



Understanding CODAs: A Professional Introduction

An evidence-informed starting point for inclusive practice, family communication and culturally respectful assessment.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

All professionals

A practical professional resource to support respectful, individualised practice with Children of Deaf Adults and their families. CODA identity is not itself a diagnosis, deficit, safeguarding indicator or support need.

SCOPE AND STATUS

This is general professional guidance, not legal advice, a statutory procedure or a substitute for local safeguarding policies. Duties differ across England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland. Verify local requirements before applying this resource.

Understanding the term CODA

CODA means Child of Deaf Adults and commonly refers to hearing people with one or more Deaf parents; usage and personal identification vary. Some adult CODAs use the term throughout life, while other people discover it later or prefer different descriptions. Do not assume a young person identifies with the term without asking.

There is no standard CODA family experience: families may communicate using BSL, ISL, other national sign languages, speech, writing or varied approaches. Identity may include Deaf and hearing cultures, languages, disability perspectives, heritage and other intersections.

- Ask how each parent wishes to communicate, rather than inferring it from hearing status.
- Speak directly to the parent and the child in age-appropriate ways.
- Respect whether the child chooses to describe themselves as a CODA.

Strengths without stereotypes

A multilingual or bicultural childhood can involve distinctive skills, relationships and connections. Avoid romanticising children as naturally mature, gifted interpreters or bridge-builders: these are stereotypes, not individual assessments.

Professionals should understand strengths and needs through ordinary, proportionate assessment and discussion, not through a Deaf-parent checklist.

- Recognise family routines and achievements.
- Avoid describing Deafness as a parenting deficit.
- Distinguish a language or communication barrier created by a service from a concern about the family.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

Would I reach the same conclusion about this child if their parent were hearing and the service had arranged accessible communication?

Identity, belonging and transitions

Young CODAs may encounter questions from peers about parents, signing or different family routines. Some enjoy explaining; others prefer privacy. Identity can shift at puberty, moving schools, entering adulthood and becoming a parent themselves.

Access to CODA peers can offer shared social experiences; children should never be pressured into discussing private family information.

- Ask the child what information, if any, they would like shared with peers.
- Provide normal access to friendship, clubs and extracurricular activities.
- Check for bullying using the same evidence-based approach as for any child.

Practical approach across services

Identify communication needs at first contact and review when needed. Ensure Deaf adults receive letters, meetings and decisions in a usable format; use suitable qualified interpreters where indicated. A child is not the service communication plan.

Ensure that family records capture preferences rather than assumptions and that relevant team members can act on them while protecting confidentiality.

- Check preferred language and format privately with each parent.
- Arrange accessible appointments in advance; explain how to request changes.
- Document the child's views separately from adult views where relevant.

PRACTICE SCENARIO

At a school consultation, a child starts interpreting a sensitive discussion. Pause, explain that the school will arrange appropriate communication support, reschedule if necessary and offer accessible follow-up.

Working with uncertainty

Use curiosity and care rather than generalisations. A concern may relate to school, peers, health, family stress or ordinary developmental changes; a CODA label never determines its cause.

Listen to Deaf parents as experts in their family lives and ensure accessible participation in assessments, meetings and decisions.

- Record observable evidence, not stereotypes.
- Consult relevant colleagues on reasonable adjustments, communication support and safeguarding.
- Reflect on cultural competence and unconscious bias in supervision.

Professional references and further reading

Equality Act 2010 / reasonable adjustment guidance (Great Britain) — <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reasonable-adjustments-a-legal-duty/reasonable-adjustments-a-legal-duty>

NHS England, Accessible Information Standard (2025 revision) — <https://www.england.nhs.uk/accessible-information-standard/>

Irish Sign Language Act 2017, sections 3, 6 and 7 (Ireland) — <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/40/enacted/en/html>

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child — <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

PUBLICATION REVIEW NOTE

For public publication, arrange review by suitably experienced Deaf community representatives, CODAs and the relevant education, clinical or safeguarding leads. Re-check current law, policy and organisational procedures at the time of use.