***Deaf Australia advocates for Auslan access from birth to improve Deaf lives***

Friday 10th November, 2023.

Deaf Australia has long advocated for the right for deaf individuals to access and use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) from birth, particularly when identified as deaf infants. Auslan, the language of the Australian Deaf community, has been recognised as a genuine language with linguistic features validated by experts worldwide.

Contrary to misconceptions, choosing Auslan does not increase the risk of social isolation or poor health for Deaf individuals. Rather, such challenges stem from barriers imposed by the broader hearing society, not deafness itself.

With approximately 97% of deaf babies born to hearing families, Deaf Australia highlights the prevalent lack of sign language familiarity within these families. The first point of contact for parents upon identifying deafness is the medical profession, where the focus tends to be on cochlear implantation, speech pathology, and mapping, neglecting the potential benefits of introducing Auslan.

Deaf Australia emphasises the significant difference between speech and language development, noting that information provided by the medical profession rarely suggests offering Auslan to deaf babies and their families. Deaf Australia, along with the deaf community underscores Auslan's value as a visual and vibrant language with its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, challenging the common belief that a spoken language-only approach with cochlear implantation guarantees success.

Despite research supporting the bilingual and bicultural approach for deaf babies and children, the medical profession often lacks awareness or support for such methods. Reviews in South Australia and Queensland have revealed serious, life-threatening gaps in skilled staff, services, and inadequate policies, with a critical absence of information about the opportunity to learn Auslan.

Recent compensation efforts by the South Australian and Queensland governments, totalling $1.48 million and $2.2 million, respectively, raise concerns. Deaf Australia questions the oversight in compensatory processes where speech services are offered without acknowledging the need for funding opportunities for families to learn Auslan. **Barring any language acquisition disabilities, if Auslan was welcomed, offered and celebrated, it is likely none of the language and developmental delays would have happened.**  Deaf Australia emphasises the crucial lesson that a bilingual and bimodal context significantly reduces language and learning delays for deaf children compared to a speech-only pathway.

Deaf Australia calls for increased awareness, policy changes, and inclusive practices to ensure the rights and well-being of deaf individuals within the broader community. Deaf Australia remains committed to fostering an environment where Auslan, alongside English and other family languages, is welcomed, offered, and celebrated from the early stages of life, preventing unnecessary language and developmental delays for deaf children and their families.

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Media Contact:

Jen Blyth, Chief Executive

E: ceo@deafaustralia.org.au

SMS ONLY: 04 77 551 844

**About Deaf Australia:**

Deaf Australia was founded in 1986 as a not-for-profit organisation that represents all Deaf, Deafblind, and hard of hearing people, and others who are fluent and knowledgeable about Auslan. The focus has and continues to be on developing access to information and accessible communication. We work with Australian governments and collaborate with key stakeholders to make sure that Australia complies with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The UN Convention and the National Disability Strategy guides our work; we aspire to achieve equity for Deaf people across all areas of life.