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professionalism



Teaching and supporting deaf learners

A professional guide for teachers

In partnership with



What is this guide for?

The incidence of deafness in the school population is about one in 250 children. If you teach in preschool or lower primary, a much larger number of children will experience temporary deafness through glue ear. Most permanent childhood deafness is detected at birth now with newborn hearing screening, but teachers often spot deafness which has developed since birth. Over 85% of deaf children in Scotland attend their local school (CRIDE, 2019). Others attend a resource-base school which has a higher level of support, a deaf school or a special school focusing on another more significant impairment. The word 'deaf' is used broadly to refer to children who are deaf in one ear to children who are profoundly deaf.

The purpose of this professional guide is to provide support for teachers to reflect on their actions and consider whether they may need further advice or professional learning. This guide is intended to complement your employer's policies and help you meet the additional support needs of this vulnerable group of learners. It is part of a series of guides produced by GTC Scotland. The guides do not form part of the Professional Code for teachers. Teachers and schools may find them useful professional learning and discussion tools but they are not intended for use in any competency or conduct process. They are part of GTC Scotland's services to teachers to enhance teacher professionalism as part of our advisory role as the professional body for all of Scotland's teachers.

What is expected of teachers?

As set out in the Professional Standards for Teachers, you should demonstrate commitment to the professional values of integrity, trust and respect and social justice in all aspects of your role as a teacher. Supporting learners and other members of the school community who have a sensory impairment is a key part of that role.

All teachers should know about the implications for learning of having a sensory impairment and should be aware of what support is available. Class teachers are in the best position to identify undiagnosed possible signs of deafness or visual impairment and pursue referral for further advice.

The Review of Additional Support for Learning Implementation (2020) highlights that all teachers should hold and enact the professional values of inclusion and inclusive practice. Teachers should be positive role models and demonstrate

welcoming, encouraging and inclusive behaviours. In doing so, teachers align with the expectations of the Equality Act 2010 and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended 2009), which set out the legal requirements to protect people from discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and for the provision of additional support for learning. Moreover, the articles of the UNCRC ensure that children are protected, have the opportunity to participate and are provided for – these are known as the '3 Ps' (Participation, Protection and Provision).

Four key features of inclusive practice in schools are that children and young people are in mainstream class as much as possible, participating, achieving and supported.

How to meet the needs of deaf learners

An important part of your role, particularly for early years teachers, is to share any concerns with the Additional Support for Learning teacher if you think a child may be deaf. Ask the local authority teacher of deaf children for advice, even if you are unsure whether deafness is the issue. Some of the warning signs that a child may be deaf include: having unclear speech, a very small vocabulary and appearing to not listen to spoken instructions. The speed of this referral will make a great deal of difference to the child's outcomes with language and school achievement. You can also recommend that the child's parents ask the GP to arrange a hearing test. If so, follow up the result and report it to the service for deaf children.

Once the child is diagnosed as deaf, specialist teachers of deaf children (ToDs) will visit your school and class to discuss the child's needs with you. They will provide practical support and advice, awareness raising for the peer group and staff, and teach school support staff how to check hearing aids and radio aid/FM systems. A radio aid, sometimes called by a brand name such as Roger, cuts out the background noise in a classroom and makes the teacher's voice clearer.

The ToD may provide tutoring for deaf children focusing on language development and pre-teaching vocabulary. This may take place in class or in a separate quiet room, and can include a small group of other children to help develop interactive skills. Deaf children often under-achieve in relation to their hearing peers, but this is not because of learning difficulties. Deaf children with all levels of deafness often experience restricted language input at home and school because they are less able to overhear or watch conversations and gather information from peers, friends and the media. This often results in a smaller vocabulary, weaker reading comprehension and difficulty in working out the views of other people, especially in rapid and informal speech in groups.

The ToD will support you in building strategies to improve attainment, maintain high expectations, and to put in place adjustments for tests and exams. You can provide good quality support for the deaf child by regularly keeping in touch with the ToD, supporting the deaf child in small group discussion and setting up a reading programme to encourage more and wider reading for pleasure.

What different approaches are used with deaf children?

Most deaf children will learn using speaking and listening, so good amplification and listening conditions are important. Deaf children often, however, experience fatigue and exhaustion with lipreading and listening – they need times to switch off and relax too. Social relationships with peers are important to nurture because deaf children often miss quick conversation in friendship groups and they can become socially isolated or might experience bullying.

In Scotland, British Sign Language (BSL) is recognised as a language under the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015. Local authorities have developed their own BSL plans to support the language and the deaf community. About a third of severely and profoundly deaf children in Scotland use BSL or an adapted form called Sign Supported English. Deaf children can use both speech and BSL at different times and for different purposes. Using BSL does not mean that speech is damaged in any way.

For severely and profoundly deaf children, BSL is an important option as they can learn it quickly and without difficulty if tuition is provided. As a teacher you may want to learn BSL but be aware, as with any language it takes a long time to become fluent. Communication professionals such as teachers of deaf children and interpreters will have higher levels of BSL if they work with signing deaf children.

While children with all levels of deafness experience difficulty with literacy, their decoding print is often good because teachers of deaf children focus on this. They may experience continuing difficulties, however, often due to a lack of background information about the world needed for understanding texts. Enrichment opportunities on background knowledge, whether through speech, reading or BSL, are important for all deaf children.

Nevertheless, deaf children can do anything other children can do, given the right support from the start. This includes actions you can take:

- a front position in class is maintained, but also checking the deaf child can see their peers talking;
- ensuring that the classroom aids listening: carpets are fitted, windows closed and noisy equipment fixed;
- ensuring good lighting and reduction of glare: window blinds are fitted and working;
- visual and written information is provided about changes to routine, not only by talk;
- definitions and relations between new terminology are made clear and available in print;
- all video clips and TV programmes used have subtitles;
- for any child with moderate deafness or more, an FM system is considered with the deaf child to enhance the teacher's voice and cut out background noise: the ToD will advise;
- at any age, a reading programme supports more and progressive reading challenges;
- ensuring that hearing aids and cochlear implants are worn and maintained; and
- if the deaf child uses BSL, that the support staff are well qualified.

What you can do

Ask yourself the following reflective questions to support your understanding and practice:

- Do I understand the nature of the listening and communication issues experienced by my learner, and how it may affect their learning in my classroom?
- How do I know that my teaching maximises the strengths and supports the challenges of my learner?
- What do I do when I realise they are struggling with their learning? Have I sought additional support for me and for my learner?
- Have I ensured that the learning environment is suitable for my learner?
- How well have I taken on board the advice I have been given in terms of meeting the needs of deaf learners?
- How well do I ensure my learner feels included in the class, and is maintaining confidence and self-esteem?
- How aware are the rest of the class of the challenges faced by my learner, and to what extent have I encouraged them to support this learner?
- How do I ensure the parents of my learner are essential partners in the learning and development of wellbeing of their child?
- How well do I work with the classroom assistant who supports my learner?
- How well do I engage with the specialist teacher of deaf children and continue their suggested strategies?
- Have I considered what special assessment arrangements should be in place to demonstrate true attainment for my learner?

Additional resources

If you have a deaf child within your class and require further support, please contact the service that delivers support in deaf education in your local authority. If you wish further information and training, please also contact the [Scottish Sensory Centre](#), which is funded by the Scottish Government to provide support for all professionals involved in the education of deaf learners.

- [British Deaf Association](#) – a third sector group which focuses on deaf people who use BSL. BDA Scotland run a successful transitions project for secondary aged pupils
- [The British Association of Teachers of the Deaf \(BATOD\)](#) – their website has information for specialist ToDs and also other interested staff
- [BSL Glossary of curriculum terms](#) – useful for support staff and deaf pupils. The Glossary provides BSL terminology and definitions for STEM subjects. Hosted by the SSC
- [A children's rights-based approach.pdf](#) – aims to help teachers embed a children's rights-based approach and effective learner participation into their teaching. Part of a series of professional guides produced by GTC Scotland
- [CRIDE](#) – annual surveys of deaf education in Scotland and the rest of the UK
- [Local authority BSL plans](#) – find out what your council is aiming for to fulfil the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 and see how it fits in with support for deaf children in schools
- [National Deaf Children' Society](#) – a third sector organisation which provides excellent support for families and useful resources for class and subject teachers
- [Scottish Sensory Centre](#) – a national government funded centre which provides CPD to class teachers and specialist teachers and support staff
- SQA pages about deaf learners and exams: [using sign in exams](#); [assessing speaking and listening skills](#); [BSL as a curriculum subject](#)



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