



**World Federation of the Deaf  
World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section  
Deaf Kidz International**

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## **Joint Statement**

### **Responding to the Safeguarding and Protection Needs of Deaf Children and Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

14 April 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global health crisis impacting communities around the world. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), the WFD Youth Section (WFDYS) and DeafKidz International are carefully monitoring developments during this pandemic and its impact on deaf communities, including deaf <sup>1</sup>children and youth and their families.

Many countries around the world are in partial or full lockdown, forcing deaf children and their families to stay at home. Schools are closed and deaf children face either a lack of educational alternatives or remote and online teaching with questionable accessibility.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends parents and family members of deaf youth be given support in the learning of their national sign language(s) in order to communicate with their deaf children. Many countries have not implemented this recommendation, thus the COVID-19 pandemic brings new challenges and uncertainties to under-resourced families of deaf children struggling in this unpredictable context.

Extra challenges and uncertainties are felt by families in low resource settings who are already feeling the pressure of poverty and marginalisation. The global economy being on hold, households are losing income that will disproportionately hit the world's most vulnerable children, including deaf children and youth, making them an easy prey for child labour,

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<sup>1</sup> In this statement, 'deaf' refers to *all* deaf children and youth and it meant to be inclusive of both those who use "Deaf" as well as those who use "deaf".

domestic servitude, prostitution, forced begging and other exploitative situations, with likely life-long lasting effect on these deaf children and youth. Deaf children and youth at risk of being victims of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse and violence faced heightened risk in these times. The risk increases further if they are forced to isolate with an existing perpetrator of abuse or with an individual with a propensity to abuse.

The shift to online settings also increases the risk and vulnerability of children. In more developed settings, travel restrictions and the increase in the number of online users also risk a significant spike in cybercrimes. Deaf and youth children forced to stay at home are more likely to spend more time online and are thus at risk of connecting with adults who actively seek to connect with children and sexually groom them.

Therefore, the WFD, as the leading global organisation representing the human rights of more than 70 million Deaf people, along with the WFDYS, and DeafKidz International, as the leading agency working to ensuring and safeguarding the protection of deaf children and youth worldwide, urge:

- International bodies, national governments and public health institutions to ensure deaf people, including children and youth, receive adequate and accessible information in the language and format of their choice. This includes national sign language(s), which also encompasses tactile sign languages and sign languages used by other populations in the country. This information must include all the crucial recommendations related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as handwashing and social distancing, as well as explaining the reasons behind these measures.
- National governments to work with deaf people through their representative organisation - the national associations of the deaf - to ensure the provision of adequate information and safeguarding access to health and education services. The provision of such services must respect the spirit and mandates of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC) and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- National governments, in partnership with the national associations of the deaf, to implement accessible emergency services for deaf children who are victim of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. This service must be accessible, ideally via direct communication, but also through SMS texting and via remote interpreting through Video Relay Services.
- Governments at the national, regional and local levels, working with associations of the deaf and organisations working with deaf people, including deaf children, to undertake all possible measures to ensure deaf children and youth are protected from physical, psychological and sexual abuse and violence during the confinement period.
- Deaf children and youth cautiously use the Internet to meet each other and maintain social networks with each other while sheltering in place.
- Parents of deaf children and youth to give support in educating their children on safe Internet and social media usage, and monitor usage and interactions as necessary.
- National governments to provide accessible information to deaf children and youth and their families about the risks of the Internet and unmonitored extensive social media

use. This accessible information should be promoted and circulated by national associations of the deaf and organisations working with deaf people, including deaf children.

This unprecedented public health crisis has exposed flaws in existing systems of child protection and support with regard to deaf children and youth. The World Federation of the Deaf and DeafKidz International are committed to ensuring no deaf child or youth is exposed to harm during the Covid 19 pandemic.

### **About the World Federation of the Deaf**

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 125 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA).

[www.wfdeaf.org](http://www.wfdeaf.org)

Email: [info@wfdeaf.org](mailto:info@wfdeaf.org)

### **About the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section**

The World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) was established in 1995 in Vienna, Austria and WFDYS is a section of the World Federation of the Deaf. The WFDYS has its internal rules that are based on the WFD Statutes. It has 50 Youth Ordinary Members over the world. The main aim of the WFDYS is to advocate for the human rights of deaf youth includes having a full access to bilingual education, to have strong cultural and linguistic identity, and be empowered.

### **About Deaf Kidz International**

DeafKidz International is the UK's leading organisation working to respond to the protection, health and wellbeing needs of Deaf, hard of hearing, deafened and DeafBlind (D/Deaf) children and young people in low resource and complex humanitarian settings.

[www.deafkidzinternational.org/](http://www.deafkidzinternational.org/)