A legacy I refuse to pass on

When I see the words 'hearing impaired' still used in schools, I think of my deaf children. I think of the deaf children I teach. I think of every deaf child in the world. I think of how easily words seep into the soul of a child. I don't want them carrying the same weight I did. I want them to be proud of who they are.

Deaf is not a dirty word. It's a culture, a community, a way of life. Something to celebrate.

Letting go of the old words

I try to understand that some hearing parents may find comfort in the phrase 'hearing impaired'. Perhaps it softens the reality of discovering their child is deaf. I empathise deeply with their journey of acceptance. But professionals have a responsibility to guide families towards language that empowers, not limits.

When we continue to use outdated terminology, we keep children tethered to old ideas about what deafness means. When we change our words, we begin to change the world around them.

Deaf is enough

If I've learned anything from this experience, it's that

words carry power far beyond the page and beyond the classroom. They can build confidence or strip it away. They can heal or they can harm.

So, to every teacher, parent, and professional who works with or has deaf children: choose your words with care. Because when you call a child deaf, you're not simply labelling them, you're giving them permission to be whole.

Michelle Atkinson, a graduate of the University of Leeds with a Master of Arts in Deaf Education, is a 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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