

British Sign Language (BSL) Toolkit for Practitioners

Section 7

This section covers:

7. Engaging with education, settings and schools
 - 7.1 Information for staff in settings and schools
 - 7.2 Involving British Sign Language users in the wider life and work of the setting or school

7. Engaging with education, settings and schools

As mentioned previously, around 96% of Deaf children are born to hearing families and approximately 86% attend a mainstream school ([Mitchell and Karchmer, 2004, Annual surveys of Deaf children – CRIDE UK-wide surveys](#)). Developing positive relationships and involving all parents in their children's learning and the wider life of the school is central to raising attainment.

Partners

There are a range of practitioners and partners who will be able to work in partnership with settings and schools to support British Sign Language users and carers. These include:

- British Sign Language users from Deaf community and professionals
- Deaf teachers
- Deaf role models e.g. Deaf professionals
- British Sign Language teachers
- Parents and families who use and/or have knowledge of British Sign Language
- Teachers of Deaf children
- Settings/schools/units with Deaf pupils
- Local authority staff
- Local colleges and universities
- Community resources e.g. Scottish Sensory Centre
- National Deaf organisations

Additionally, there are a range of national organisations provided at the back of this Toolkit who can help support practitioners working with British Sign Language users in their setting or school (See Appendix 2).

Parents and families

Communication is a key element to ensure effective engagement with British Sign Language users.

Practitioners working with BSL families should consider whether they are:

- A Deaf/Deafblind parent of Deaf/Deafblind children
- A Deaf/Deafblind parent of hearing children
- A hearing parent of Deaf/Deafblind children

The ability of Deaf BSL users to understand the English language will vary and be dependent on the individual. For some BSL users, English is their second language. Learning to read and/or write in any language can be complex. Many Deaf parents may lack confidence with English for a number of reasons. As mentioned in Section 4, these include:

- not receiving early support when they themselves were in the 0-5 age group
- their parents (if Deaf) not having communication with Teachers of Deaf children
- teaching methods in settings and schools may not have used BSL
- Teachers of Deaf children may previously only have had minimal BSL skills

A lack of or limited literacy skills amongst many Deaf parents means that they have much less access to information about how systems like Education work. Information is not passed on for example at the school gate which can often be a common source of intelligence for hearing parents. Schools need to be aware of this so that they can pass on important information which other parents are likely to find out through conversations.

Additionally, some BSL users who do read and write English, may have partners at home who do not. Information sent home should therefore be in an easy to understand and accessible format whilst avoiding the use of jargon. Furthermore, as already mentioned in Section 4, it should be remembered that not all words translate from English to BSL and vice-versa. Individuals all have their own preferred method(s) of receiving information and this will be dependent on their needs and circumstances. **It is crucial that BSL families are explicitly asked about what their specific communication needs and preferences are.** For instance:

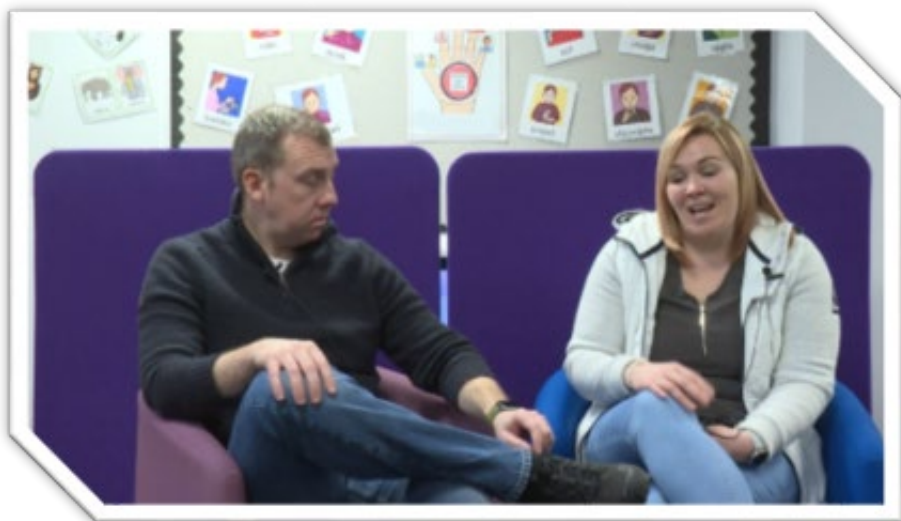
- While some Deaf parents are highly literate, others will prefer plain English email communications.
- Some may like to have ways of getting letters home translated (as already happens with other community languages), through a setting or school's existing communication methods and channels, with parents who speak other languages at home.
- Some Deaf parents may prefer to communicate via a BSL interpreter either in person or online. Local authorities may have access to their own interpreting service.

Communication options could include:

- British Sign Language – in person (BSL/English interpreter) or online via [Contact Scotland BSL](#). It should be noted that Contact Scotland do not provide a service whereby written communications from settings or schools are translated or interpreted for BSL users.
- Written English or other language
- Spoken e.g. English or other language
- Both written and signed language

Further information can be found on the British Deaf Association Scotland's [website](#).

As with many families across Scotland, parents may, for a variety of reasons, have children who attend different schools in the same authority or indeed local authorities out with their catchment area. Engaging with families may therefore present more challenges.



Allowing time and space to understand the individual needs of families is a key starting point from which to build relationships and create a foundation upon which the home-school partnership can grow (Hunt et al, 2011).

Care should be taken in the early days of building relationships to ensure that assumptions about parents and families are not made without firstly obtaining a holistic overview of their individual circumstances, challenges and/or barriers. Ensuring families feel valued, included, understood and listened to is a vital component to developing and maintaining effective and meaningful relationships.

Families with Deaf children may engage with their child's learning at home through various methods. These can include:

- social media platforms;
- sharing images/photos from the class teacher about their learning;
- having a conversation with their child(ren);
- going through the school newsletter(s) with their child;
- reading diary notes (home diary) or subtitled video from the class teacher about what their child has been learning, or via online communications. There is a range of video relay agencies available.

Ideas to consider:

- Would it be possible to partner with a setting or school, BSL teacher, local college, national Deaf organisations or community partner(s) to provide parents and families in the school community the opportunity to learn British Sign Language together as a family and support the development of a shared language?
- Can staff undertake professional learning to help them work effectively with families who use British Sign Language?
- How can your setting or school support families who adopt and/or foster Deaf children?

Children

Children and young people may face barriers to their learning for a variety of different reasons. Deaf children who use BSL could encounter similar barriers but at the same time also experience completely different and/or additional barriers to their learning. Deaf children face barriers to learning because their communication needs are often not being met effectively. One main barrier that deaf children face is

because they do not have language in the earliest years.

Many Deaf children from signing families need a BSL environment and access to staff who can use the language fluently.

Recognising the need for a specific intervention(s) to help staff support Deaf children and overcome any barriers is important to ensure they can achieve and attain throughout their learning journey.

British Sign Language can be used effectively to support children and ensure they understand the purpose of their

learning but also to engage effectively with their peers. Further information is available [here](#).

Children who are deaf can develop their knowledge and understanding through a range of approaches. This can include learning more about being deaf, Deaf culture and identity. Additionally, staff, former pupils, Teachers of Deaf children, visitors or Deaf role models can all support children to learn about Deaf culture and identity. This will in turn reduce feelings of isolation, build their confidence and overcome any barriers to learning which they may encounter.

Deaf children in the care system

'Deaf children involved with child welfare systems are often overlooked both in terms of tracking and service delivery. These systems frequently do not offer accessible and equitable services to deaf children' (Bowman, 2018, p348). Furthermore, Deaf children in the care system may not have fluent BSL in the children's home, setting or in the family in which they are placed. They may have trauma from their earliest life experiences.



When working with Deaf children in the care system, it is particularly important for schools to:

- be aware of ways to provide and/or enhance the BSL skills of caregivers;
- signpost to BSL learning services;
- recognise the need for skilled bilingual Deaf mental health practitioners and care workers;
- provide mentoring and transitions support;
- provide deaf children with Deaf role models so that they can develop confidence in their Deaf identity.

Planning meetings for Deaf children in the care system should use a GIRFEC approach and have consistent representation from all agencies so that the parents and caregivers can build trust over time. The families will need support before any meetings are held. As a Deaf child progresses into the upper stages of primary school, they will also need support to represent themselves at planning meetings. Education is often the agency providing consistent support and it can encourage other bodies to do the same. This is also true for Deaf children from other families who need a lot of support. For example, families with refugee parents, families who are hearing but do not use English at home, families who are Gypsy Travellers, or who have a parent in prison.

Multi agency work with Deaf children needs to consider BSL services throughout a child's learning journey.

Ideas to consider:

- In what ways can you support Deaf children in the care system who attend your setting or school?
- Teaching basic BSL to children across the setting or school, particularly where there are Deaf BSL pupils. Where possible, this should be undertaken by a qualified BSL teacher.
- BSL could be included as part of the policy or [1+2 approach](#) to language learning as an L3 (second additional language).
- Deaf children are encouraged to organise and lead school clubs e.g. lunch time club for other pupils (hearing and/or deaf). This would support Deaf children to engage and communicate with their peers.
- Inviting Deaf parents and/or fluent British Sign Language users to relate conversations and stories to all pupils using BSL. However, it may be necessary to pay for a BSL/English interpreter.
- Raising awareness of and promoting BSL as a valued language across the whole school community on an ongoing basis throughout the year including from outside education e.g. BDA's [Deaf Roots and Pride Project](#). Case study examples include [Moorfoot Primary School](#) and [St Rochs Secondary School](#).
- Providing opportunities for all pupils to develop their confidence and skills in BSL in mainstream classes. The [BSL Glossaries of Curriculum Terms](#) can be used in mainstream science classes to teach children scientific concepts which they can learn and remember kinesthetically with BSL.
- Providing other opportunities for children to showcase their skills in the setting or school e.g. class activities, assemblies, concerts. Consideration could also be given to attending Deaf theatres, drama groups or the BDA's online [Glasgow City Heritage Trail](#). Should settings or schools consider using BSL signed songs, a fluent Deaf BSL user should translate the songs to BSL and practise these with the children involved eg a choir.
- Provide opportunities for all hearing children to gain accreditation at Levels 1-6 in BSL. Further information about SCQF 3-6 units is available on the Scottish Qualification Authority's [website](#).
- Provide opportunities for Deaf children to achieve up to and including SCQF 7 BSL accreditation.
- Ensuring there is a strong approach to inclusion in ways which are relevant for children to learn about equality and diversity. For example, including:
 - Deaf history when studying history;
 - Deaf role models when looking at leadership in assemblies;
 - Poetry and storytelling by Deaf authors;
 - Deaf senior citizens at events with Deaf children who can interact with them.
- Introducing Deaf Studies into the curriculum rationale.
- Ensuring all whole school events have a qualified BSL/English interpreter. Consideration should be given about where the BSL/English interpreter should be positioned. Further information on working with an interpreter can be found [here](#).

7.1 Information for staff in settings and schools

British Sign Language users identified the following as being important for staff in settings and schools to help support them and their Deaf child:

General

- Quality liaison must take place with the allocated Teacher of Deaf children and parents to know and understand the needs and culture of deaf children before they start an early learning and childcare setting or school. It is also important to know the needs of the family and any relevant background circumstances.
- Taking a [Getting it Right for Every Child](#) approach is necessary to ensure the holistic needs of the child and their family are met. Individualised Education Programme (IEPs) and a Child's Plan are often structured using SHANARRI indicators.
- Not all Deaf people use BSL, neither are they proficient in it.
- Families from other countries use a different sign language to BSL and may/may not understand English. It may be an idea to explore with parents and families which signed, written or spoken language(s) are used at home.
- BSL families need to be aware of their rights and have the full range of information. Ensuring that national policies, strategies and frameworks are available in [Easy Read](#) or BSL translation is important to ensure parents and families are aware of their rights. For additional support needs, parents and families could be signposted to [Enquire](#) (Scotland's advice service for additional support for learning) which has some information available in BSL. See below for further information*.
- **Repeating/explaining information to practitioners is a tiring process. This is exacerbated at times because the child's ability (particularly younger children) to communicate with staff in BSL is limited.** In addition to this, there can be a high turnover of staff in settings and schools. This can intensify the barriers for Deaf BSL users who regularly have to return to the beginning to help practitioners build their understanding of the situation. Ideally, it would be good to have a Deaf Teacher of Deaf children. However, in the interim, Local authorities may wish to consider having a qualified and registered BSL/English interpreter who can support and communicate with BSL families in settings and schools.
- Costs for families to learn BSL so that they can communicate with their Deaf child.
- The Scottish Qualification Authority offer [qualifications](#) in BSL for pupils to learn the language.
- Deaf BSL users in Scotland can use BSL for [exams](#).



*Further information:

- [Planning your child's support: working together with the school](#)
- [Understanding school placements and making a placing request](#)
- [Extra support in exams](#)
- [Rights of children aged 12 - 15](#)

British Sign Language users who are looking for advice from Enquire can submit a [webform](#) or [email](#) with their request. A date/time will then be arranged to contact them and a BSL/English interpreter will be provided.

Children's learning

- **Involving a Deaf child(ren) in British Sign Language from the start is critical.**
- Tactile BSL for Deafblind.
- Close liaison with the allocated Teacher of Deaf children to inform all learning and teaching.
- Local authorities should consider providing free opportunities for families to learn BSL.
- Informing parents in advance what topic their child is learning so that they can support this at home.
- Appropriate communication support in and beyond the classroom should be provided for all signing Deaf children. BSL users struggle to ask for support in class if they are not confident, are unable to communicate with the teacher, or if support has not been provided in class.
- Liaising with established Deaf schools across the UK who can provide curriculum support and advise on suitable resources. Schools in Scotland include: [Calderside Academy](#), [Windsor Park School and Sensory Centre](#), [Aberdeen School for the Deaf](#) and [Hamilton School for the Deaf](#), [St Rochs Primary School](#), [St Rochs Secondary School](#), [Moorfoot Primary School](#), [Nursery Class and Garvel Deaf Centre](#). See Appendix 1 for further information.
- Settings and schools should ensure there is an emphasis on hands-on practical activities as well as progression which involves complex discussions on curriculum areas.



Extra-curricular activities

- Communication support and better signposting to available groups/venues needs to be in place to allow Deaf children who use BSL and Deafblind children who use Tactile BSL to take part in extra-curricular activities such as sports, Deaf clubs, Deaf Youth Clubs and have access to Deaf role models outside of the setting or school. Further information can be found [here](#).
- **Providing opportunities for all children to attend BSL interpreted events.** For example, if you have a signing Deaf child in the setting or school and are planning to attend a pantomime each year, consider asking the company if performances are already, or can be provided in BSL.

Friendships

- British Sign Language users generally have more friends in lower stages of primary but fewer in the upper stages and in secondary. Children, both Deaf and hearing, need support to develop relationships.
- **Provide opportunities for Deaf children to meet other Deaf children at a local and national level informally and at organised events e.g. British Deaf Association Scotland and National Deaf Children Society Scotland events.** For example, regular meetings on an online platform could be arranged between a Deaf child from a Deaf family and a Deaf child from a hearing family.
- As a starting point, consider having a regular toddlers group to provide opportunities for parents to meet and socialize. It is important to ensure that there is at least one fluent Deaf BSL user and a BSL/English interpreter available at the group. Consideration should be given to potential transport issues that might arise for parents.

Mental health and wellbeing

- British Sign Language users can be motivated and inspired when hearing people are able to communicate with them in BSL.
- Having access to Deaf teachers and Deaf role models throughout their education learning journey is really important for children who use BSL. **The benefits of this approach are that children grow up recognising the skills of Deaf adults and the wider Deaf community. Deaf children will also be able to have conversations with adults who are very fluent in BSL.** This approach will support Deaf children's quality of life and sense of wellbeing.

Resources

- Having suitable story book [resources](#), plain English information books and text books for children and young people are necessary.
- Videos signed using BSL to support learning and understanding.
- Access to resources and understanding of the issues outlined in this Toolkit will support schools to understand the needs of Deaf families.
- There is a need for STEM [language](#) (Science, technology, engineering, mathematics to be translated into BSL. The [British Sign Language Glossaries of Curriculum Terms](#) is a deaf-led project which creates new technical terminology for STEM subjects to support deaf education in the UK ([Cameron, 2020](#)).

Staff

- Staff should be aware of British Sign Language and Deaf culture - see Section 4.
- Clear communication channels with allocated Teacher(s) of deaf children. This will enable better planning for language support.
- **Having staff who can communicate effectively is essential to support BSL families.**
- Need for staff to be trained to SCQF 6 or above in BSL. Many young BSL users become more fluent earlier than the adults who support them. Where that is the case, children often need to adapt their language so that staff can understand what is being said. This is not a good situation for learning and the progress of learners will be limited by the lack of expertise in BSL.
- There is a need for staff teaching BSL to be native users of the language or to be at a minimum of SCQF Level 6. It is recommended that other staff working in schools with groups of Deaf BSL signing children be able to sign at SCQF Level 4 and above where there are BSL users in the school community. Teachers of Deaf children require to be fluent in BSL. Further information is available [here](#).
- **Raising awareness of this Toolkit with staff and signposting them to online and local BSL courses would help them to better support BSL families.**
- It is important that staff know where to access information, help and support for BSL families. For example, the British Deaf Association Scotland, Deaf Action or a social worker with Deaf people.

7.2 Involving British Sign Language users in the wider life and work of the setting or school

Many British Sign Language users would like to be involved in the wider life and work of the setting or school, such as:

- Parent Council
- Improvement Planning
- School events
- Fundraising
- Extra-curricular activities with child/family
- Out of school clubs
- Breakfast clubs
- Family learning
- Classroom helpers
- Open days
- Volunteering e.g. school trips, sharing skill, expertise
- Parents evenings
- Deaf peers, Deaf mentoring support

However, there are a number of challenges which prevents them from doing so. These include:

- Lack of availability of BSL/English interpreters.
- Not feeling confident or able to volunteer and support the setting or school.
- Being unable to engage/communicate with other parents and vice-versa.
- Sign language used in settings or schools not always following British Sign Language.
- Not knowing where/how to fit in, lack of BSL access, attitudes towards BSL.
- Lack of understanding and/or reluctance to ask questions.
- Appointments being cancelled at the last minute due to unavailability of BSL/English interpreters, note takers, or lack of communication.

- Meetings with multiple teachers who may/may not be familiar with accommodating BSL users.
- Requirement to travel distances to access clubs, activities, Deaf role models.

Settings and schools could consider supporting British Sign Language users by:

- Employing a Deaf signing teacher and embracing BSL as a whole school culture.
- Access to BSL/English interpreter(s) and booking these well in advance.
- Liaising effectively with a Teacher of Deaf children who is fluent in BSL and has the necessary skills to support the child or young person.
- Engaging with more Deaf parents.
- Having a support network e.g. provided by the setting or school, online, with other BSL parents, national networks.
- Facilitating online meetings with BSL/English interpreters where appropriate and access to digital devices and internet access permits. This may require training and support initially.
- Providing an email address and/or a mobile number for parents to contact the school regarding any issues.
- Creating a list of local Deaf role models to work with them. This would enable Deaf children and young people to have regular exposure to BSL and Deaf culture and support them to develop their confidence in embracing their Deaf identity.

Reflective Questions:

- What is working well within your setting or school to support BSL users?
- Are there opportunities in your local authority, setting, school or local community for children and parents to learn BSL together as a family?
- Are BSL users in your setting or school able to access information and support in the format most suitable for them? Do they have access to Deaf clubs, Deaf role models, Deaf organisations?
- Do practitioners in your setting or school know how to book and employ BSL/English interpreters?
- Is a list of Deaf schools made available for parents to access if requested?
- Is there a pool of BSL/English interpreters that can be accessed when needed?

