

The importance of Auslan for deaf families in NDIS Plans

Many families in Australia can be described as deaf families. This means they are a family with a deaf infant or child, or have a family member who is deaf. Deaf Australia is deeply concerned about reports from deaf families that the NDIS is refusing to fund private Auslan tutoring for deaf families when it is requested. Instead, the NDIS argues that deaf families can learn Auslan at community classes tailored for adults in the general community. This position is grounded in harmful and inaccurate ideologies about deafness, child language development, and family language learning. It is not based on science or best practice. It is also dangerous for deaf families, as it puts deaf infants and children at risk of lifelong language deprivation trauma. It is vital that the NDIS supports deaf families to learn and communicate using Auslan by funding Auslan tutors who can work directly with deaf families at home, along with any other necessary family-centred support that is requested.

Community Auslan classes are not suitable for deaf families

Community classes are not suitable for deaf families because they are institutional second language learning environments tailored for adults who are not deaf and who have already learned English (Napier, et al., 2007). Auslan learning in community classes depends on adult peer-to-peer interactions, whereby a group of adult learners interact with each other under formal instruction from a single Auslan teacher. Lessons are typically structured around lists of Auslan vocabulary and grammatical domains, and taught using written English and Auslan signs within formal classroom question-answer contexts. They are usually only one or two hours per week, only available after hours on weeknights, and only in central urban locations or online. They are typically only offered as a paid service. There are some limited community classes that are free for families already registered with specific hearing service providers, but these classes have the same problems described above. Adult second language learners who benefit from community classes tend to be hearing middle-class urban Anglo-Australians, who are also more able to attend community classes and concurrently seek more informal language learning opportunities at deaf community social events. None of this is possible for the majority of deaf families who need to learn Auslan.

Deaf families need something different: they need a family language policy, and they need robust, varied, and immersive opportunities for family language learning. A family language policy refers to the explicit decisions that families make about language use and language learning, as well as the implicit ideologies and attitudes that shape these decisions, especially in child language acquisition contexts (King, et al., 2008). Careful development of a family language policy is especially important for deaf families, who are often struggling with conflicting information about what language choices are best for their deaf child, and how to

include their deaf child within existing family language practices, which may already be culturally and linguistically marginalised in Australian society (Willoughby, 2012). Many deaf family language policies depend on learning and using both Auslan and English. Some also include learning and using other spoken and signed languages that are culturally, linguistically, and pragmatically important. For example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages that are so vital to First Nations families; the mother tongue languages used with elderly family members and caregivers who migrated to Australia as adults; and the heritage spoken and signed languages used within specific family and social contexts.

Learning Auslan prevents language deprivation and other communication traumas

When the NDIS refuses to fund Auslan tutors for deaf families, it does not mean that deaf families will be channeled into learning Auslan at community classes. It means the NDIS accepts that deaf infants and children will be condemned to a lifetime of social exclusion and language deficits within their own family. Deafness itself does not affect language and social development; being denied access to natural language acquisition and social development does (Hall, 2018; Cheng, et. al, 2019).

A common experience shared by many deaf children and adults is dinner table syndrome: “the chronic experience of observing spoken conversations between other family members and not understanding what is being said” (Murray, et al., 2020). Another common experience is cognitive fatigue: the relentless exhaustion resulting from the huge cognitive efforts needed to make sense of speech and other sounds aurally and/or visually, even with assistance from hearing technologies such as cochlear implants and hearing aids (Werfel & Hendricks, 2016). These are mental loads borne exclusively by the deaf child or adult. Most hearing people are not able to consistently adjust themselves or their environment to properly include a deaf child or adult in their spoken language interactions. Even if they understand what adjustments are needed, it takes concerted efforts to remember to make these adjustments in real time. This rarely happens. It is not reasonable or possible to expect a young child to constantly advocate for their need for better lighting, quieter spaces, or fewer people talking in order to make some sense of what is being said. These experiences are shared by all deaf children and adults, but they are especially painful for children and adults who have only learned spoken languages such as English.

In the worst cases, deaf infants and children are at risk of irreparable language deprivation syndrome (Hall, 2018). Language deprivation syndrome occurs when a child is denied access to mastering a natural language during their critical early language learning years. It presents as underdeveloped brain connectivity for neural language pathways, and difficulties perceiving and producing language (Cheng, et al., 2019). Language deprivation leads to extreme social, emotional, educational and employment disadvantages in adulthood (Hall, 2018). Most children and adults with language deprivation are deaf people who have been systematically denied access to natural language development and socialisation during early childhood. This occurs when teachers and parents focus solely on speech and spoken language development, without also providing access to a natural signed language such as Auslan. Even deaf children who are implanted early and show promising early spoken language development begin to suffer beyond age four, as their spoken language learning

environments become more complex and they cannot keep up with the pace of natural speech (Bo Wie, et. al, 2020).

Language deprivation is a leading cause of neurocognitive and social trauma for deaf and hard of hearing people, yet it is entirely preventable. When language delays are identified in deaf children, this is most likely due to lack of accessible language input. The solution is not simply to intensify English and speech training. The solution is to ensure the deaf child learns a language that is accessible to them: a natural signed language (Hall, et al., 2019). This should occur early as possible without waiting for language delays. There is ample evidence that when deaf infants and children experience early access to fluent signers of a natural signed language such as Auslan, their signed and spoken language develops on par with other bilingual children (Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021). Deaf children who learn both signed and spoken languages are more likely to become successful adults, and there is much less risk involved when deaf children and families are supported to develop a robust communicative repertoire that they can draw upon as needed. There is absolutely nothing to lose for deaf families learning Auslan, and everything to gain.

Effective family language learning is accessible, social, and close to home

When deaf families decide that Auslan is essential for their deaf child or family member, it is vital that all immediate and extended family members have robust, varied, and immersive opportunities for family language learning. Family language learning centres on social engagement and connection between Auslan teachers and family members within their self-determined familial and cultural contexts, including their home. It is best supported in accordance with the specific cultural, linguistic, and pragmatic needs of each family. It is not based on just one or two adults learning Auslan in adult-centred community classes and bringing this home, which offers only impoverished signed language input for deaf children, and can lead to the deaf child becoming overly reliant on the one signing family member to facilitate communication with other family members. In other cases, the deaf child's signed language development progresses much faster than their adult family members, which often leads to adult family members plateauing or giving up on their own Auslan learning, as they feel they can never catch up or keep up. There is a need to balance and support these different language development pathways within family language learning contexts.

Learning Auslan at home needs to be a concrete possibility for both immediate and extended members of deaf families. This involves deaf children learning Auslan alongside their siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents, and other family members during their everyday social activities. These include cooking meals, eating together, reading a book, doing homework, and playing with peers. It involves learning Auslan within natural and informal interactions built around the child's individual interests and current language development. As this is not possible in community classroom environments, Auslan tutors are the best placed language practitioners to facilitate effective family language learning in the home. When deaf families are supported to learn Auslan effectively, their deaf children or family members are less likely to experience social isolation and negative language and mental health outcomes, and more likely to experience social belonging, physical and emotional safety, and connection within their own families. When the NDIS refuses to fund Auslan tutors for deaf families, it is enacting systemic violence on the very people it was created to support.

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