

British Sign Language (BSL) Toolkit for Practitioners

Section 4

This section covers:

4. Understanding:
 - British Sign Language
 - Deaf culture
 - Deaf identity

4. Understanding British Sign Language, Deaf culture and Deaf identity

For a variety of reasons, **many practitioners may not understand or have an awareness of British Sign Language and Deaf Culture.**

Sign Language is a visual language which uses space, facial expression and hand shapes quite differently from spoken languages.

It is used mainly by people who are Deaf. Within the UK, the most common form of Sign Language is called British Sign Language (BSL). BSL is the preferred language of Deaf people and it is used for many functions including learning. It has 'its own grammatical structure and syntax. As a language, BSL is not dependant nor is it strongly related to spoken English' (<https://www.british-sign.co.uk/what-is-british-sign-language/>).

British Sign Language is an entirely separate language that is grammatically different to English (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999). Sign language can also be different in social groups with a Deaf Community and there are regional dialects in BSL in the same way as there are in English.

As with all living languages, BSL has altered to reflect changing society. 'BSL sign order is different from English word order, but it still has its own rules of sign order' (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999, p10). Users of BSL comprise a cultural-linguistic community with its own cultural norms, traditions, ways of being, preferences and histories (Ladd, 2003).



British Sign Language does not directly translate into a visual representation of the English language. 'There are some BSL signs for which there is no easy translation into English'.

Likewise, 'it sometimes happens that there is not a single BSL sign to express something for which English uses a single word or phrase' (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999, p10).

Deaf people share a unique culture and way of life which has been passed down from generation to generation. 'Deaf culture' centres on the shared experiences and histories as well as the central role that sign language has within the Deaf community. This key characteristic is what differentiates 'Deaf' from 'hearing' people. Within the Deaf community, there are two separate cultures, the 'hearing world' and the 'Deaf community' although most Deaf people inhabit both worlds. The BDA Scotland supports the development of Deaf identities through the [Deaf Roots and Pride project](#).

The medical definition of 'deafness' is rejected within the Deaf cultural model as being either a loss or hearing impairment. This compares to the social model of disability and disabled people's rejection of the medical model. In particular, it is the term 'impairment' that the Deaf community sometimes departs from the social model because for the majority of culturally Deaf people, there has not been a loss of hearing neither is there an impairment.

Deaf culture encompasses a common language, history, heritage and shared values. The Deaf community is international and despite the variation in national sign languages there are some commonalities which connect all Deaf people. These include their shared visual communication, histories, cultural activities and their requirement for a Deaf space or opportunity to get together. Further information about Deaf culture can be found on the [British Deaf Association](#) and the [National Deaf Children Society's](#) websites.



Deaf children need to meet other fluent signing children and staff in order to develop their self-expression and confidence in the language. This is why deaf schools and resource base schools are so important for Deaf children's sense of identity as confident communicators. Deaf children can learn from each other in these environments and watch adults signing to each other, thus expanding their knowledge base.

Deaf children need the right environment in order to thrive. British Sign Language is one way which can shape the way deaf children develop. It can also support them to develop a strong and fluent language. Exposure to language, particularly a first language, begins in the home environment and continues in settings, schools and in the community. Having access to British Sign Language and learning English allows a Deaf child to become bi-lingual. Teachers of Deaf children (TOD) who are Deaf themselves can be a great role model, as can teachers who have high quality BSL skills and fluency.

One way to achieve this would be to have a systematic and continuing way for parents of Deaf children to learn BSL in the home alongside their child. BSL teachers could teach parents (at home or in another venue) or provide a model of BSL in the home. Children aged 0-5 would ideally need around 10-15 hours per week to become bilingual ([The Input Matters: Assessing Cumulative Language Access in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals and Populations](#)). This would be complemented by a sign bilingual environment at school with teachers who are qualified to SCQF 6 or above in BSL.

The BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 promotes that information and services will be accessible to BSL users across the Scottish public sector. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD) recognises and promotes the use of sign language to allow persons to 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice' (Article 21).

Deafblindness is the combined loss of both vision and hearing. For some people this may be a complete sensory loss, whilst for others, there may be some residual sight or hearing that can be used. Deafblindness is a uniquely disabling condition. When an individual experiences a single sensory loss or are Deaf from birth, they often cope by making the best use of their other senses. However, with a dual sensory loss, this coping strategy becomes less effective.

Deafblindness affects each person differently. Currently there is no consensus on a definition of deafblindness in Scotland. A commonly adopted, helpful definition is that deafblindness is 'the loss of functioning in one sense that cannot be compensated for with the other sense, resulting in a distinct disability' (Taken from [Deafblind Scotland](#) video).

Further information on the history of British Sign Language in Scotland is available on the Scottish Government's [website](#).