

Position Statement on Educational Rights for Deaf Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Wednesday, April 7, 2021

[Position Statement in International Sign](#)

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on access to education has significantly impacted deaf learners. Around the world, deaf children and youth lack access to quality bilingual education in national sign languages, and parents of deaf children lack support for learning sign languages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools have closed and/or moved online. This includes both deaf schools and local schools; however, during the pandemic local schools have especially struggled to meet the needs of deaf learners. Especially in the global South, when schools have re-opened, many parents have been unable to afford school fees or have not sent their children to school due to concerns about the ongoing spread of COVID-19. Other deaf children and youth, including children and youth in the global North, have left school altogether during the pandemic. Deaf children and youth may be further isolated at home and lack access to communication.

This lack of access to and support for sign language education for deaf children and their families exacerbates language deprivation in deaf children. Language deprivation is the lack of full access to a natural sign language during approximately the first five years of life. Deaf children and youth who have been deprived of language during early childhood have ongoing learning needs that must be addressed by educators, governments, and service providers. Deaf children and youth are also at significantly greater risk for abuse and exploitation, and this vulnerable situation is worsened during the pandemic.

The worldwide shift to virtual learning has left many deaf learners behind since many families lack good Internet access. Most online learning materials are also not designed to meet the needs of deaf learners. Online teaching materials and virtual classes and meetings may lack subtitles and qualified teachers and sign language interpreters. However, due to differential access to sign languages for many deaf learners, these learners may still be in a situation where they are still acquiring a language base in their national sign languages, and virtual learning, even in national sign languages, often does not meet their needs. This is because learners may not understand sign language videos and/or are not able to ask for clarification.

In situations where deaf learners have good Internet access, there is a need for guidelines regarding the use of virtual learning technology. In many cases, governments and schools will continue to make more use of online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic ends. Simply recruiting a sign language interpreter to interpret online learning materials can present further barriers. Qualified teachers who are proficient in national sign languages are essential for the success of virtual learning. Online materials should include visual content, demonstrations, and pedagogical innovations designed for deaf learners. Moreover, deaf children and youth and their parents and teachers need support with safe use of social media and the Internet, since deaf children and youth are vulnerable to online exploitation.

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) calls on countries to provide education to deaf learners in national sign languages in order to maximize academic and social development. This includes equal access to primary, secondary, and postsecondary education as well as vocational training and adult education. Article 25 of the UN CRPD calls on governments to provide early intervention to deaf children and provide services to prevent further disabilities, such as language deprivation. This includes equal access to early childhood education.

Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls on countries to ensure that children with disabilities, including deaf children, have access to education so that children achieve the fullest possible development. The same Article states children with disabilities must have equal rights with respect to family life and early and comprehensive information, services, and support must be provided to families. Both the CRPD and CRC call on countries to provide parents of deaf children with services that support parenting duties. This includes free, comprehensive sign language tuition for parents and families of deaf children. However, in many countries, governments and schools do not meet their obligations to deaf learners.

The WFD calls on all governments to ensure deaf children and youth receive equitable access to information and education in national sign languages during and after the pandemic, including access to instruction by sign language-proficient teachers and the provision of visual learning materials. Parents of deaf children must also receive support for sign language learning, including remote learning where available, to support family communication and children's language development.

Guidelines on Best Practices in Virtual and Non-Virtual Learning Environments

- Ensure learners receive equitable access to information and education in national sign languages during the pandemic, including access to instruction by sign language-proficient teachers and the provision of visual learning materials;
- Ensure parents of deaf children receive support for sign language learning via home visits, parent classes, and distance learning to support family communication and children's language development;
- Ensure deaf children and youth and their parents and teachers are given support with the safe use of social media and the Internet;
- Implement interactive online activities for deaf children and youth to support their social and emotional development;
- Provide individual home visits by sign language teachers and deaf community support workers to parents and deaf children and youth, in accordance with local covid-19 regulations;
- Support deaf children's right to return to in-person schooling with other deaf learners;
- Support access to higher education to enable deaf people to become teachers;
- Provide ongoing training to support hearing teachers in improving their proficiency in national sign languages.