



WORLD FEDERATION  
OF THE DEAF

**World Federation of the Deaf Advocacy Points for Members and Partners  
on the occasion of World Hearing Day 2021  
and the launch of the World Health Association  
2021 Global Report on Hearing.**

**Early intervention: Access to sign language at birth is a fundamental human right.**

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) advocates for early acquisition of sign language by all deaf children and strongly recommends that all deaf children and their families receive sign language early intervention services as soon as possible after birth.<sup>1</sup> Young deaf children who are not exposed to natural sign languages at home and in early education are at risk of facing language deprivation, which is the lack of access to a natural language during the early years. Language deprivation has lifelong effects on deaf children's language, health, and educational outcomes, including cognitive and socio-emotional development.<sup>2</sup> Article 25 of the UN CRPD calls on governments to provide early identification and intervention, and services designed to minimise and prevent further disabilities, including language deprivation. In order to provide high-quality sign language early intervention services to deaf children and their families, it is essential that medical professionals collaborate with deaf professionals, community members, sign language teachers, and deaf advocacy organisations.<sup>3</sup> Governments must also not restrict sign language services to deaf children with cochlear implants but support the provision of sign language services to all deaf children with and without hearing technology, as recognised and recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>4</sup>. High-quality sign language early intervention services to deaf children and their families may include deaf mentor home visiting services, parent sign language classes, sign language playgroups, and bilingual early childhood education and care programs with educators, including deaf educators, who possess native-like sign language proficiency. Early intervention ensuring access to sign language is crucial to prevent language deprivation.

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<sup>1</sup> [WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf Children.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Murray, J.J., Hall, W.C., & Snoddon, K. (2019). Education and health of children with hearing loss: The necessity of signed languages. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 97. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/97/10/19-229427.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Gale, E. (2020). Collaborating with deaf adults in early intervention. *Young Exceptional Children*. Ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1096250620939510>

<sup>4</sup> [CRPD Committee Concluding Observations to the initial report of Denmark released on 30 October 2014. Recommendations on Article 21 CRPD.](#)



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## Community involvement: Deaf communities empower deaf children and youth.

The needs of Deaf people to sign language learning and socio-emotional fulfillment, including cultural and identity development, are supported by participation in deaf communities. Deaf communities enable social relationships that are supportive of a positive deaf identity. Deaf communities, led by National Associations of the Deaf, are cultural and linguistic entities that often share collective rights and goals, instead of only focusing on individual rights and experiences. A capability approach seeing human differences as fundamental to achieve equality underpins the participation of deaf children and youth in their many communities, including deaf communities.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge empowers deaf people and allows them to be agents of their own change. The collaboration of National Associations of the Deaf with various stakeholders is crucial to build sustainable partnerships for the realisation of the human rights of deaf people.<sup>6</sup> Projects addressing the needs of deaf communities should therefore be conducted in interaction and collaboration with National Associations of the Deaf. As per Article 4.3 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, representative deaf associations must be consulted in the formation of policies impacting deaf people from the outset to the conclusion. The principle of “Nothing About Us Without Us” is about inclusion and decision-making that leads to higher quality outcomes. When deaf communities are empowered to implement programs and policies for deaf people and sign languages, these policies will best support the flourishing of individual deaf children.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Snoddon, K. & Underwood, K. (2014). Toward a social relational model of Deaf childhood. *Disability & Society*, 29(4), 530-542.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.823081>

<sup>6</sup> [World Federation of the Deaf Charter on Sign Language Rights for All.](#)

<sup>7</sup> Snoddon, K. & Underwood, K. (2014). Toward a social relational model of Deaf childhood. *Disability & Society*, 29(4), 530-542.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.823081>



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## **Language and communication: Sign languages should be recognised and integrated into all services.**

Deaf people using visual languages have been recorded since antiquity and even today sign languages are central to the lives of deaf people all over the world. Sign languages are natural languages with the same linguistic properties as spoken languages, they have their own grammars and lexicons, and are not the mere representation of a spoken language on the hands.

Yet only 58 countries have accorded sign languages status equal to that of their national spoken languages. Sign language recognition has been part of the core work of National Associations of the Deaf around the world who have strenuously worked towards legislative recognition of sign language in their countries. In many countries, however, the rights of deaf people are also assured through disability policy, legislation and international instruments. These linguistic rights are important for deaf people and should not only be granted within those disability paradigms: Deaf Communities need these linguistic rights as linguistic rights and not as a part of a disability construct<sup>8</sup>.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) contains provisions recognising the Deaf Community as having cultural and linguistic rights. When achieved, these rights will reduce barriers to the inclusion of deaf people in society in a variety of settings (including education, cultural activities, political participation and others), alongside the reduction in many other barriers faced by people with a wide range of other disabilities.<sup>9,10</sup>

Access to information in the national sign language is vital for sign language users. Deaf sign language users have the right to access information and interactions through professionally qualified sign language interpreters and translators. Although automatic computer translation of sign language can in the future support human translation, it does not serve as an alternative for a qualified human interpreter or translator.<sup>11</sup> The provision and development of sign language interpreting and translation services should be done in close consultation with national associations of the deaf and national professional interpreting associations.

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<sup>8</sup> [WFD Position Paper: 'Complementary or diametrically opposed: Situating Deaf Communities within 'disability' vs 'cultural and linguistic minority' constructs'](#)

<sup>9</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<sup>10</sup> [WFD Position Paper on Accessibility: Sign Language Interpreting and translation and technological developments](#)

<sup>11</sup> [WFD Position Paper on Accessibility: Sign Language Interpreting and translation and technological developments.](#)



**A holistic approach: Families and Sign Languages. All deaf children and their families must have access to sign languages.**

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) strongly advocates for family support and access to sign languages.<sup>12</sup> Since deaf children's sign language acquisition should begin as soon as possible after birth, families must be included in early intervention and specialised parent sign language classes.<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that parents of disabled children must be provided free of charge with assistance and services to ensure children reach their fullest individual, social, and cultural development. In cooperation with deaf communities and deaf sign language teachers, governments must implement free programs for parents and family members of deaf children to learn the national sign language and participate in deaf communities.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, governments must ensure families with deaf children receive accurate information about the health and educational benefits of sign languages, including information that showing the positive impact of national sign languages on spoken language development and the utilisation of hearing technology.<sup>16</sup> Research shows that deaf children, including deaf children with hearing parents who learn the national sign language as a second or additional language, have optimal language development when sign language learning begins in infancy.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, families' learning of sign language supports elaborated communication with deaf children and deaf children's social and emotional development.<sup>18</sup> Developing a family language plan can help families and service providers with supporting deaf children's bilingual development in sign languages and spoken/written languages.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf Children.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Snoddon, K. (2015). Using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to teach sign language to parents of deaf children. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 71(3), 270-287.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.2602>

<sup>14</sup> Oysernam, J. & de Geus, M. (2021). Implementing a new design in parent sign language teaching: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In K. Snoddon & J. Weber (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on plurilingualism in deaf education*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

<sup>15</sup> [WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf Children.](#)

<sup>16</sup> [WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf Children.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Caselli, N., Pyers, J., & Lieberman, A.M. (2020). Deaf children of hearing parents have age-level vocabulary growth when exposed to ASL by six months. *The Journal of Pediatrics*. Ahead of print.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2021.01.029>

<sup>18</sup> Snoddon, K. (2015). Using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to teach sign language to parents of deaf children. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 71(3), 270-287.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.2602>

<sup>19</sup> Michener, J. & Batamula, C. (2020). Family language policy and planning: Families with deaf children. In K. Snoddon & J. Weber (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on plurilingualism in deaf education*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.