

EVALUATION OF FAMILY SIGN AT HOME PILOT

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY REPORT

Elizabeth Thomas – April 2025

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BDA
BRITISH DEAF ASSOCIATION



"It is clear that introducing sign language to deaf children and their families as early as possible makes a powerful impact. This evaluation report, and our previous studies, demonstrate this very distinctly.

Thanks to funding from the Masonic Charitable Foundation and the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, our pilot project – led by the BSL in Our Hands campaign – has given families the opportunity to begin their British Sign Language journey together. This early access to communication has already transformed lives.

With your continued support and donations, we can extend this life-changing opportunity to even more families across the UK. We now call on the Government to commit to the long-term future of this programme by ensuring that free BSL courses are made available to every family with a deaf child. This is essential for building lasting, meaningful connections and giving all children the best possible start in life."

Jaz Mann, BDA's Head of Community



"I've witnessed firsthand the frustration and emotional distance that families (parents, grandparents, and siblings) can experience when they lack the tools to communicate with a deaf child. But through the Family Sign at Home project, I've also seen something extraordinary: transformation.

Watching families connect during these sessions and seeing a deaf child light up with recognition and understanding when their loved ones are finally able to 'speak' their language has been nothing short of powerful. British Sign Language didn't just give them vocabulary; it opened doors to connection, confidence and joy.

It's been a privilege to witness the impact of this project. For many families, it's not just been a learning experience - it's been a life-changing one."

Mhairi Simpson, BDA's England Manager

Background

In 2024 the British Deaf Association (BDA) launched its 'BSL in Our Hands' campaign* to highlight the right of deaf children to access BSL within the first five years of their life. Having access to quality BSL within the crucial early years window (0-5 years old) supports deaf children's wellbeing, cognitive development and lifelong outcomes.

The campaign draws attention to the lack of provision currently for families of deaf children to learn the BSL that they need in order to: communicate effectively with their deaf child, build family bonds and provide a solid foundation for their child's development.

The BDA designed the Family Sign at Home (FSH) project to highlight the demand and need for high-quality BSL tuition for families, and the difference it can make, particularly for the hearing families into which 90% of deaf children are born.[1]

[1] Rawlings B.W. and Jensema C. Two Studies of the Families of Hearing Impaired Children. Office of Demographics, Washington DC Gallaudet University. 1977.

* www.bda.org.uk/bsl-in-our-hands/



Family Sign at Home Impact Fact Sheet

Family Sign at Home (FSH) was created by a deaf-led team at the BDA to equip families with deaf children under 5 with British Sign Language so that...



Hearing parents communicate with their deaf child



Their child has the best chances to develop in the early years



Their deaf child grows up to thrive

6 Weeks of 1 hour sessions

Delivered in the family Home or online as needed

By Deaf BSL Tutors Providing holistic family support & positive deaf role models

With 1 bespoke curriculum and resource pack designed by a qualified teacher of the deaf and deaf parent to deaf / hearing children

REACH

FSH was implemented from Aug 2024 to Feb 2025. The project aimed to reach 50 families across England & Wales.

51 Families
Completed the project

172%
Demand for places

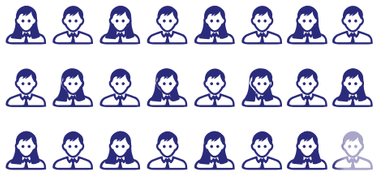
Target
Project target exceeded





IMPACT

PARENTS



96%

Felt they had learnt 'as much as' or 'more than' they hoped from the project.

Reported an impact on their ability to communicate with their child.

"His little face lights up when he knows you're understanding him or he gets a new sign."

As a result, parents' use of BSL with their child started to increase:

We're more aware of trying to sign as much as possible in the everyday. It's definitely helping when [child] isn't wearing his hearing aids.





CHILDREN

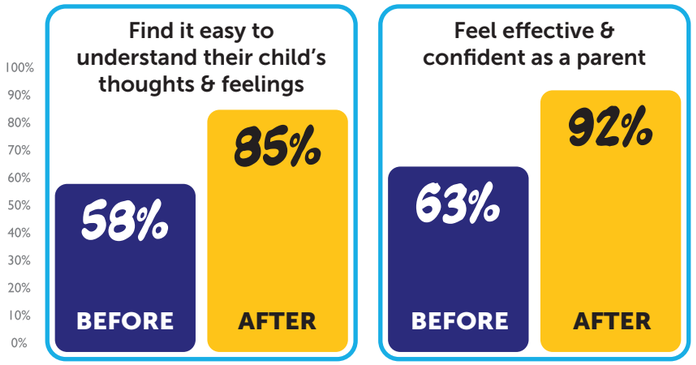


During and after the FSH course, the project also supported children's wider wellbeing and sense of identity.

It built her confidence quite a bit, to have an adult come round who had a cochlear implant and was signing. She was a bit awestruck, like the tutor was a celebrity.

FAMILIES

Parents reported wider effects on their relationship with their child, and how the project eased their stress.



"Our tutor does what she wants & lives her life...It made us feel really calm and relaxed. [Our child] is going to be fine."



Case Study

How the Family Sign at Home project brought the Adamson Family closer.

The Adamson family home is a happier place to be since they started learning British Sign Language together, according to Mum Lindsey.



Three-year-old Oscar and his little sister Ottilie, who has just turned one, are both profoundly deaf due to a genetic condition, which was diagnosed during the newborn hearing screening.

Their hearing parents did not know they were carrying the gene – which meant there was a one in four chance of their children being deaf – and newborn Oscar was the first person they had ever met with hearing loss.

While both children wear cochlear implants which allow them to access some sound, they have limited access to speech which has understandably led to frustrations.

While Mum Lindsey has been learning BSL independently she has struggled to teach her children at the same time, so the Family Sign at Home project seemed the perfect opportunity to learn together. She said: "It was fantastic that we could all learn at the same time and our relationship has definitely improved now there are fewer frustrations.

"Our teacher was brilliant at getting Oscar engaged and she tailored the signs to things he was interested in such as Paw Patrol and diggers, cars and trains.

"My husband's confidence with signing improved greatly too and it has sparked an interest with other family members, who are now learning alongside us; which is brilliant.

"The fact that we could learn at home was great too, because we could work around naptimes and learn in a place where we felt relaxed."

The Family Sign at Home sessions also gave the Adamsons tools beyond vocabulary.

They learned about deaf awareness, the importance of facial expressions and how to adapt everyday activities to be more visually accessible –



turning reading time into a signing storytime or using signs during play.

Lindsey added: "Before this, I felt quite thrown in at the deep end. There's such a steep learning curve when you find out your child is deaf.

"It's hard work with a newborn, but if they have hearing loss that adds in another layer of challenges."

Looking to the future, the Adamsons are eager to continue their BSL journey. Oscar has started to engage more with signing and Lindsey was inspired to continue studying for formal BSL qualifications.

"I just wish these sessions were widely available to every hearing parent of a deaf child," she said. "It's so valuable because it hasn't just helped us to communicate – it's helped us grow closer as a family."

Case Study

Toddler Ebubechukwu struggles with speech, but is no longer lost for words



"His siblings are proud when he learns something new, and it's brought us all closer. We're so grateful for the support - it's made a huge difference in our lives."

The Family Sign at Home project didn't just support deaf children - it made a life-changing impact on little Ebubechukwu Matthews, who is non-verbal.

Learning a few basic signs has given him a way to connect with his family for the first time.

Two-year-old Ebubechukwu often felt frustrated by his inability to make his parents and older siblings understand him.

When a social worker recommended the Family Sign at Home project, it turned out to be transformative - giving the whole family a new way to connect and understand each other.

Mum Chinonyerem Eghwrudje said: "We don't know why Ebubechukwu isn't talking, but he was having tantrums and getting very upset that he couldn't tell us what he wanted.

"He is too little to take an active part in the sessions himself but myself and his two siblings participated and so we are teaching him over time.

"We started with simple signs like 'eat', 'drink', and 'nappy'," Chinonyerem continued. "Now, when we use those signs and he responds, you can see he's pleased. It's like he's finally being heard."

The project gave the family the tools to break down communication barriers in a loving and familiar environment.

"It's helped the whole family," Chinonyerem added.

Ebubechukwu starts nursery in September, and Chinonyerem hopes that his ability to sign will help ease the transition.

"It gives me comfort to know he has a way to express himself," she said. "He might still struggle with speech, but he won't be completely lost for words anymore."

For families like this, the Family Sign at Home project has opened the door to a new world of understanding - proving that even the simplest signs can lead to the most meaningful connections.



THE PROJECT

FSH sessions were delivered from August 2024 to February 2025 across England & Wales, with funding from Masonic Charitable Foundation.

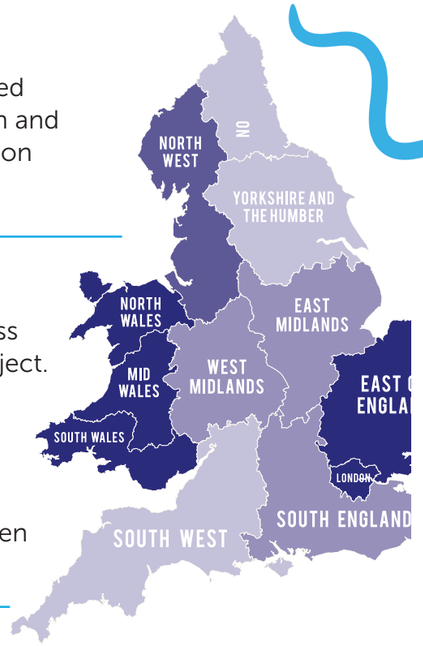
During this time the project underwent an evaluation, led by a mixed hearing-deaf team, that answered questions about implementation and early outcomes. This summary shares learnings from implementation and evaluation during this period.

Who took part?

The project aimed to reach 50 families. In total, 56 families across England and Wales signed up and 51 families completed the project. Over 30 were placed on a waiting list due to high demand.

- Project target exceeded
- 172% demand for places

The project targets hearing families of deaf children. Most children joined the project aged either 1-2 years old, or 4-5 years old.



Age of participants:



< 12 Months	**15%**
13-24 Months	**35%**
25-36 Months	**15%**
37-48 Months	**12%**
49-60 Months	**23%**

"It's hard work with a newborn, but if they have hearing loss that adds in another layer of challenges." **- Parent**







Most children taking part:

- Were moderate (33%) or more profoundly (37%) deaf
- Had no deaf family members (70%)
- Had their deafness confirmed before they were 3 months old (56%)
- Used hearing aids (56%) or Cochlear Implants

Parents[2] joining the project faced significant stress and worry around their child's future and wellbeing:

44% reported that they "often feel overwhelmed when I think about my child or their needs"

41% reported that they "often feel stressed about issues or decisions relating to my child"

However they were also committed to learning BSL for their child:

96% parents agreed that learning BSL was a priority for them at project start.

What does the project mean for families?

Families want to learn BSL so that they can improve their communication with their child now, give their child more communication options for the future & ensure their child has access to the Deaf community.

"I strongly feel that learning BSL is an important way to introduce all of us into the wider Deaf community and culture - and all the richness that offers" **- Parent**

"We don't know what will happen to [our child's] hearing in the future, but we don't want whatever happens to be a big deal" **- Parent**

Nevertheless, families experience various barriers to learning BSL.

96% families reported at least one barrier

The main barriers they experience are:

Finding classes at the right time or place (in person)	**80%**
Not having enough time	**68%**
Cost	**56%**
Arranging childcare	**56%**

"Our daughter is deaf and we want her to access BSL. We are struggling to afford courses though" **- Parent**

FSH is designed to overcome these barriers by being:

- **Home-based**
- **Flexible**
- **Free**

[2] - The project welcomes parents and carers of deaf children. This summary will refer to 'parents' only for the sake of brevity. All figures relating to parents given in the remainder of the report refer to the evaluation sample (n=25).

What works for families?

Overall satisfaction with the project was high. Families were particularly happy with the individualised approach, the quality of tuition and how relevant the content was to their families' lives. Home-based delivery had particular benefits over online delivery.

Personalised tuition for the whole family

Families felt the **quality of tuition was high**, and that sessions could include parents, children and even other family members and friends. Having **individual family sessions accelerated learning**: tutors could tailor sessions to children's personal contexts & parents could ask questions, both about BSL and wider issues. It also meant tutors could **provide emotional support to parents** as needed.

96% Agree the tutor explained things well

88% Agree the lessons were fun for everyone taking part

Curriculum & resources

The FSH curriculum was valued because it focused on **topics & relevant to families with young children** and reflected the actual context the language would be used in. Families & tutors emphasized the importance of having physical resources to work with, during and after the FSH sessions.

"The resources provided were helpful" **92%** Agree

"The lessons were at the right level" **96%** Agree

"The content of the lessons was relevant" **96%** Agree

A flexible approach

Families could choose to have sessions in person at home, or online via Zoom and then choose a day and time that suited them. Some requested home visits but could not be matched with a local tutor.

Families valued this flexibility because it not only enabled them to take part but also arrange childcare, pick a time when they had more energy for learning & when they could continue practising after their lesson.

96% Agree the timing of the lessons suited them

88% Agree the location of teh lessons suited them

Learning in the home

Satisfaction levels were similar across home-based & online delivery. Online delivery helped where there was no tutor available, and some parents found it easier to focus online when there were no children present.

However, **additional benefits of home delivery** were identified:

- Engaging young children, which can be challenging with this age group but was more effective in person

"The [session] with my child was difficult online as I had to look at them, and at the screen and missed some communication whichever way I was looking"
- Parent

"The child was shy with me but there was a lot of engagement. They were looking at mum and dad."
- Tutor

- Teaching in a natural environment where the language will be used

"Being able to [sign] in the space that you use...it felt more like you could make it part of the day."
- Parent

- Enabling tutors to offer more tailored teaching & holistic support, after building a closer relationship with the family in person

"Face-to-face, I can teach, nurture and encourage"
- Tutor



Challenges

Tutors faced a few challenges in delivering the FSH project, including:

- Engaging young children
- Teaching families with more prior knowledge of BSL
- Needing to adapt quickly to meet additional needs e.g. other physical disabilities, high parent stress & English as a Second Language in the home

What does the project achieve?

Families reported improvements in their parents' knowledge and use of BSL, and the communication between them and their child after taking part in FSH. They also reported some positive effects on child and parent wellbeing.

Parents

- 96% of parents felt they had learnt 'as much as' or 'more than' they hoped or expected from the project

As a result, parents' use of BSL with their child started to increase:

- Many parents (96%) consequently reported an impact on their ability to communicate with their child.

96%

Children

During and after the FSH course,

92% of parents observed an impact on their child's ability to communicate

"We're more aware of trying to sign as much as possible in the everyday. It's definitely helping when [my child] isn't wearing his hearing aids"

"His little face lights up when he knows you're understanding him, or he gets a new sign."

They also saw improvement in their child's:

58% ability to express their thoughts or feelings

50% mood when interacting with other family members

The project also supported children's wider wellbeing and sense of identity:

"It built her confidence quite a bit, to have an adult come round who had a cochlear implant and was signing. She was a bit awestruck, like [the tutor] was a celebrity"
- Parent





Case Study

Little Hands, Big Voice:

How BSL is empowering four-year-old Molly to embrace both Deaf and hearing worlds

Little Molly Robins-Loftus wasn't keen on learning BSL but now the four-year-old is regularly signing with her family - and her friends have started to learn too.



Molly has sensorineural hearing loss, a genetic condition she inherited from her mum Rachael, who is also severely deaf. They wear hearing aids which allow them to hear some sounds, but communication is difficult for both of them.

Rachael signed up for BSL classes shortly after Molly was born and she has been trying to teach her ever since.

But it was only during the Family Sign at Home classes that the channels of communication really opened up – partly because Molly's seven-year-old sister Amelia joined in.

Now Molly not only understands signs, she has begun to use them herself. Rachael explained: "Molly is very attached to her hearing aids and won't even let me take them out at night until after she has gone to sleep.

"I signed up for classes for myself as soon as Molly was born, because I felt it was really important that she had access to language and communication.

"But it's only since the family sessions that Molly has started to sign herself more confidently. They were the turning point really and they brought us all together. Amelia loves it and she is also really good at it.



"I really want Molly to be bilingual and able to live successfully in both the hearing and deaf worlds. It's as much about embracing both cultures and identities as it is communicating, and I'm so pleased she's started to use both."

The impact has stretched beyond the immediate family too. Molly's friends have started learning basic signs to communicate with her, turning playtime into a more inclusive and connected experience.

Rachael added: "It's amazing what a difference it's made. We can understand each other better, which means fewer frustrations and more fun. And seeing other children get involved makes me so hopeful for Molly's future. It's helped her feel seen and included."

For the Robins-Loftus family, the sessions have not just been educational – they've been transformative. Rachael says the confidence boost Molly has received has made a huge difference in how she interacts with the world around her.

"She's so proud to show off her signing now. What felt like a barrier before has turned into a bridge – and that's all thanks to having the right support at the right time," she said.

Rachael also hopes that access to early sign language learning becomes standard for other families in similar situations.

"If more parents and schools could offer this kind of support from the start, it would change lives," she said. "It's given us tools, confidence and a stronger bond – and every family deserves that chance."

Recommendations

The evaluation identified a few ways to increase the project's impact in future:

Lengthen the course

Increase course length from 6 to 10 weeks (minimum) to give parents the opportunity to learn more BSL and embed it in their day-to-day activities. This will allow more change to filter down to children & open up future evaluation opportunities.

Assess families in more detail at project start

Some families & children have additional needs that mean tutors have to adapt their approach. Some families have higher than expected levels of BSL. Carrying out a more detailed assessment when families enrol will ensure course content can be tailored from the first session.













Expand the curriculum

Several possible ways to expand the curriculum were identified: more advanced content for parents with prior knowledge (e.g. sentence-building), adapted content for babies (under 2) and older deaf children (5+). BDA should scope need further before adding curriculum material.

Build the FSH tutor community

Tutors are a vital element of FSH's effectiveness & fostering the tutor community will ensure FSH is delivered with consistent quality. Actively enable tutors to share practice between themselves, input to curriculum & resources, and feed back to BDA staff. Covering tutor travel costs will help reach remote families particularly.















#BSL in our hands

www.bda.org.uk

Masonic Charitable Foundation