

Beyond the fixing mentality: Rethinking language, development, and thriving in deaf education

QToD **Michelle Atkinson** highlights the importance of early access to good-quality sign language for deaf children

For generations, deaf education has aimed to help children fit into a listening and speaking world. Hearing technology, speech therapy, and a focus on catching up, on fixing, have dominated practice. With enough effort, we are told, deaf children can approximate the hearing experience. But at what cost? Cognitive load. Fatigue. Emotional strain.

There is a quiet irony here. Hearing babies are encouraged to use baby signing to boost language development. Yet many families of deaf children are still, in many contexts, discouraged from exploring sign language. Deaf children are expected to master fragments of sound before having access to a language they need to listen and speak to use. A patchy start, at best.

Perhaps this is an opportunity to rethink the direction deaf education has taken over the years. Instead of asking how deaf children can fit into society as it currently exists, what if we asked how society and education can better support them to live as they are?

Because one truth remains unchanged: language is the foundation of human development. We are not born with it. We grow into it. Language is not just a tool for communication. It is the engine of cognition. Language builds thinking. Shapes memory, attention, relationships, identity. It allows children to question, imagine, reason, connect. For hearing children, this unfolds naturally through constant, effortless exposure to spoken language, so seamlessly it often unnoticed. For deaf children learning to listen and speak, it is rarely effortless.

Even with advanced technology, spoken English can remain only partially accessible. Listening demands concentration. Meaning can be incomplete. Incidental learning – the overheard conversations, background chatter, subtle cues – can be significantly reduced or lost altogether.

So, deaf children adapt. They fill gaps. They piece things together. They work harder. Survival strategies. Impressive? Maybe. But why is survival the goal?

This is not a failure of the child. It is a limitation of the modality. And when we recognise that full and effortless access to spoken language cannot always be guaranteed, a deeper question emerges: why are we building a child's entire linguistic and cognitive development on something that may remain partially inaccessible?

Perhaps there is a quiet concern. That a child may be

drawn towards the language they can engage with ease, rather than one that demands constant effort. And we must ask ourselves, at what cost, and to whom, is this choice being questioned? Society's comfort, or the deaf child's right to thrive?

A holistic approach begins somewhere different. It ensures that deaf children have immediate, consistent access to a fully accessible language. This means sign language. Sign languages are complete natural languages with their own grammar, structure, and cultural depth. Crucially, they are visual. A deaf child exposed early can acquire language naturally. Without delay, without strain, and without the inconsistency of decoding incomplete auditory input.

And it doesn't need to be perfect. Research shows that early signing helps children reach milestones more confidently, even when parents are still learning. Imperfect signing is still language. A house full of enthusiastic, imperfect signing is far more powerful than one limited by effortful listening.

Which brings us to another question: what do we celebrate? A child identifying a sound in a soundproof booth? A perfectly pronounced word in controlled conditions? These matter, but they happen in artificial spaces. Real life is messy, layered, unpredictable.

The deeper milestones often go less celebrated: a deaf child telling a story fluently in sign language, asking "why?" for the hundredth time, negotiating with a sibling, inventing a game, expressing emotions, making connections, thinking critically. These are not just communication milestones; they are cognitive milestones – the building blocks of lifelong learning.

When deaf children have full access to language, everything shifts. Thinking expands. Confidence grows. Identity forms without deficit. They are not just surviving ... they are thriving.

This is not about rejecting technology or speech. They have value. But they should supplement a strong linguistic foundation, not replace it. Without full access to language early on, risks are real: delayed cognition, barriers to learning, impacts on mental health and more.

And what's more, skills do not cancel each other out; they build on one another. We would never tell a child not to kick a football because it might stop them learning to catch. We would never discourage storytelling on the basis that it could interfere with learning facts. We

understand instinctively that learning is layered, flexible, and expansive.

So why does that logic shift when we consider deaf children and language development?

With deaf children, language is often treated as if it must follow a single, fragile path, where introducing sign language is often framed as something that might interfere with spoken language development, despite research showing otherwise. Yet bilingualism shows us something different: language builds language. Understanding is mapped across signed and spoken systems, allowing children to connect meaning in richer, deeper ways.

Far from delaying language, early access to sign language has been shown to support overall language development and reduce emotional stress for deaf children, with research also indicating positive associations with broader cognitive outcomes.

The real limitation is not sign language. It is the idea that there should only be one route to language at all. A holistic approach is child-centred. It asks what the child needs, not what the system prefers. It recognises that language should not be exhausting. Language should flow.

This approach invites reflection for professionals in deaf education. There can be hesitation around sign language. A pause, a step back. Is it undervalued? Or simply unfamiliar?

If so, the answer is not avoidance. It is collaboration.

And it requires a shift in what 'using sign language'

means. This is not Sign Supported English (SSE) where English stays in control. Not keyword signing, which follows spoken language. This is an upfront, fully signed language. British Sign Language (BSL). Independent. Visual. Complete.

Take the word 'dragon'. On the page, it sits still. In keyword signs or SSE, it barely shifts. But in BSL, it comes alive, its shape carved through the air, its presence felt as much as seen. It isn't just understood; it's experienced. Not a translation, but a transformation into a visual, fully accessible language*.

When professionals embrace this, when we learn from fluent signers, we do more than support communication. We unlock cognition, creativity, autonomy. A child raised with full language access is not limited to one way of communicating. They can sign. They may speak. They can choose. Life is not static. Conversations shift. Environments change. Communication adapts. And so can they.

This is what thriving looks like: not fitting into one mould but moving seamlessly through different experiences. Having options, agency, and control.

If language is the key to development, then give deaf children a key that fits, and then trust them to decide which doors to open.

This is what it means to move beyond the fixing mentality: not reshaping the child to fit the system but reshaping the system to fit the child.

*See:

www.reddit.com/r/asl/comments/1kivsc0/i_always_use_this_in_my_asl_classes/ for a good example of this.



Michelle Atkinson, a graduate of the University of Leeds with a Master of Arts in Deaf Education, is a QToD at the Royal School for the Deaf, Derby, with a deep-rooted commitment to enhancing outcomes for deaf children. She recently completed a dissertation exploring local offers for deaf children, adding to her growing body of work in the field. As a deaf parent of deaf children, Michelle brings invaluable personal insight and lived experience to her professional practice. She is passionate about creating environments where deaf individuals can truly thrive and remains dedicated to driving innovation in deaf education for future generations.

Role of Educational Audiologist

The **Qualified Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People** role is diverse. The **BATOD publications: 'Articulating the specialism' series** provides an insight to the different professional capacities. The series now includes the 'Role of Educational Audiologist'.

Other publications in the series include:

Qualified Teacher for Deaf Children and Young People working in an auditory implant centre (ICQTOD)

The role of the QToD in HE

The role of the QToD in FE

The role of the QToD in mainstream settings

The role of the QToD in early years



BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the June 2026 issue.

© BATOD 2026



Thank you to this edition's advertisers

