

This article is based on research in the authors' accepted manuscript: **Exploring Sign Language, Social Connectedness, and Life Satisfaction of Deaf Adults:** <https://derby-repository.worktribe.com/output/976793>.

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Deaf Children often face unique challenges, and the choices made for them can influence their confidence, relationships, and long-term happiness. This article summarises research exploring how language access and connections to the Deaf<sup>1</sup> community affect satisfaction with life.

## ***Childhood Cognitive and Emotional Development.***

For my research, I interviewed deaf adults to explore their lived experiences of growing up deaf. Many of those raised only with spoken language said they felt neglected or let down by their parents for not providing them with sign language. They said they struggled to connect with their families and peers and often felt inadequate. But those who were raised with even a little sign language said they felt 'seen' and could communicate without barriers. They also developed positive self-perceptions and strong family connections.

*"I blame my mum and dad a little bit, like, why didn't you teach me to sign before? I was like, but all deaf people need sign to help them communicate." Lousie*

## ***Identity***

People who were introduced to the Deaf community as children said this allowed them to have positive deaf role models. The deaf community provided them with a sense of shared experiences, pride, and belonging.

*"[After learning sign language] I didn't think I was deaf when I was with my [Deaf friends], it was like I'm just a normal teenager." Helen*

## ***Agency and Advocacy***

Feeling connected to Deaf culture provided confidence and enabled self-advocacy. Positively framing Deafness allowed people to reject the idea of it being a deficit. Everyone discussed the role of sign language in their identity development, and how it helped build confidence to move between hearing and Deaf environments.

*"I always say if I was given a miracle pill that could cure my deafness would I take it? And the answer is no. I love being deaf, it is my very being." Stella*

Treating deaf children according to hearing social norms can cause isolation, low self-esteem, and emotional distress. However, embracing Deaf culture and sign language can lead to higher life satisfaction, showing that social connections in the Deaf community matter most for long-term happiness. Social and cultural factors support well-being more than trying to “fix” hearing and using spoken language.

Feeling connected with other Deaf children is essential for mental health and well-being. Sign language and cultural belonging improve life satisfaction more than using spoken language and hearing technology alone. True inclusion comes from ensuring that every deaf child has access to sign language so they can choose how they want to communicate.

## What can you do?

### Families

- Start learning basic sign language as early as possible. Use resources like YouTube, mobile apps, or local community classes.
- Connect with the Deaf community, go to Deaf clubs and Deaf events. Deaf adults can provide guidance and be role models for your child.
- Advocate for the inclusion of sign language in your child’s school.
- Support the British Deaf Association campaign to give every deaf child and their families free access to British Sign Language: <https://bda.org.uk/bsl-in-our-hands/>

### Schools

- Promote sign language as a valuable skill for all students, not just those who are deaf.
- Ensure that BSL interpreters are provided for all school events, ensuring deaf children and deaf parents are always included, and that BSL is equally valued and at the forefront.

### Policymakers

- Prioritise the provision of sign language to all families immediately after discovering their child is deaf, regardless of ‘level’ of deafness or the child’s age.
- Redefine medical and educational frameworks. From “deficit” models to cultural models that celebrate linguistic diversity.
- Be led by the Deaf Community, prioritising deaf-centric views and experiences.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>This article uses capitalised *Deaf* to refer to Deaf culture and lowercase *deaf* to refer to all deaf people. The author recognises the complexities and intersectionality of deaf identities and does not seek to define identity and belonging.

Names have been changed to protect anonymity.