

British Sign Language (BSL) Toolkit for Practitioners

Section 8

This section covers:

- 8. Health and wellbeing
 - 8.1 Supporting Deaf children and young people

8. Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing are important at all times of our lives. Children thrive in situations where they feel safe, secure and respected. Practitioners, family and friends have a strong influence on health and wellbeing and help shape habits and behaviours which can last a lifetime.

The mental health of children who use British Sign Language to communicate, can be affected particularly if they are the only Deaf pupils in the setting or school and are unable to communicate with practitioners and/or form friendships with their peers. Not having access to Deaf role models or being exposed to Deaf culture from an early age can affect the mental health and confidence of Deaf BSL users. Parents and families will undoubtedly be concerned that their child will feel alone and isolated if they are unable to fully participate in routine school and playground communications and activities. Providing BSL learning for hearing pupils will help to reduce incidents of bullying, improve social inclusion, provide better education opportunities and participation for Deaf BSL users.

The purpose of health and wellbeing strategies, programmes, involving Deaf professionals and role models is to help every child feel cared for and valued as an individual. Learning about health and wellbeing will help BSL users to cope with uncertainties in life, have confidence to try new and different things and make the most of opportunities that come along. It will also teach BSL users about:

- mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing;
- planning for choices and changes;
- physical education, activity and sport;
- food and health;
- substance misuse and relationships;
- isolation;
- bullying and harassment;
- sexual health and relationships.

8.1 Supporting Deaf children and young people

Mental health, also known as mental wellbeing, is about how we think, feel and behave. This can range from feeling happy and optimistic to feeling very low and unable to escape negative ways of thinking. If a child appears anxious it is important not to assume you know why. It is important for practitioners e.g. Teachers of Deaf children, Pastoral/Guidance Teacher to check in with children to see if they are able to, or want to share what they are worried about.

Opening up conversations with a child can be a useful place to start. For example, by asking 'How are you feeling at the moment?' or 'It's been a tough time lately. How are you getting on?' Children may prefer to express feelings through a game format, for example the [Balloon game](#).

Younger Deaf children are able to show their emotions but may not be able to identify them. You can help by offering them a possible name for how they are feeling, for example: 'I'm wondering if you are feeling a bit sad just now' or 'are you angry because you can't go on the swings at the moment?'. You can also comment on characters in stories and wonder about what they might be feeling. Having access to Deaf counsellors and/or Arts Therapy should be considered where appropriate. The NHS in Scotland does not currently have a Deaf CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) service but there are qualified Deaf BSL counsellors who do a lot of work with Deaf children and young people.



NHS Lothian provides specialist support for deaf people with mental health problems. This is available to deaf people across Scotland. Further information is available [here](#). Deaf Action provides BSL Health and Wellbeing Support including deaf counselling services. This is available to all adult BSL users living in Scotland. Further information is available on their [website](#).

Practitioners can support Deaf children by helping them find positive ways to express strong feelings. Some children might express their feelings through imaginative play, others might draw, journal, kick a ball against a wall or go for a run. You can also help them to think about what helps them feel better when they are down or upset.

Finding ways for children to stay connected to their friends can help build up and maintain friendships with their peers. These may differ depending on each child and/or family circumstances. BSL videos, programmes, ideas for staying connected, and information about Deaf culture and identity is available on BDA Scotland's Deaf Roots and Pride [website](#).

The wellbeing of children can further be improved by finding small ways to help others. Perhaps they can help a sibling or a peer with their reading, or do an act of kindness for the community, for example send drawings to a local care home as part of an intergenerational project.

If parents are concerned about their child's mental health, they should contact their child's GP. [Parentline](#) can also support with general parenting advice either through their website or their free telephone number – 08000 28 22 33. This helpline can be accessed through [Contact Scotland](#).

Contact Scotland aim to provide a quality, effective and seamless platform in interacting with Deaf and Deafblind BSL users who use and access all business services. They offer a free video relay service for all. Calls can be made to any service provider – public, voluntary or the private sector. Contact Scotland BSL also have online videos which settings or schools may find useful.

Childline support children and young people up to age 19. There is lots of advice and support for children and young people on the [Deaf Zone](#) section of their website.

Reflective questions:

- How do you support the health and wellbeing of Deaf BSL families in your setting, school and at home?
- Do Deaf children have access to a Deaf counsellor or Deaf volunteer if required?

