



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into access to services
and information in Auslan

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Our family's story

We were fortunate to welcome a happy and healthy baby with hearing loss in 2021. She is part of a multilingual household. We, her parents, speak both English and another language, and now incorporate Auslan into her daily activities.

All of my family live interstate, and my husband's family live overseas. We both work in the Public Service, but with no local family support, (being even more pronounced due to COVID lock downs and difficulties travelling), and despite the significant financial burden, we felt it best for me to take an addition year of maternity leave to enable me to take my daughter to weekly speech therapy and other hearing related appointments, practice what has been learnt in speech therapy, learn Auslan, teach my daughter Auslan, and meet and become part of the local Deaf community. She currently uses several signs (mum, dad, cat, dog, milk, finished) and understands several others. She does not yet have any spoken words.

Auslan hurdles and barriers

A Medical Model

During the initial weeks and months of our baby's life, we were presented with a very medical model of deafness. After hearing screenings on four separate occasions, we attended the Canberra Hospital for diagnostic testing when our baby was 7 weeks old. A moderate to severe hearing loss was identified. The Audiologist at Canberra Hospital then referred her to Hearing Australia.

At Hearing Australia, the Audiologist fitted our baby's first hearing aids, made an application to the NDIS on our behalf, and made a referral to an Ear Nose and Throat Specialist. We also received brochures for the Early Intervention providers in the field of hearing and speaking in Canberra, (The Shepherd Centre and Nextsense). I made contact with both organisations and was advised by Nextsense that they focused on children who were to receive Cochlear Implants, and that The Shepherd Centre was the best option for us. Therefore, The Shepherd Centre, who offer a listening and spoken language focus, was chosen. (At this stage, hearing aids are the best technology for our daughter's situation, but she is being closely monitored by her team to identify any additional loss, which would result in recommendation for cochlear implant surgery).

While we, as a family, have received excellent service from all involved, I don't recall

any of these medical professionals recommending that we learn Auslan or introduce our deaf child to Auslan. No one identified that our family would need to speak to and build connections with other parents of deaf children or suggested ways to make contact with the local Deaf community. There was a clear underlying belief that with technology (hearing aids or cochlear implants), early intervention and speech therapy, our child would have all the tools she needed to communicate and participate in society.

Unfortunately, many parents in this situation are not being made aware that Auslan is a communication tool useful for all levels of hearing loss. By focusing on only listening and speaking development, it is being overlooked that when a deaf child is not wearing their devices, they do not have full access to the sounds necessary for understanding speech. They miss out in situations like swimming at the pool, when at the beach (fine sand can get into and damage the hearing aids, so it's safer not to wear them even when just on the sand), when in the bath or shower, and when sleeping and waking up. In addition, some device users experience listening fatigue after a day of amplified hearing, especially after being in environments like classrooms where there is a high degree of background noise. They require a period of time device-free to recharge and regain energy and are also without access to spoken communication at these times. In addition, there are many situations where hearing aids simply do not function effectively. Because they amplify all sounds, it can still be very challenging for device wearers to communicate in noisy environments like pubs, clubs, restaurants, concerts, school halls, in busy shopping centres, indoor sports arenas, or outside on windy days. The technology is certainly not perfect.

As such, it is evident that there is a fault in the current system that could be resolved at the diagnosis stage. It would make a significant improvement to children with hearing loss if their parents were at the very least advised that the technology has its limitations and were then introduced to the idea of Auslan and its benefits. Ideally, this would go hand in hand with opportunities to meet members of the local Deaf community, who could (through their first hand experience) explain to parents why they believe Auslan is so essential to the the child's development and Deaf identity.

Acquiring Auslan in Canberra

Perhaps because we are already speakers of more than one language, we recognised the need for Auslan at the moment of our baby's diagnosis. I proactively searched the internet and made contact with parents of deaf children and others in the Deaf community to obtain their advice. I read story upon story of Deaf adults whose parents had taken the medical specialists at their word and invested all their efforts into speech and language development. Many of these adults discovered Auslan as teens and adults, and developed deep resentment towards their parents for not making the effort to learn and teach them 'their' language. It was described by one Deaf adult that in participating in years of speech therapy as a child, all they had really done was to make life easier for the people they were communicating with. The therapy didn't make hearing easier, it didn't make the deaf person's life easier; it just made their speech clearer for those they were talking to. The deaf person still needs to put in extra effort to decode, guess and make conversations "work".

We were surprised at how difficult it was to access an Auslan teacher in Canberra. At

first, we just wanted to learn simple words that could be incorporated into our baby's daily routine, and were able to achieve this by accessing a free Auslan Dictionary app, but ultimately we did not find this to be an effective way to learn an entire language. We engaged a speech therapist with Auslan knowledge as a home tutor, but were also aware that within the Deaf community, this is not considered appropriate. Auslan should always be taught by a Deaf person who has strong cultural links to the Deaf community and who uses Auslan with native speakers regularly. We have not yet been able to find someone like this with availability in Canberra.

I soon realised that I needed to enrol in a formal Auslan course, however discovered that in Canberra, Certificate courses are only offered by one organisation (Deaf Connect) and the entry level course (Certificate II) was only offered at the beginning of each year. I searched for other providers around Australia and was disheartened to discover that none offered online courses for mid year intake, except for Deaf Connect, but they only offered the online course to residents of Queensland. Those two online classes booked out within 3 days, which shows there is demand for such courses. Given my extended maternity leave is happening now, I am frustrated to have to wait until next year to progress my knowledge. To continue my language development, I enrolled in an online 7 week beginners course through Deaf Connect, which mostly involved revision of the vocabulary that had already been self taught, but now I must wait. Our family has also looked into Auslan in the Home tuition, also offered through Deaf Connect, but have been advised there is a significant backlog for service provision in Canberra.

The experiences here demonstrate that there is a need for parents of deaf children who wish for their children to grow up bilingual (English and Auslan) to have priority access to Auslan classes, and that there is currently a concerning gap in service provision in Canberra. We are so frustrated to have funds available for this purpose through NDIS but are unable to utilise them. The decommissioning of CIT Auslan courses is particularly frustrating, and there seems to be an issue with the monopolisation of services through Deaf Connect. It is reaching a stage where it might be appropriate for the ACT government to step in and demand a review of services, particularly considering they provide funding to Deaf Connect.

Auslan for toddlers and school aged children

In other states, there are Auslan and bilingual preschools and primary schools, and schools that offer Auslan as an Additional Language (in place of foreign languages). Some significant examples include Furlong Park Preschool, Aurora School, Willmott Park Primary School, St Albans East Primary School, Eastwood Primary School, Forest Hill College, Mount Erin College, Charles La Trobe College and the Victorian College for the Deaf in Victoria; Klemzig Bilingual School in South Australia; Toowong State School in Queensland; and Mosman Park School in WA.

In Victorian preschools, there are also a number of kindergartens and early childhood centres that offer 3 hours of Auslan a week in addition to the extensive Auslan program in Primary and secondary schools. In South Australia 38 schools offer an Auslan language program. In some states, a Teacher of the Deaf is allocated not only once a deaf child reaches school age, but during infancy.

In Canberra, there is nothing like this available. There is a small group of parents trying to establish an Auslan Playgroup at a grass roots level, which runs once a fortnight, but nothing offered through government education.

In an ideal world, we would love to see a fully bilingual school in Canberra. Failing that, we would love to see “Hub” schools in North and South Canberra, where deaf children can gather together (with hearing children) and receive education in a form tailored to their needs with support from Auslan interpreters. This would enable a pooling of government resourcing, specialisation of teachers at those schools, and opportunities for networking and mentoring among deaf students and families. At the moment, deaf children are siloed, and do not always regularly interact with other deaf children and as such, do not get to see older deaf children achieving and being successful and acting as role models.

Without a change to the education system in Canberra, we are very concerned about our daughter’s educational future and continued Auslan progression. We would love to see her grow up with English, Spanish and Auslan as native languages. While we can act as expert language models in English and Spanish, we are lacking support with Auslan. As a deaf child, access to a signed language should be part of her birth right and I feel that we are letting her down by being unable to expose her to native signers and bilingual instruction.

In summary, we would like to see:

- promotion of Auslan as an additional communication mode among medical professionals who deal with hearing loss
- parents of newly diagnosed deaf children given adequate materials and assistance to enable them to make an informed choice about whether Auslan is a pathway they would like their family to follow
- opportunities for parents of newly diagnosed deaf children to meet other parents, as well as other deaf children and deaf (particularly Auslan using) adults
- frequent opportunities for Auslan tuition in Canberra (whether face to face or online), particularly for parents of deaf children
- a bilingual Auslan-English school in Canberra
- failing that, hub schools that act as deaf centres of excellence
- Auslan as an Additional Language in Canberra schools
- expansion of the Teacher of the Deaf program to include children of all ages