

British Sign Language (BSL) Toolkit for Practitioners

Section 2

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2. Background

*'We need Scottish education to deliver both **excellence** in terms of ensuring children and young people acquire a broad range of skills and capacities at the highest levels, whilst also delivering **equity** so that every child and young person should thrive and have the best opportunity to succeed, regardless of their social circumstances or additional needs'.*

[\(National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan, 2002, p8\)](#)

Research by the University College London shows that around 1 in 600 Deaf babies are born in the United Kingdom every year. **96% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, the vast majority of whom do not have British Sign Language (BSL) skills.**

BSL is a recognised language under the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, but where there is a lack of communication, this can lead to frustrations between settings, schools, families and at home. Deaf children are 60% more likely to experience mental health problems compared to other children (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dcal/news/2013/may/deaf-children-and-development>). See Sections 7.1 and 8 below for further information.

In 2018/19, an [Annual Survey](#) undertaken by the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE), looked at the education provision for deaf children in Scotland. Responses to this survey were received from 30 services covering 32 local authorities. The findings of the survey showed that there were, at that time, around 3,647 Deaf children in Scotland. This figure highlighted an increase of 8% as compared to the previous academic year.



Figures obtained from the [2019/20 Annual Survey](#) and the [2020/21 Annual Survey](#) would suggest that these numbers reduced to 2,898 and 2,841 respectively. However, given the lower response rate (27 services), it is not possible to determine if there has been a change overall in comparison with previous years.

The 2018/19 and 2020/21 Annual Surveys show the following key findings for school-aged Deaf children in Scotland.

%	2018/19	2020/21
Attending a mainstream school	86	81
Attended a mainstream school with resource provisions	5	5
Attended a special school for deaf children (See Appendix 1)	1	2
Home educated		6
Attended a special school which was not specifically for deaf children	6	6
Deaf children recorded as having an additional support need	22	20
Deaf children using an additional spoken language other than English	7	8

One conclusion which could be drawn from these figures is that **Deaf children are much more likely to use British Sign Language if they are attending a Deaf school or resource base school. This is where a community of Deaf BSL users meet and learn together.** Being deaf should however, not be considered as a learning disability.

Deaf BSL children and young people would be more likely to access Deaf BSL role models who would support them to develop a strong sense of BSL, Deaf culture and identity in Deaf schools and resource base schools. There are thirteen local authorities in Scotland which have such a provision. These are:

- Aberdeen
- Angus
- Dundee
- East Ayrshire
- Falkirk
- Fife
- Glasgow
- Highland
- Inverclyde
- Midlothian
- North Ayrshire
- South Ayrshire
- South Lanarkshire

Local authorities who do not already have a Deaf school or resource base may wish to consider having something similar when planning for Action 13 in the [British Sign Language Plan](#) (2017-23).

Practitioners should be aware of the distinct groups as identified in Action 13 of the [British Sign Language Plan](#) (2017-23). These are: Deaf children/young people with Deaf parents, hearing children with Deaf parents, Deaf children with hearing parents. While many of these groups will have some overlapping needs, practitioners need to know about how Teachers of Deaf children can support with literacy development. This can be due to these distinct groups of children mentioned above, having very different experiences of access to British Sign Language.

This Toolkit sets out the key national legislation and [General Teaching Council for Scotland](#) (GTC Scotland) standards which practitioners should be aware of when working with British Sign Language users. Information to help understand British Sign Language and Deaf Culture is provided throughout the Toolkit alongside some of the key definitions and terms used when working with parents and families.

The Toolkit goes on to consider some of the barriers that British Sign Language users may encounter when trying to engage with education and it provides suggested ideas and reflective questions for consideration on what might help address and overcome these. One such barrier may be that while Deaf parents may sign fluently, hearing parents have less opportunities to learn and develop these skills. Ensuring that staff in settings, schools, public services, further/higher education and businesses are trained and able to work with British Sign Language users is also discussed.

Lastly, there are a number of national organisations across Scotland who work with policymakers, practitioners, settings, schools and communities on engaging with parents and families. A list of some of these key national organisations is provided in Appendix 2 of this Toolkit for ease of reference.

2.1 Defining Deaf parents

Deaf parents are British Sign Language users who have Deaf and/or hearing children. The National BSL Plan focused on this group of parents because of the wide consultation which took place with the Deaf Community leading up to the BSL (Scotland) Bill and onwards into the National Advisory Group (a short-term working group which included a Deaf parent).

Children can be deaf for many reasons but statistics shows that [genetics](#) is considered to be the most common. Statistics also show that approximately 90% of Deaf children are from hearing parents and 5-10% are from Deaf parents. Further information is available [here](#).

Deaf parents may not have access to information about the Education system because practitioners do not sign and often do not interact with Deaf parents. They struggle to access information in the planning process for their child due to a lack of literacy and/or access to this in a BSL format. Additionally, practitioners often have to deal with cases without having an appropriate understanding of BSL, Deaf culture, identity and on how best to meet needs.

Knowledge about literacy may be much less because Deaf parents themselves were not taught BSL when they were at school. Indeed, many Deaf parents experienced a long period without language in their own early childhood. **Reaching parents who find themselves in this situation is therefore a key priority.** It is also important that practitioners know how to support Deaf parents in an equally supportive way as they would with hearing parents.

Statistics show that there is a much larger group of hearing parents of a Deaf child (96%) who do not know British Sign Language but many of whom want to learn.



Action 13 in the [BSL National Plan](#) addresses their needs to learn British

Sign Language in the early years. One possible structure to support this would be to have an approach whereby hearing parents learn BSL when their Deaf child is young and/or alongside them. Classes then continue in the home, via online groups and in early learning and childcare settings with fluent BSL signers.

There are good examples of this in countries like the [Netherlands](#), [Ireland](#) and in some USA states such as [Colorado](#), and in Victoria in [Australia](#). In these countries and states, parents do not have to choose a path such as speech or sign. They can use both if they are allowed the opportunities. It is a challenge for hearing parents to find a BSL teacher and accessible classes to learn a sign language, but it is possible if this is a policy priority. The outcome of this approach is children and parents who can communicate fluently with each other.

2.2 Key findings from focus groups and interviews

Data from the focus groups, interviews and the online survey suggest that there may be differences in the priorities and perspectives of Deaf parents and practitioners in respect to their children's learning. Reasons for these differences could be due to a lack of understanding of the needs and culture of Deaf children and families.

Practitioners who may not have previously worked with BSL signing families may not be aware of how to access and book BSL/English interpreters, nor where to access support for them. Additionally, Deaf parents may have less access to information and therefore less understanding about their rights, entitlements, options, and what support is available to them. This can result in Deaf parents possibly feeling estranged from decision-making processes regarding their children's learning.

What is clear from the findings is a willingness from practitioners and parents to work together in partnership to support children's learning and improve outcomes.

Deaf parents who have both a hearing child and a Deaf child, expressed concerns over the variations in how their children's learning was progressing. For some Deaf parents, the progress of their Deaf child's learning was significantly behind that of their hearing child.

Findings from focus groups, interviews and the online survey also highlighted a need for practitioners to have a greater understanding of the barriers that Deaf parents encounter when trying to support the learning of their Deaf and/or hearing child(ren).

Suggestions to address some of these findings, were to:

- develop a British Sign Language Toolkit for practitioners who work with Deaf children/young people and their families, parents/carers who use British Sign Language and Tactile BSL in education;
- provide BSL Awareness training;
- provide contact information for Deaf organisations for access further information;
- provide Deaf role models;
- provide Deaf clubs, centres and youth clubs;
- have activities for Deaf young people;
- provide peer support;
- provide a parental support group for networking and exchanging information;
- ensure a [Getting it Right for Every Child](#) (GIRFEC) approach when working with all children and families.