

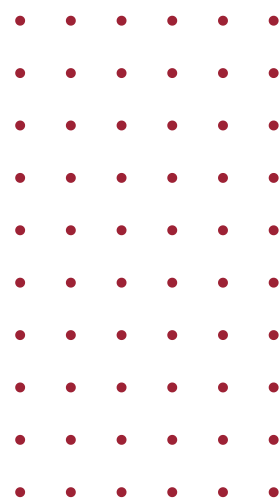


BRIEFING NOTE

THE BENEFITS OF EARLY ACCESS TO SIGN LANGUAGE FOR DEAF CHILDREN

Commissioned by: British Deaf Association

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1. WHY THIS MATTERS

- Over 72 million Deaf people worldwide use a natural sign language.
- In the UK, 1–2 in every 1,000 children are born deaf. Fewer than 5% have deaf parents, meaning most grow up without immediate access to fluent sign language at home.
- Early exposure to a natural language — whether spoken or signed — is critical for language acquisition, cognitive development, educational success, health and wellbeing.
- While research and funding have historically focused on hearing technologies, the benefits of early access to sign language have been under-examined, creating gaps in policy and service provision.

2. KEY FINDINGS FROM THE EVIDENCE BASE

A. Language Development

- Sign language is acquired in the same way as spoken language. Deaf children exposed early to sign language follow the same developmental milestones as hearing children acquiring spoken language.
- Age of acquisition is critical. Late exposure leads to persistent deficits in language fluency, comprehension and grammar, regardless of how long someone has been signing later in life.
- Early sign language does not impede spoken language development. In fact, children with cochlear implants who were exposed to sign language early show better spoken language and working memory outcomes.
- Quality of parental signing matters more than whether parents are deaf or hearing.

B. Cognitive Development

- Exposure to language drives cognitive development, not exposure to sound.
- Deaf native signers perform as well as or better than hearing peers in Executive Function, Working Memory and Theory of Mind.
- Early sign language helps prevent the cognitive delays associated with language deprivation.
- Visual-spatial features of sign language may offer unique cognitive advantages, e.g. perspective-taking and iconicity.
- deaf or hearing.

C. Social-Emotional Development

- Early access to sign language supports secure attachment, self-concept, emotion recognition and regulation.
- Early signers show better emotion perception and social adaptability than late signers.
- Access to Deaf cultural interaction and “visual social scripts” strengthens confidence, inclusion and resilience.
- Delayed access to language can result in later difficulties in forming relationships and a secure sense of self.

D. Literacy

- No evidence that early sign language delays literacy.
- Strong sign language skills predict stronger reading and writing outcomes, including in children from hearing families.
- Early exposure enables better reading comprehension, vocabulary, and metalinguistic skills.
- Fingerspelling bridges sign and print, improving early literacy outcomes.

E. Health and Wellbeing

- Deaf adults face poorer health and mental health outcomes, often linked to language deprivation and communication neglect in childhood.
- Good quality early communication — including sign language — is associated with better mental health, resilience, and health literacy.
- There is a lack of long-term studies specifically on early sign language as a protective factor, but evidence strongly indicates language deprivation as a risk factor.

3. GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

- Most evidence is from short- or medium-term studies; fewer track long-term outcomes of early exposure to sign language.
- Research on early access to sign language is underfunded compared to that on hearing technologies, limiting available data.
- More work and further research is needed to separate quality of communication from mode of communication in health outcome studies.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Early sign language access should be treated as a core right, not an optional extra.
- Bilingual pathways (sign and speech) offer developmental protection without limiting spoken language outcomes.
- Investment in family sign language support is critical — quality of parental signing matters.
- Integration of sign language in early intervention services, education, and health promotion could reduce inequalities in education, employment, and health.
- Recognition of language deprivation as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) would align with broader public health strategies.

5. HEADLINE MESSAGES FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

- Early language access, including sign language, is fundamental for optimal life outcomes.
- Delaying sign language exposure carries long-term costs — educational, economic and health.
- Supporting families to sign early is a cost-effective, evidence-based intervention.
- Policy and funding currently lag behind the evidence base.

