

British Sign Language (BSL) in Scotland: learning and communication tips and support for families



**Our vision is a
world without
barriers for
every deaf child.**

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We use the term 'deaf' to refer to all types of hearing loss from mild to profound. This includes deafness in one ear or temporary hearing loss such as glue ear.

We use the term 'parent' to refer to all parents and carers of children.

1

This guide

The purpose of this guide is to support parents of deaf children in Scotland who have chosen British Sign Language (BSL) as the language and communication option for their child. The Scottish Government has committed to ensuring that families with deaf children are offered the right information and support at the right time to engage with BSL. Local authorities and health boards are required to publish their plans addressing how they will do this.

This guide sets out some key tips and resources, what support should be available in Scotland, and how the National Deaf Children's Society can help.

We have created videos about six of the families we work with. Here they discuss their experiences of raising a deaf child, and offer tips and support to families on their own journey. You can find these families stories here: bit.ly/different-directions

The National Deaf Children's Society's key principles

At the National Deaf Children's Society, we have developed a set of key principles to help parents of deaf children when making decisions for their child. We provide a range of resources for families to support these principles.

The principles are:

- ▶ Every deaf child has the right to develop effective language and communication. They need open access to a rich language environment and good support from adults who are fluent in the chosen language(s), whether signed or spoken.

- › Different approaches to language and communication suit different children, and choice of approach should take account of the family's circumstances.
- › Parents should be able to make properly informed choices about approaches to developing their child's language and communication. Therefore, they need high quality information and opportunities to increase their understanding of and experience in the different approaches.
- › Families should receive support from qualified providers with the knowledge and experience to help them create the best possible learning environment.

2

Some top tips

Communication is how we share and exchange information, ideas and feelings with other people. It's a two-way process and involves not only what we say or sign, but other things like:

- › eye contact
- › gesture
- › tone of voice
- › facial expressions
- › body language.

Communication begins from birth, long before first words, with cries, then coos and smiles, so developing language and communication skills in early years is important. Some tips for parents of a child 0 to 2 years old are:

- › Children learn to communicate when they feel safe, secure and confident that their communication will be understood and valued.
- › Communication and language are not the same thing. Whatever language you use with your child, good communication will always be important.
- › An environment where there is lots of communication and interaction between everyone is extremely important. You don't need to limit or simplify your communication because your child is deaf.
- › Keep it visual. Use gestures, facial expressions, body language etc, to support good communication.

- › If your child uses hearing technology make sure it's working properly and that your child is using it for as many of their waking hours as possible.
- › Children learn to communicate when they are given chances to take part in the conversation. Remember to give your deaf child that little bit longer to respond.
- › Babies and toddlers learn to communicate when you talk and/or sign about the things that they are focused on or interested in.
- › Praise your child when they respond, or attempt to respond, through either verbal or non-verbal communication. This will help to positively reinforce communication for your child.
- › Play with your child as much as possible. Children who enjoy play, and particularly imaginative play ('pretending'), tend to be better language learners.
- › Early experience of sharing and enjoying books helps children learn language and lays the foundations for reading.
- › Some parents feel that because their child is deaf, they have to become 'teachers' to make sure their child develops language and communication skills. Remember that you should communicate as you would with any other child – including through play and everyday activities.
- › It may seem obvious, but the more opportunities babies and toddlers have to communicate every day, the better communicators they turn out to be. Ensuring there is lots of meaningful interaction between adults and your child is vital.

- › Some parents feel daunted by the prospect of how much time and patience is needed to help their child develop communication and language, but try to make it part of everyday life and not just dedicated time at the start or end of the day, so that it becomes ‘the norm’.
- › If your child uses hearing aids, ask your audiologist if a radio aid is appropriate for your child.

Tips for learning sign language

- › We’ve created lots of videos and tips to introduce you to British Sign Language (BSL) along with practical and fun examples of how you and your family can use it. You can find them [here](#).
- › Do things together. Everyday activities are a great way to practise signing and introduce new signs you’ve learned. Whether it’s signing each step of your child’s bath time routine, or about the food you’re having for breakfast.
- › If you’re just starting to learn to sign, try to learn a few new signs every day. With just two new signs a day, you’ll know 60 signs by the end of each month! Try and include the whole family and friends in learning to sign. That way everyone can get involved and your child will be more confident about communicating with others. Here are some ideas to get you started:
 - › in the house
 - › talking about feelings
 - › mealtimes
 - › playtime
 - › out and about.

For these tips and more, visit the **Family Sign Language** section of our website.

- › Discover more ways to communicate using BSL, with stories and rhymes, **here**.

For more information on learning BSL at home, as well as more complex signs and fingerspelling, visit **www.british-sign.co.uk**.

National Deaf Children's Society support and guidance

There are lots of communication methods which can support deaf children to develop communication and language. There is no single 'right' or 'best' way. Different methods suit different children and families, depending on their needs and circumstances. We produce information to help inform parents about the options and stages they need to go through when making choices suitable for their child. British Sign Language is one of those options and we have a number of resources that parents can use.

Many British Sign Language (BSL) courses are designed for adult lives and interactions. They may be unsuitable for families with deaf children who want to learn the signs and phrases they need for everyday family life. In Scotland we currently deliver Family Sign Language courses, available to families of deaf children aged 0 to 11 years. These courses are delivered by experienced tutors in a flexible way, allowing families to enjoy interacting with their children while they develop their language skills. We believe that language learning should be fun! You can sign up for our courses by searching for Family Sign Language courses on our website.

The Family Sign Language curriculum and a supporting glossary of key vocabulary are also available on our **YouTube** channel, so you can learn at a time convenient to you.

Our Enablement, and Advice and Guidance teams offer families, deaf children and young people additional advice and resources on a wide range of topics including education, benefits, technology and health. Please contact our **helpline** if you require support with any of these topics and you will be directed to the appropriate team. We want to hear from you!

Local deaf children's societies play an important role in providing support to families with deaf children and young people across Scotland. Each local group is an individually constituted charity, affiliated to the National Deaf Children's Society.

Your local group may run social events and activities, provide support to parents and carers, and give deaf children the chance to meet outside of school.

3

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act

The BSL (Scotland) Act requires the Scottish Government, local authorities, local health boards and other listed bodies to create their own BSL Plans on how they will promote the use of the language and improve access to services for deaf people living in Scotland. Your local authority must produce a BSL Plan.

These plans set out the support available to deaf children and their families in local areas. This should include supporting families of deaf children who want to learn sign language, with the opportunity to do so. There are major differences in the support for families provided by local authorities, but in some cases it can include funding for BSL courses, information packs, educational resources, regular family visits from a Teacher of the Deaf or signing classes.

Details for each council are available on their website and you can see a link to all of the plans in the table on pages 20-28.

The Scottish Government has made it clear that their vision is for all families with deaf children who want to learn BSL to be able to do so. Professionals and public bodies are required to support you in doing this if you wish.

Professional support

You and your child may need to see a number of professionals, depending on the details of the diagnosis. Here is a list of some of them, with links to videos and resources, explaining their roles and how they can support you.

Health services

- › Watch Ruth explaining the role of the audiologist – bit.ly/pro-audiologist.
- › Watch Ann explaining the role of the paediatrician – bit.ly/pro-paediatrician.
- › Watch Fiona explaining the role of the speech and language therapist – bit.ly/pro-SLT.

Education services

- › Watch Barbara explaining the role of the Teacher of the Deaf – bit.ly/pro-ToD.

In Scotland, professionals deliver support as part of a framework called Getting it Right for Every Child.

This requires professionals to take a child-centred wellbeing approach, focused on addressing the needs of every child early on. You should have a personalised Child's Plan setting out the support you and your child receive. Where deaf children are concerned, this should address the development of good age-appropriate language and communication to meet the overall objective of the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach.

GIRFEC supports children and young people so that they can grow up feeling loved, safe and respected and can realise their full potential. At home, in school, or in the wider community, every child and young person should be:

- › safe
- › healthy
- › achieving

- › nurtured
- › active
- › respected
- › responsible
- › included.

These eight factors are often referred to by their initial letters – SHANARRI. They are wellbeing indicators, which help make it easier for children and families, and the people working with them, to discuss how a child or young person is doing at a point in time and if there is a need for support. Each child is unique and there is no set level of wellbeing that children should achieve. Wellbeing is influenced by children's individual experiences and changing needs as they grow.

Taken together, GIRFEC and SHANARRI indicators provide a framework for all of those working alongside you and your child, to ensure that all children are loved, safe, respected, included and can realise their full potential.

4

What support is provided where I live?

Like any new spoken language, such as French or Spanish, it takes time and practice to learn and use British Sign Language (BSL) fluently. BSL is broken down into different levels and can be learnt through a variety of courses, from basic introductory courses to recognised qualifications. There are many providers of BSL courses:

- › local authorities
- › health boards
- › local colleges
- › private businesses
- › charities (including the National Deaf Children's Society's Family Sign Language course)
- › voluntary groups.

It's worth spending time investigating who is offering courses in your area to see which provider is most suitable in terms of cost, location, speed of learning and course times. Your **Teacher of the Deaf** will be able to provide information about what is provided through your local authority.

A good place to search for courses is **Signature's website**. They don't give you dates and times of courses but will tell you where you can find them. It is also a good idea to look up local colleges online and find out what BSL courses they offer.

The type and level of support provided by local authorities for parents to learn BSL varies greatly but can include:

- › home/online tuition for families from a Teacher of the Deaf or a sign language tutor/deaf role model

- › introduction to BSL classes aimed at families, Family Sign Language courses or similar
- › introductory courses for parents of deaf children
- › setting up free Level 1 or 2 BSL classes for families.

Other services provided by local authorities might include:

- › lending BSL resources such as books and DVDs
- › family support workers
- › groups for families and children to practise BSL
- › liaising with other local organisations who can provide support.

5

Accessing the support you need

Case study – Highland Deaf Education Service BSL digital teaching pack

Highland Deaf Education Service (HDES) has produced a BSL digital teaching pack for schools which follows a framework similar to other taught modern languages. The pack is designed to be delivered by a non-signer who is learning alongside their pupils. It is a unique resource, providing the teacher with lesson plans, video clips and all resources required for a basic BSL course. Training can also be given, ranging from an hour online to three-day courses in person. The training can range from a basic how-to-navigate the pack to a full BSL course.

Over 120 teachers in Highland have been trained to use it in 41 primary and 19 secondary schools. The pack has been well received across Scotland, with 17 local authorities currently using it. There has been great feedback from those using it.

They said: “Best organised teaching resource I have seen in my career.” And “Can’t believe how quickly the kids have picked it up.”

If you would like your child’s nursery or school teachers to use the pack, ask them to contact Sheila Lundberg, Coordinator of the Highland Deaf Education Service at Dingwall Academy at Sheila.Lundberg@highland.gov.uk.

If the support you want to access isn't available where you live, there are also online courses available.

Public bodies in Scotland should ensure that families with deaf children in their area have timely information and support to learn BSL. If you need support with accessing this, you can contact our helpline or read further information about your rights [here](#).

In Scotland we do not have a local offer where families can pick from a selection of different options of support. Instead, local authorities will often publish the support available on the deaf education sections of their website, and they should discuss options with you when developing a child's plan.



Which British Sign Language (BSL) courses are available in Scotland?

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

FAQ: I want to complete a formal BSL course, how much will this cost?

Introductory or Family Sign Language courses tend to be free. However these courses will only teach you a very basic level of BSL which will not be advanced enough for those who wish to take a **Sign Bilingual** or Total Communication approach. The cost of accredited courses is variable at Level 1, with courses ranging from free to more than £400 depending on the provider. The cost of BSL is often higher for more advanced levels.

You may find it useful to view our information on getting support for learning BSL which explains in more detail the types of support local authorities may offer.

If you are a parent who can't access funds or courses to learn BSL in your local area, please contact our **Freephone Helpline** for information and support. Some local authorities offer funding for places on accredited courses from local providers. However, funding does not always cover assessment fees.

FAQ: What courses are available in Scotland?

The Scottish Qualifications Authority offers a Scottish qualifications framework that develops knowledge and skills in the area of BSL and related areas, from Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Level 3 to SCQF Level 8. You can find more information **here**.

Signature offers accredited BSL courses from Level 1 to Level 6. You can find more details about each level on the Signature website. To find an approved **Signature centre** near you visit their website [here](#).

Deaf Action is a deaf-led charity in Scotland. They offer taster BSL courses and up to Level 3 BSL. To find out more about their courses visit their [website](#).

FAQ: Where can I find the BSL Plan for where I live?

Table of BSL local authority Plans and commitments for BSL classes

This list is not definitive and is subject to change. Information was gathered during an audit of local authority services in 2020–2021, and from BSL local plans.

Local authority area (A-Z)	Local authority BSL for families commitment
Aberdeen	<p>Aberdeen City Council 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Supports parents with weekly visits from a Teacher of the Deaf and offer BSL classes weekly, during term time, at Aberdeen School for the Deaf.› Promotes the latest national guidance/ resources via social media channels, updated website and, when possible, face-to-face with parents/carers.› Bookbug sessions are delivered by Aberdeen City Council’s Library Service – a member of staff from Aberdeen School for the Deaf supports these sessions and is there to interpret for BSL users during school holidays.

Aberdeenshire	<p>Aberdeenshire Council 2017 to 2023: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Supports parents who wish to access formal signing classes but cannot afford to, through collaboration with partner organisations.
Angus	<p>Angus Council 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Delivers basic BSL to pre-school children when opportunities arise.
Argyll and Bute	<p>Argyll and Bute Council 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Produces a pack containing deaf-friendly educational resources and information about Deaf culture for parents, nurseries and health visitors which also includes links to additional online resources.
Ayrshires (North, East and South)	<p>Joint Ayrshire Councils (North, East and South) 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Ensures parents and wider family members have access to funded BSL courses.
City of Edinburgh	<p>City of Edinburgh Council BSL Plan 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Continues to discuss communication choices with parents and signposts them to family BSL classes for additional support.
Clackmannanshire	<p>Clackmannanshire Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Offers BSL in specialist provision as a Level 3 option. › Offers Makaton across early years, primary and secondary settings. › Offers training for parents and staff and sessions for children/young people and BSL classes in the community.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	<p>Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Parent courses are run regularly throughout the school session for parents and friends of profoundly deaf children who are BSL users. Their schools host the classes which are run by the Teacher of the Deaf. These are held in various schools throughout the Western Isles.› Classes have also been run in the local library for the general public to attend and these have been fully subscribed showing a demand and high interest in them.› Each school term, regular courses in BSL are run by the Teacher of the Deaf to staff in schools where there are pupils using BSL.
Dumfries and Galloway	<p>Dumfries and Galloway 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Offers visits to build up a relationship with parents/families.› Offers basic family signs, signed resources and deaf awareness to extended family – for example grandparents.

Dundee	<p>Dundee City Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Presents parents with different options of communication from the start and encourages the use of BSL signs. › Offers a fortnightly parent/carer support and information group, called Wee Chat. › Offers Bookbug sessions involving sign and the opportunity to learn some basic BSL words. › Continues to promote the learning of BSL through whole school events and clubs in Craigie HS and Claypotts Castle PS. In Craigie HS this year, a small cohort of deaf and hearing pupils are undertaking National 3s in BSL. › Other classes: health board baby signing classes are available through parent and toddler groups
East Dunbartonshire	<p>East Dunbartonshire Council has considered the BSL Plan and the papers are available here on p.153.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Works with deaf organisations providing support to hearing families of a deaf child, to provide free BSL classes to the parents, guardians, and extended family of the deaf child, to make sure all the family can communicate appropriately.
East Lothian	<p>East Lothian 2018 to 2024: Plan available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Works with BSL stakeholders to ensure and develop resources and information that are appropriate and relevant.
East Renfrewshire	<p>East Renfrewshire 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Ensures families of deaf and deafblind children have access to BSL resources as early as possible in their child's life.

Falkirk	<p>Falkirk 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Provides support to families from a qualified Teacher of the Deaf (ToD), from diagnosis.› Continues to look for safe ways to provide opportunities for parents/carers and extended family to learn BSL from ToDs or BSL tutors. This service is currently delivered virtually due to COVID-19.› Has a designated early years provision (Bantaskin Nursery) for BSL users, with Windsor Park staff facilitating/developing communication.› Continues to ensure that BSL interpreting services are available throughout Falkirk Council for deaf parents using Interpreter Now, when a face-to-face interpreter is not available.
Fife	<p>Fife 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Runs a family group via a Deaf communication support worker and Teacher of the Deaf. Prior to COVID-19 was run in South Parks Primary School in Glenrothes. During lockdown it was run online.› A pack has been created for the teaching of BSL as part of the 2+1 language policy which requires Scottish Government support.
Glasgow	<p>Glasgow 2018 to 2024: Plan is available here. BSL video is available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Improving links and communication with partners to continue to signpost families to appropriate agencies for sign language support through Early Years Multi-Disciplinary clinic and Early Years New Referral clinics.

Highland	<p>Highland Council 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Provides information on resources available in BSL so that staff can meet the needs of families with a deaf or deafblind child, including grandparents and siblings. › Offers Family Sign tuition where required. › Offers BSL as part of the 1+2 languages initiative.
Inverclyde	<p>Inverclyde 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Offers BSL tutor Family Sign classes through the Garvel Deaf Centres in the Garvel base and/or at home or in a local community hub. The number of classes offered to parents and families is expected to increase. › Continues to work closely with deaf organisations such as the National Deaf Children's Society to direct parents to BSL classes/support offered.
Lanarkshire (North and South	<p>North Lanarkshire Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › North and South Lanarkshire Council did not reply to our audit request for additional information about BSL provision. However their commitments to the BSL Plan can be found above.
Midlothian	<p>Midlothian 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Works with the Scottish Government BSL team and Deaf Action Scotland to look at arranging Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) for staff. At present, no schools are offering it as a Language (L)3 but BSL is being developed to support inclusion in some schools.

Moray	<p>Moray Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Teaches and shares signs with children and parents as needed.› Promotes knowledge and understanding of signing with the parents of children with a hearing loss, using daily clips on Facebook.› Promotes the 1+2 Language Policy Highland scheme to schools across the local authority.
Orkney	<p>Orkney Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. A BSL video for the Orkney BSL Plan is still being produced.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Orkney Council did not reply to our audit request for additional information about BSL provision. However their commitments to the BSL Plan can be found above.› Orkney has the Highland BSL 1+2 pack in all of their schools and the teachers have received training to deliver the pack as part of 1+2 languages.
Perth and Kinross	<p>Perth and Kinross Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. Video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Offers Family Sign Language tuition. The work and support put in place by Perth and Kinross Council’s Education Department is in line with national position and is needs-led. If a family requires Family Sign Language tuition, the need would be supported.
Renfrewshire	<p>Renfrewshire 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Parents and siblings of deaf children are encouraged to access funding from Children’s Services to learn BSL.

Scottish Borders	<p>Scottish Borders Council 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The BSL Highland pack launched in spring 2020. › Family Sign Language needs are discussed with families.
Shetland	<p>Shetland 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Provides early years staff with information on BSL and Deaf culture, as well as on resources that are available in BSL, to meet the needs of families with a deaf or deafblind child. › Children and young people who use BSL will get the support they need at all stages of their learning, so they can reach their full potential. › Parents who use BSL will have the same opportunities as other parents to be fully involved in their child's education › More pupils will be able to learn BSL at school.
Stirling	<p>Stirling 2018 to 2024: Plan and BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Provides early years and family support staff, and partner childcare and early years providers with information on BSL and Deaf culture, and on resources that are available in BSL, to meet the needs of families with a deaf or deafblind child.
West Dunbartonshire	<p>West Dunbartonshire 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › A pack for delivering BSL in primary schools is under development and training sessions for practitioners are planned for the 20/21 session. › In terms of Family Sign Language tuition, needs are responded to as they arise.

<p>West Lothian</p>	<p>West Lothian 2018 to 2024: Plan available here. BSL video available here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">› Provides staff training and information on BSL and Deaf culture, and on resources available in BSL, to meet the needs of families with a deaf or deafblind child.› Ensures families of deaf and deafblind children have access to nationally developed BSL resources.› Promotes Bookbug sessions available in West Lothian to deaf and deafblind families.› Improves recording systems within Education Services to enable them to determine how many young people use BSL in their schools, as well as the number of young people whose parents and/or guardians also use BSL.
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Appendix 1: Communication and language tool links to websites and resources

www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/language-and-communication/

www.cuedspeech.co.uk/

www.makaton.org/aboutMakaton/

www.avuk.org/what-is-auditory-verbal-therapy

www.signedlanguage.co.uk/SignSupportedEnglish.html

BSL learning resources

Other National Deaf Children's Society resources include:

- › ***Communication With Your Deaf Child***
- › ***My Baby Has a Hearing Loss***
- › ***Understanding Your Child's Hearing Tests.***

If you are a member, these resources can be viewed on our website and are available to download for free. They can be printed as required and can also be ordered through our website, however they are currently out of stock. To become a member for free, complete our simple application [here](#) and access more information, support and resources.

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About us

We're here for every deaf child who needs us – no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate.

Visit our website **www.ndcs.org.uk** or contact our Freephone Helpline to find out how we can support your child at every stage of their life. Join us for free and you'll be able to:

- › download or order our free information
- › come to our events
- › be a part of our online community
- › borrow equipment through our technology loan service
- › read about other families' experiences in our quarterly magazine and email updates
- › access support.



**National
Deaf Children's
Society
SCOTLAND**

**We are the National Deaf Children's Society,
the leading charity for deaf children.**

Freephone Helpline:

0808 800 8880 (voice and text)

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For resource references or to give us your feedback email
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**National
Deaf Children's
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SCOTLAND**