



*Legal Seat – Helsinki, Finland*

## **WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF**

An International Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, WHO and the Council of Europe. WFD was established in Rome in 1951

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### **Submission to the Special Rapporteur on the right to health on the right to health in early childhood**

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute in developing a report on the right to health in early childhood. The WFD would like to raise a few points of concern regarding deaf children for consideration in drafting the report because the lack of access to sign language in early years of life may lead to health problems in later life, particularly in mental health.

Sign language is related to all human rights of deaf people. When a deaf child is proficient in sign language, s/he can communicate her or his needs and become protected as a human being.<sup>1</sup> This would help decreasing the risk of deaf children becoming physically disciplined, which is currently higher than experienced by hearing children.<sup>2</sup>

According to the World Health Organization, as many as five of every 1000 children are born deaf or hard of hearing, or acquire that disability during early childhood. With appropriate support provided to children and their families they can succeed in society on equal basis. It is important to provide sign language training to family members and medical professionals to enable effective communication with deaf people in sign language.<sup>3</sup> Delayed opportunity to learn sign language leads to behavioural and psychosocial difficulties for deaf children. Such difficulties are not experienced by deaf children who acquire sign language at early age compared to hearing peers.<sup>4</sup>

National governments have the responsibility to facilitate and promote the use of sign languages.<sup>5</sup> Clear mentioning of the benefits that teaching sign language to the whole family of a deaf child brings, needs to be incorporated into the information that medical professionals should be offering to parents of deaf children upon early identification.<sup>6</sup>

The critical learning years occur in early childhood, at ages 0-3, when a language should be acquired. Without sufficient support from family and community, deaf children often learn a language only at school after the critical learning years have passed.<sup>7</sup> Deaf people who have not learn sign language at early age may experience problems in cognitive, social and emotional development. The majority of deaf children fall under this risk population because more than 90% of them are born to hearing parents who very rarely know sign language.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WFD Policy – Education rights for deaf children. Available at <http://wfdeaf.org/databank/policies/education-rights-for-deaf-children>

<sup>2</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1039.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization: 10 facts on deafness. Available at <http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/deafness/facts/en/index4.html> and <http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/deafness/facts/en/index7.html>

<sup>4</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1039.

<sup>5</sup> Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 21.

<sup>6</sup> WFD statement at the opening of the 11th session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Available at <http://wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/WFD-Statement-at-the-11th-session-of-the-CRPD-Committee-31-March-2014.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> WFD Policy – Education rights for deaf children. Available at <http://wfdeaf.org/databank/policies/education-rights-for-deaf-children>

<sup>8</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger, Dobner, Gerich, Lehner, Lenz & Goldberg: Mental distress and quality of life in a deaf population. Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol. 2005 (40). p. 737-738.

The development of neurocognitive processing domains, such as working memory, attention, and inhibition is negatively affected by the lack of having linguistic skills from early age.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to acquiring sign language deaf children are usually isolated in extensive measures and treated as problem children. This can lead to increasing rates of depressive symptoms and insomnia later in life. Deaf people experience more mental distress than the hearing population. The lack of communication possibilities pose deaf children to risk of becoming abused that leads to common mental disorders. Any child, including deaf children, should not be faced with communication problems or experience abuse.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that without acquiring communication skills in sign language during early childhood, it is difficult for a deaf person from early age onward to make herself/himself understood that could lead to serious medical errors at any stage of life when they face health problems.<sup>11</sup> Learning sign language at late age may affect communication abilities also on health issues. According to a research, 75 % of deaf patients at a psychiatric unit were unable to communicate in any language. The lack of possibility to communicate with family members from early age poses deaf children in four times higher risk of acquiring mental health disorders and becoming abused compared to deaf children who have had good communication skills. Deaf people who learned sign language after early childhood reported more mental distress than those who have used sign language from early age.<sup>12</sup>

The WFD highlights the importance of national governments implementing their responsibilities as per the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to provide the opportunity for all deaf children and their families to learn sign language as soon as they are identified deaf.<sup>13</sup> The provision of support in sign language and other measures to families of deaf children as a result of early identification can protect children from abuse.<sup>14</sup> The ability to communicate with family members can prevent mental health problems.<sup>15</sup> Experience from early childhood have long-lasting impact on mental health wellbeing.<sup>16</sup>

The WFD hopes that this contribution is useful for drafting the report on the right to health in early childhood.

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#### **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 134 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 member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). ([www.wfdeaf.org](http://www.wfdeaf.org)) Email: [info@wfdeaf.org](mailto:info@wfdeaf.org)*

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<sup>9</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1038.

<sup>10</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger, Dobner, Gerich, Lehner, Lenz & Goldberg: Mental distress and quality of life in a deaf population. Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol. 2005 (40). p. 738 and 740-741.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, Ladd & Powell: Deafness might damage your health. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 979

<sup>12</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1038-1039.

<sup>13</sup> WFD Policy – Education rights for deaf children. Available at <http://wfdeaf.org/databank/policies/education-rights-for-deaf-children>

<sup>14</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1042.

<sup>15</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1037.

<sup>16</sup> Fellingner, Holzinger & Pollard: Mental health of deaf people. Lancet 2012. Vol. 379. p. 1039.