

# Family support from 320 BC to 1951 AD

**Ted Moore** delves into his records to share historical family support details

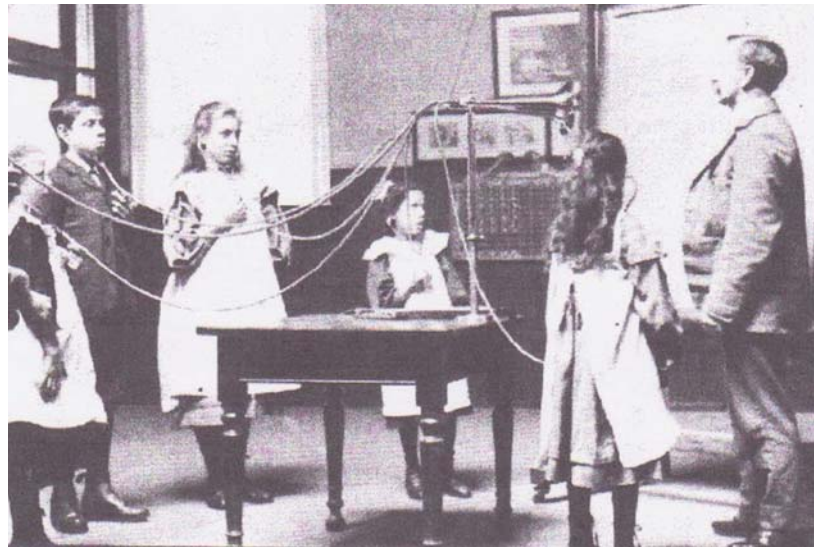
We live in a world heavily reliant on technology: the internet, mobile phones, television, cars, printers, etc., and for people with poor hearing: digital hearing aids, newborn hearing screening, compact pure tone audiometers, cochlear implants, bone-anchored auditory implants, radio systems, etc.

Even if we go back some 70 years or so, none of these were available, or at least they were undeveloped by current standards. So was family support available for deaf children before 1951? If so, how does it compare with 2021? That's for you to decide!

Going back to Greek and Roman times, children with a hearing loss were generally cast as 'deaf and dumb'. Aristotle (354–322 BC) stated "Those who are born deaf all become senseless and incapable of reason". And St Augustine (354–430 AD) considered deaf children as "forever deprived of the heavenly blessings of the Faith". Roman beliefs were that since deaf people had no intelligence, they had no legal rights. And that was the way it was until in 16th-century Spain there were problems over inheritance. Those who couldn't speak couldn't inherit. One way round this was for the rich to employ a tutor who could teach speech to the deaf heir.

It seemed to work and so there was a slow modification of these ventures, and by the 18th century some education was being provided by way of individual teaching for young deaf children by entrepreneurs who were able to coax money out of aristocratic families.

Subsequently, it appears that the success of these early ventures into deaf children's education started the idea that schools for deaf children might be a profitable enterprise. So, by the 19th century, schools for the deaf were created, presumably from a mixture of philanthropic and mercenary motives. However, some sources suggest



that a number of them became overcrowded and, to some extent, no better than glorified workhouses. See Charles Dickens!

**Questions:** So, what about the vast majority of deaf children? What sort of life did those children have? What constituted 'deafness'? Were the parents consumed, once a diagnosis had been made, with sadness, disappointment and/or guilt? What did, or could, children's parents do to help them? How did they communicate? Did s/he go to school? Was s/he isolated from their local

communities? How did s/he cope with loneliness and being the butt of the inevitable bullies? When old enough, did s/he engage in some form of work? If so, what form of work? What was his/her life expectancy?

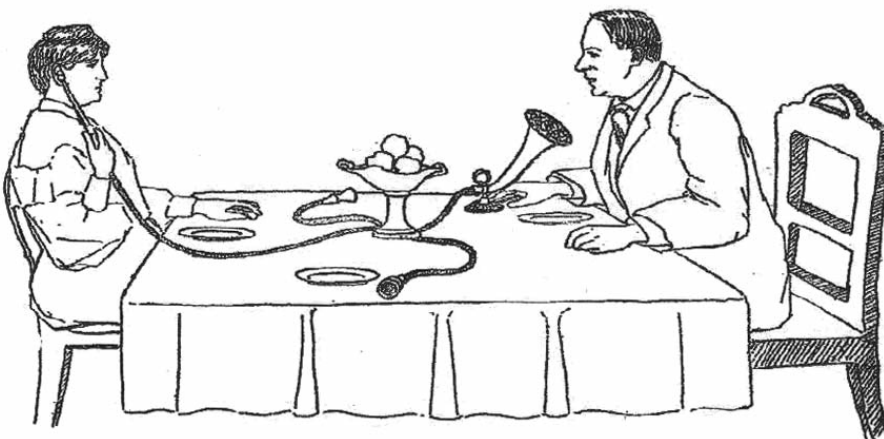
Perhaps one can only guess.

Nonetheless, the number of schools for deaf children continued to grow. A survey in 1904 states that there were 2,200 deaf children in boarding schools and 1,100 in day schools in England.

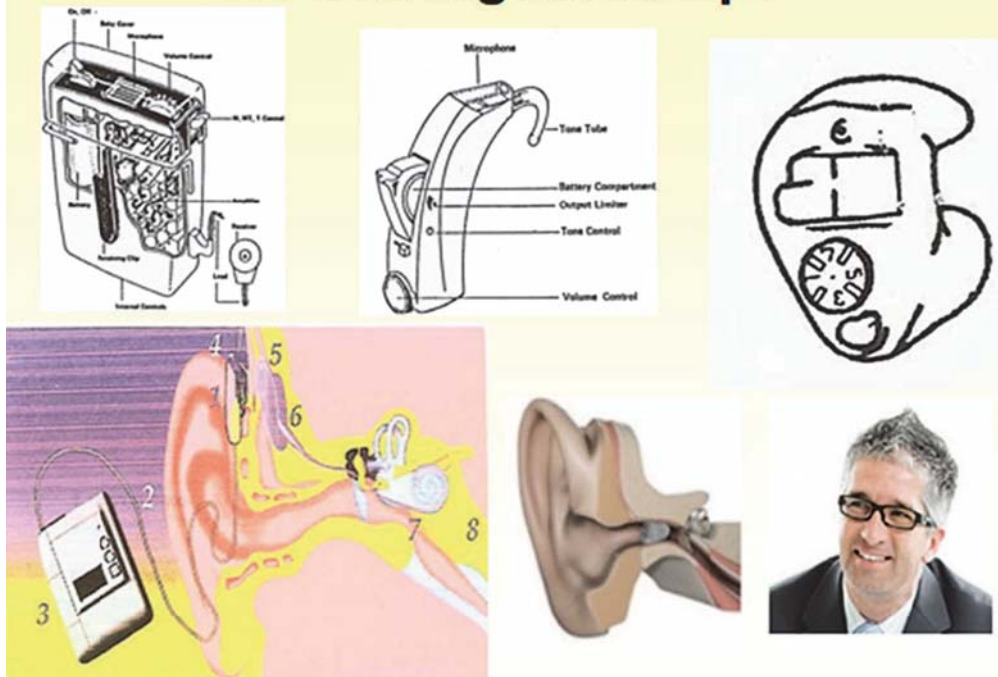
**Questions:** So, what was being taught? What contact did the children have with parents? What contact did the parents have with the school? Did deaf children become cheap labour?

It became apparent to a doctor called James Kerr Love (1855–1942) that there was a strong need for early education, ie before three years of age, as this was the time that foundations in the development of language (spoken and signed) were crucial.

But it seems that engaging all deaf (and those with other 'handicaps') children in education was still illusory.



## Do hearing aids help?



Flora Thompson wrote in Larkrise to Candleford that in her village in the early 1900s *"Candleford Green had its own village idiot in the form of a young man who had been a deaf mute. At birth he was probably not mentally deficient ... and as a child been allowed to run wild while other children were in school, and the isolation and the absence of communicating with his fellows had told upon him ... He was known as Luney Joe. Some years later, after his mother's death, he was sent to the County Asylum."*

So what was to be done? In 1913 the Board of Education published figures relating to six million children in public elementary schools in England and Wales. The outcome was awful: 5% suffered from 'defective hearing' and 3% from 'suppurating ears'. There were other categories, the chief of which was that 50% suffered from 'injurious

decay of the teeth'.

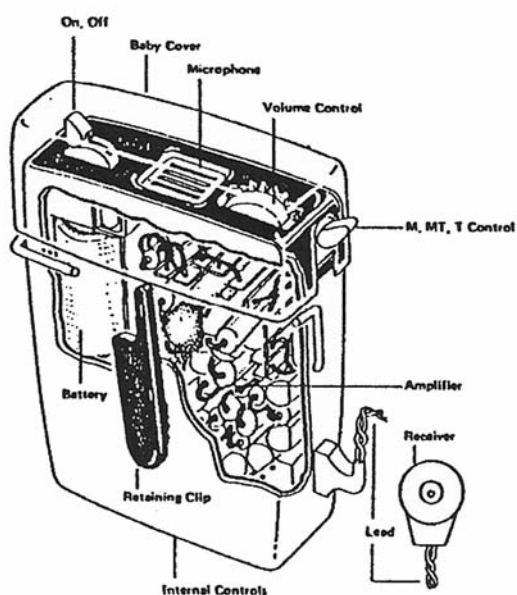
**Questions:** Who at this time diagnosed a child as having hearing difficulties? How 'scientific' were the tests of hearing? At what age? On diagnosis, who was involved with the family to discuss educational issues? Who agreed payment for a deaf child to attend a residential school?

But this period also saw the beginning of the involvement of deaf children's families in their education. In 1912, the first 'peripatetic' Teacher of the Deaf (ToD) was appointed to work with very young deaf children and their families, which led to the first nursery school for deaf children in the same year.

The first residential infant school for deaf children at the Royal School for the Deaf in Manchester, was established in 1913, with Miss I.R. Goldsack as teacher-in-charge, later to become Lady Irene Ewing. Then came two World Wars, but some people still strove to improve matters.

Greenaway, E.S., Head of Yorkshire School for the Deaf, Doncaster, in the ToD Journal August 1943 writes: *Naturally parents are reluctant to be parted from their children at the early age of 2 years. We have already learned that each parting causes little or no distress on the part of the child and any distress on the part of the parents is more than compensated by the real pleasure they soon obtain in watching the child's rapid progress and development mentally, physically and socially.*

He sent out a questionnaire to parents and gave some







Gradually, technology began to develop. There were hopes that the development of hearing aids would begin to make a lot of difference. The early individual hearing aids

were bulky and not easily portable, so various types of group aids were used in schools. It wasn't until 1936 that the first wearable hearing aid using vacuum-tube technology went on sale in England. But these were not easily available, comparatively expensive and quite heavy. Then the real breakthrough came in 1948 when transistors came into being, the NHS was formed and the hearing aids (Medresco) were available to all. No charge! But these were unfortunately not accessible to those who couldn't afford them until 1948 when the NHS was formed.

In 1943 at the other end of school life (14–16) came the question of what happened next? A questionnaire led to 151 replies.

examples of how parents felt and reported back:

*D.S. Age of admission 2.0. Mother could do nothing with him at home. He settled down at once and has given no unusual trouble.*

*J.S. Age of admission 2.8. A delicate child on admission with troublesome temper. Within a few months was a robust child with a happy disposition and extremely self reliant.*

But, as a matter of interest, some 40 years later, Nolan & Tucker (1988) in *The Hearing Impaired Child and the Family* suggest that:

*Initially we are strongly of the opinion that it is sound policy to 'place' the child in the educational environment of the home, as we do not recommend, as a general rule, early nursery placement.*

**Questions:** Have things moved on since then to the present day? Are parents able to be full-time carers or do they need to go to work?

At the same time (1930s/1940s) there became the problem of where could deaf children go when they reached the age of five. The only option, for geographical reasons, came whereby a large number of the over fives had to go to residential schools.

But in the 1940s there were the overriding concerns of World War II, when schools for the Deaf in the vulnerable position of being bombed or near invasion points, had to move elsewhere. This caused parental difficulties over distance from home and transport, eg Gorleston School for the Deaf, Norfolk moved to Glyn Neath, Wales.

Maybe they were safer there, but personal contact was extremely difficult. Imagine yourself in the position of the deaf child, waiting expectantly, or hopefully, that at assembly there would be a letter from home.

**Question:** How would you feel if there was no post for you, after a week or more, whilst others got several letters?



Vocational training after the age of 16:

- 82 parents expressed a desire for further education.
- 50 parents expressed an objection to further training.
- 19 gave no opinion.

As there were no family allowances, it is likely that this was the reason that some families voted against further education.

Nellie McDonald (who was in charge of pre-school classes of the hearing impaired in Canada in October 1950) said in a talk to parents, doctors and teachers *"I fully understand the heartbreak, the black despair and the resentment of the first few months after deafness is suspected"*. But she also added that one parent had said to her *"I no longer have time to weep, question or resent. I'm a very busy woman. My time is occupied transporting Jackie, training him, reading, studying, attending parents' classes, housekeeping, being a mother to my other children. But, there are tears buried deep in my heart"*.

Miss McDonald went on to make the following suggestions for parents of pre-schoolers:

- Hold monthly meetings for parents, allowing for talks, questions and discussions;
- Discussion/instruction can be given regarding hearing equipment, communication, and the use and development of language;
- Some time should be given to getting parents to work/play, under supervision, with their child.
- Invite parents of deaf babies not yet in school to observe what is going on.
- Have a parents' library.

**Questions:** How common was this arrangement in 1950 in the UK? To what extent did the parents have a say in how their child was to be educated? What options were there?

By the 1940s/1950s some residential schools for the Deaf encouraged parents to take their children home every weekend: but could they afford it? How far away was the school? Did local authorities pay for transport? If no

means of transport could be found, children had to stay at school and only go home for the main school holidays: how did parents manage to make contact with the school? How was correspondence dealt with? Many parents did not have a phone, so letters were the main way of getting in touch, but of course this involved the problem of time gaps between question and response.

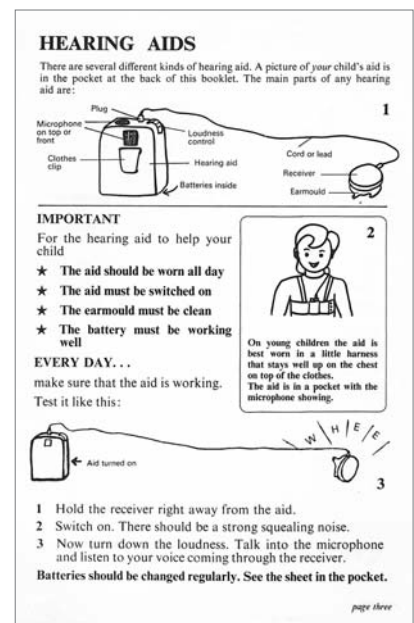
But not all deaf children were

attending residential schools for the Deaf. Not all deaf children had the same needs – totally deaf, partially hearing, born deaf, acquired deafness, conductive and sensori-neural deafness. It must be remembered, too, that at his time the causes of deafness, meningitis, rubella, prematurity, syndromes and rhesus incompatibility, etc were all widespread.

But parents to the fore! The National Deaf Children's Society was founded in London on 15 December 1944 by a handful of parents of deaf children concerned about the impact of the **1944 Education Act** on their schooling.

The Society published its first information resource for parents called 'If Your Child is Deaf', followed by the first monthly course to help parents support deaf children. In the 1950s the Society launched its first magazine for parents called 'Talk'.

Irene Ewing (1951): *The old idea that the education of a child was brought about mainly inside the school has passed. Today, education is thought of as a preparation for life. In ordinary circumstances a child lives and learns as much or more in the home as in the school. Parents everywhere are realising that the best preparation for living can only be given to a child when school and home co-operate in their aims.*



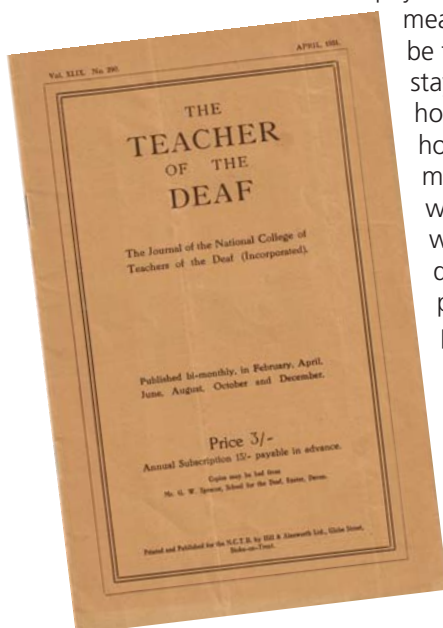
From a booklet *Helping your Child at Home* courtesy of the Ewing Foundation distributed through the NCTD.

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Ted Moore is a former president of BATOD and former Head of Oxfordshire Sensory Support Service.



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