

Rather deaf

Deaf organizations in the US and the UK, among others, are advocating for the right of deaf people to the choice for deaf children, particularly the right to 'create' deaf children through means of embryo screening and selection or sperm donor choice (discussed under the term "designer deafness"). This illustrates the emancipation of the deaf. Many deaf people are proud of their otherness, their identity. Deafness is not a handicap, they think, at least, it does not have to be. Where sign language is used, there is nothing wrong with the deaf - there the non-signers are handicapped. Deaf people actually form a linguistic or cultural minority and for this reason should be eligible for the rights that other minorities also enjoy.

This development leads to pressing and intriguing questions. Some examples:

1. Sign language or speech vision?

Since the inception of deaf education, there has been a debate over what deaf children in school should be taught: sign language or speech vision? Or both, but in what proportion? The recognition of sign languages as languages in their own right did influence the discussion, but did not signify its end. Positions in the discussion go back to moral understandings and views regarding deafness, communication group identity, social integration and so on and the role of education in these matters. It makes a difference for example whether deaf education is primarily intended as an introduction to the culture of the deaf, or as a preparation for participation in the shared culture of hearing and deaf people or as an attempt to eliminate as much as possible the adverse effects of deafness as a disability.

2. Rights of parents and children

An everyday environment in which sign language is the mother tongue and is fluently used by everyone is beneficial for the development of deaf children. Such an environment is optimal not only for their linguistic development, but for their overall development. After all, it is an environment where nothing is wrong with them. For this reason, some deaf advocate that children who are born deaf to hearing parents, should be placed out of their homes and entrust deaf foster parents with their upbringing and daily care. This view presupposes certain interpretations and valuations regarding, among other things, the interests and rights of deaf people, the interests and rights of parents, and the relationship between the interests and rights of children and those of parents. But this is equally true of the opposite view: that children belong with their natural parents anyway, including deaf children with their hearing parents.

3. Cochlear implant

Technological advancements complicate discussions. According to many, the development of the cochlear implant (CI) is a godsend for the deaf. It is an advanced hearing aid that allows the deaf to hear something. The expectation is that with further development of the technology, more and more hearing can be heard thanks to the CI. Not all deaf people are enthusiastic. One of the concerns among the deaf is that the existence of the CI introduces new ideas that deafness is a defect and sign language is a surrogate language.

When young deaf children are given a CI, the development of auditory memory, phonetic vocabulary, speech and the like come at the expense of learning sign language. When older deaf children receive a CI, intensive hearing training is required to derive any benefit from it. The question of whether it is worth it -whether CI is worth these costs and difficulties-, is the subject of discussion in which the differences of insight and opinion go back to divergent moral views on deafness, language, identity integration and emancipation. Adult deaf people can choose for themselves whether they want CI, but deaf children, of course, do not. Who decides for the deaf child? Suppose the deaf child has deaf parents who are convinced of the added value of being deaf. May the parents then decide for their child that it remains deaf? Or suppose the deaf child has hearing parents who see being deaf as a defect. May the parents then decide for their child that everything should be done to "remedy" his deafness as much as possible and that he himself will also have to do everything to cooperate in this?