

Should Sign Language be Taught in Schools?

There are approximately 45,000 deaf children living in the UK alone, according to the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), and 50,000 people who use sign language as their first or sole language, according to disability.co.uk. But how many of us actually know how to communicate with them?

Very few hearing people learn sign language through their own means. This stops many deaf or hard of hearing people having the same experiences or chances as hearing people. Many deaf people are unable to learn how to speak due to the severity of their disability, so the lack of communication can become a large problem when it comes to the needs and wants of the deaf community.

Many Brits, however, are able to speak another spoken language. This is probably due to the fact that students must learn a foreign language at least for a few years at secondary school standard, so every secondary school nationwide teaches another spoken language. However, British Sign Language (recognised as an official language in 2003) is rarely taught as a lesson. It is more commonly taught as an extra-curricular club, although it's still only a few schools who provide this. This means that hard-of-hearing students find comprehensive schools especially difficult as very few people can communicate with them. If they can't go to a state school, isolation becomes an issue and they have to find a specialist school for the deaf and hard of hearing.

Few students and adults are likely to learn sign language in their own time unless they need to. If it were a required class, everyone would have at least a basic understanding of how to communicate. It's especially important in our aging population, as around a third of elderly people are hard of hearing, many of whom only lost their hearing as they aged – anyone could go deaf, so we should learn how to deal with this now in case it happens to us.

It is generally accepted that it would be beneficial for BSL to be taught in schools as an extra lesson, with a few even saying that they would take it as an option, if offered. The main issue for the government would be the extra staff – schools for the deaf and hard of hearing are already usually understaffed, so how can we expect to find the extra signing teachers for public schools? If money was put into training language teachers, however, this may not be a problem. Funding is normally sent to more pressing issues, so this would probably not be completed for at least a few years, if ever.

A new petition, however, has been set up by the NDCS (National Deaf Children's Society) to get this issue debated in the House of Commons. If enough politicians agree to it, British Sign Language would be taught across schools nationwide as an option, just as you could choose to do Spanish or French – a scheme which is already in place in Scotland. This would allow thousands of people a chance to be able to communicate with the deaf community. When this was put to the House of Commons, it was turned down, but the petition has still brought the issue into the public eye.

This issue has recently come to light after the success of the short film 'The Silent Child' in this year's Academy Awards. The film, which won the Oscar for the best live action short film, follows the story of a four-year-old profoundly deaf girl who is unable to speak for herself until a social worker teaches her how to use sign language. Rachel Shenton, who wrote the piece, was inspired to write it after her father became profoundly deaf through complications from chemotherapy.

(All statistics are taken from www.disability.co.uk or the National Deaf Children's Society website)