

# What's up with deaf children and sign language in Denmark?

by Sofie Heilmann

Most deaf people in Europe and probably also in the United States are painfully aware of what is going on with deaf children in Denmark. Rumour has it that 99% of children who are born deaf get a cochlear implant. And it's true. But is Danish Sign Language and Danish deaf community dying?

The main worry for everyone in the deaf community in Denmark is that parents of deaf children are recommended not to use sign language as they believe it will impede their speech development, even though research has shown the opposite.

So what is the Danish Deaf community going to do about it? Before we get ahead of ourselves, I should explain why doctors and audiologists are advising parents not to use sign language as it's believed to impede deaf children's speech development.

The Danish Health Department and Social Department in the government made guidelines on how to treat deafness of children called "National Clinical Guideline". These guidelines included recommending getting Cochlear Implants and speech and hearing therapy. Danish sign language is recognised in the guidelines according to UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) but as a means of communication for the deaf children who are not eligible for a CI or don't have the full use of it. It also mentions deaf children of deaf parents, where Danish Sign Language is the primary language in the family. According to the guidelines, sign language is not compatible with hearing and speech therapy; thus they will need further specialised assistance to ensure the deaf CI child has proper access to speech therapy.

So far, so good. So the guidelines described above has caused concern in the deaf community. The Danish Deaf Association (DDL) has been working on a strategy

to have Danish Sign Language as a part of a more holistic advice on the options given to the parents of the deaf children by recommendations on how to fulfill the CRPD from The Institute of Human Rights at Copenhagen University. In 2014 the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities expressed concerns that the children born with a hearing loss are prevented from learning Danish Sign Language. With these tools, DDL are working tirelessly on changing the guidelines to include Sign Language at the Social Department.

In an interview with Jenny Nilsson, the political consultant at DDL, she revealed that the DDL, in 2016, had meetings with politicians about implementing Danish Sign Language as a part of a more holistic guideline for the future deaf born children. They were met the Children and Youth Minister who didn't think it was necessary to add further suggestions to the guidelines such as more focus on Sign Language as an option. The door was still closed even though DDL brought plenty of research supporting Sign Language and recommendations from the The Danish Institute of Human rights.

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Recently a gift was given to the deaf community. The truth of what a deaf child without language looks like. It was a TV program about Modern Miracles, where a deaf two-year-old was in the program. This boy did not have any language, as the doctors had discouraged the parents to use sign language with this boy because sign language would impede his speech development. The only means of communication with him was pointing, and still, the little child did not seem to understand what was going



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on at all. He couldn't even figure out why his mother was waving. His mother expressed a longing to hear her son saying "I love you." Which he obviously would have been able to do if he was given Sign Language while waiting for his CI operation.

With this case in DDL hands, they are ready for round two where they will approach members of the parliament to argue their case. This year the Social and Health Department will be reviewing the guidelines on treating deaf born children to make sure they are up to date with current research and now DDL has a chance to influence the outcome for the reviewed guidelines. When she was asked about the future for deaf children, Jenny seemed to be optimistic. Sooner or later the majority will realise that Danish Sign Language is not dangerous for children. Denmark is not a lost case; the future is still bright. The deaf community will fight against prejudices.

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