

Safeguarding deaf children with DeafKidz International

Stuart Harrison gives us an insight to his recent work with DeafKidz International

DeafKidz International (DKI) was founded in 2014 in response to the abuse of deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, DKI is emerging as the global leader for the protection and safeguarding of deaf children and young people.

DKI's work has evidenced that as many as 2 in 10 children in low- and middle-income countries are deaf. Hearing loss amongst 75% of children under 15, is attributable to preventable causes (WHO). The impact of deafness on children is life changing. Due to low levels of newborn hearing screening, few children are properly assessed, and many are perceived as 'retarded' or 'stupid'. They are four times more likely to experience neglect and abuse (UNICEF).

DKI has a responsibility to protect deaf children and young people. Our strategic focus and operating model is designed to do just that, centred on four key objectives:

- **Screening** – We want all children to be screened for hearing loss as early as possible so that they are not wrongly labelled and are able to reduce their risk and vulnerability to stigma.

- **Communication** – We want to ensure that deaf children and young people can communicate in the method of their choice. Families, statutory officials/services and healthcare services need support to understand and learn to communicate in sign language, sign supported spoken language or aural methods depending on the child's choice.
- **Parents & Families** – We want all fathers and mothers of deaf children to understand how to parent positively deaf children. We especially work to ensure parents make informed choices on accessing education and that the schooling they receive is bilingual, bicultural and appropriate to their needs.
- **Victims & Survivors** – We want to prevent abuse from happening and to ensure fair access to the criminal justice system for those who do become victims. The global justice system, overall, is unsuited to supporting deaf victims of abuse, it lacks the capacity and understanding to interact with this constituency.

Funded by organisations such as DFID through its UK Aid Direct programme, Comic Relief and the Oak Foundation,





DKI is currently working in India, Iraq, Pakistan, South Africa and Jamaica whilst developing new programmatic interventions in Jordan and Syria.

I joined DKI in 2015 to assist in the establishment of its programmatic work with two projects in South Africa and Jamaica. My main remit with the organisation has always been safeguarding. My involvement in safeguarding training began in the mid-1990s delivering training for the National Coaching Foundation (now UK Coaching).

During 2015 – 2016, funded by Comic Relief, I made three research visits to South Africa to determine the situation of safeguarding deaf children and their access to child helplines with Child Helpline South Africa being our main partner. I visited schools for the deaf, social services, helpline services, deaf organisations and members of the criminal justice system from front line police officers to barristers. Our findings were published as our first piece of research "Behind the Green Door". On my first visit I was accompanied by Steve Crump, founder of DKI and on another visit by Emma Gilbert, who is now a Detective Inspector with the Greater Manchester Police and the national co-ordinator of the UK PLOD service (Police Liaison Officers for the Deaf)

At around the same time, we began a second Comic Relief funded project with the Jamaica Association of the Deaf

who are based in Kingston and run schools for the deaf throughout the island. Our project was to enable the organisation to build its capacity to safeguard children and young people and we did this by providing training for deaf and hearing school staff, parents and key members of the deaf community. They were also joined by relevant officers from the social services and the constabulary. School staff and parents were taught how to recognise signs of abuse and how to report appropriately to statutory services. They in turn were made aware of the needs of deaf children and young people at every stage of the safeguarding process from disclosure to the conclusion of an investigation and/or prosecution. In the second year of the project, DI Gilbert and I delivered training to the Chief Justice and her magistrates to enable them to make the court systems fully accessible to both deaf victims, witnesses and perpetrators of abuse to ensure that all were safeguarded, and fair trials are given.

To me, the most important piece of the work in Jamaica was ensuring that deaf children and young people themselves understood their rights to be safeguarded and to live without fear of violence. We provided ideas and resources to enable school staff to deliver safeguarding awareness training at both primary and secondary schools, delivered through curriculum-based activities (bespoke storybooks) and sport/physical activities. To demonstrate

their understanding of safeguarding, child protection and abuse, the schools came together for a national Dance festival based on the theme of Safeguarding. School staff were trained by dance specialists to devise dance routines with the children who then performed to a packed-out theatre in front of their peers, parents, families and local dignitaries including the British Ambassador. The standard of performances by both primary and secondary students was outstanding as they clearly demonstrated their understanding of the concept.

As a result of this intervention, adults modified their behaviour appropriately and students came forward to report allegations that were investigated. DKI is now mid-way into its second project in Jamaica, working with girls and women on gender-based violence through a dance and martial arts based education programme which, once proven, will be cascaded across DKI's developing global footprint. Indeed, DKI is preparing to conduct a General Based Violence (GBV) pilot in Iraq with Islamic Relief.

Our initial investigations in South Africa enabled us to establish another safeguarding project, this time with Child Line South Africa, ensuring that deaf children and young people were aware of their rights and had access to the helpline services and their outreach programmes. This also cascaded to other helplines in sub-Saharan Africa including Zimbabwe and Kenya and we continue to support good practice through the international umbrella organisation, Childline Helpline International, based in Amsterdam.

Our work at DKI, the safeguarding of deaf children is not

*'...the fastest growing charity in the UK'
Dr. Dan Brockington, University of Sheffield*

*'I praise the work of DeafKidz International'.
Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, Secretary of State for International
Development, in the House of Commons, May 2018.*

confined to the narrow parameter of child protection but ensuring that they have access to education and other statutory or Non Government Organisation (NGO) delivered services and protected from the ever present threats associated with unstable environments; conflict, sex / slave trafficking and the witchcraft body parts trade. Current programmes in South Africa and India, are working to deliver safeguarding activities to deaf children through the medium of football with Tackle Africa and Slum Soccer respectively. Our early identification and screening project in Pakistan is also delivered within a safeguarding construct.

My colleagues at DKI are currently working with a number of partners to develop a range of digital resources which will empower deaf children to reduce their risk and vulnerability to abuse. After two years of intensive research and development in South Africa, Jamaica and the UK, we've arrived at a learning framework that is to be cascaded globally through four scaling partners. Titled 'DeafKidz Defenders' this initiative will make a difference to the lives of thousands of deaf children.

For more on DKI's work, visit
www.deafkidzinternational.org



Stuart Harrison is a qualified Teacher of the Deaf and now works as a Senior Consultant for DeafKidz International www.deafkidzinternational.org He is also a founder Director of Deaf & Hearing Trailblazers CIC www.dhtrailblazers.co.uk and is currently Events Director for the World Deaf Golf Championships 2020 www.wdgc2020.com. Vice President of UK Deaf Sport www.ukdeafsport.org he has two books in print 'Same Spirit Different Team; The Politicisation of the Deaflympics' and 'You Can Do It! The FYD Story' and a blog at www.big-ears.org

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