

Introduction Can you imagine navigating the world without hearing your name, a friend's voice, or your teacher's instructions?

Supporting Children with Additional Learning Needs

For thousands of children in the UK with hearing impairments, this is a daily reality. The Welsh Government's ALN Code for Wales 2021 recognizes hearing impairment as an Additional Learning Need (ALN), ranging from mild loss to profound deafness, significantly impacting communication, social interaction, and learning.

In the UK, over 50,000 children have hearing loss, with many attending mainstream schools where specialized support may be lacking (BATOD, 2021). Early identification and tailored interventions are crucial. This presentation explores the challenges of diagnosing hearing impairment, focusing on barriers like missed diagnosis and lack of staff training. It also examines Signalong, a sign language strategy that supports both children with hearing impairments and their neurotypical peers, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

Identification and Diagnosis of Hearing Impairment

Early identification of hearing impairment is crucial to mitigate its impact on a child's development, as undetected hearing loss can severely affect speech, language, cognitive, and social skills (NDCS, 2021). In the UK, newborn hearing screening is universally offered within the first few weeks using tests like the Automated Otoacoustic Emissions (AOAE) and Auditory Brainstem Response (AABR), which identify moderate to profound hearing loss. However, mild or progressive impairments often go undetected until children begin formal education, when speech delays become more noticeable (NHS, n.d.). Diagnostic evaluations may include pure-tone audiometry, tympanometry, and alternative methods like visual reinforcement audiometry (VRA) for younger children (Patient.info, n.d.).

Diagnosis is a multidisciplinary process involving audiologists, speech therapists, and education professionals. Delays in referral and lack of awareness can hinder timely diagnosis, especially in children from disadvantaged backgrounds (NHS, 2023). In Wales, if a hearing impairment is suspected, the school's Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) collaborates with parents and external professionals for further assessment (Department for Education, 2021). If a hearing loss is confirmed, an Individual Development Plan (IDP) is created to provide tailored support (Welsh Government, 2022). For successful implementation, professionals must be adequately trained to identify hearing impairments and respond in a coordinated manner.

Barrier 1: Delayed or Missed Diagnosis

A key challenge in supporting children with hearing impairments is the educational impact of delayed or missed diagnosis (British Academy of Audiology, 2022). While UK newborn screening detects moderate to profound hearing loss, mild, progressive, or late-onset impairments often go unnoticed until children start school (NDCS, 2021). By then, critical developmental windows for language and communication may have already been affected. Undetected needs often manifest as learning delays or behavioral concerns, mislabeled as other issues, delaying referrals and restricting access to support (RCSLT, 2019). Delays in diagnosis are exacerbated by weak coordination between health and education services, especially for children from disadvantaged or multilingual backgrounds (RCSLT, 2019). Early identification and coordinated support, such as Signalong, are essential to ensure inclusion and prevent children from falling behind academically (National Deaf Children's Society, 2021).

Barrier 2: Lack of Staff Training and Awareness

A major barrier to supporting children with hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms is the lack of staff training and awareness (CRIDE, 2024). Mainstream teachers often receive limited training in identifying or accommodating hearing impairments, particularly mild or fluctuating ones, leading children to mask difficulties through lip-reading or avoidance (NDCS, 2021). This gap in knowledge delays intervention and creates academic and emotional barriers, as communication issues are misinterpreted as behavioral or cognitive problems. Without training in inclusive communication methods like Signalong, staff may fail to use strategies that improve classroom inclusion and learning outcomes (Education Scotland, n.d.). To overcome this, schools must invest in professional development, ensuring staff are trained to identify needs early and create an inclusive learning environment for all students.



Signalong Support Strategy

Signalong is a key word sign supported communication system derived from British Sign Language (BSL), designed to help individuals with speech, language, and communication needs. It uses signs alongside spoken words to enhance understanding, making it especially beneficial for children with hearing impairments and other learning needs (Signalong, n.d.). In schools, Signalong promotes inclusion by providing visual cues to support classroom learning and communication (Promethean, 2025). Research shows that its implementation improves pupil engagement, listening skills, and the use of visual supports (Education Scotland, 2024). However, successful use depends on consistent staff training and institutional support. Schools may face challenges with limited resources, funding, or high staff turnover (NDCS, 2021). While valuable, Signalong should complement, not replace, other interventions like hearing aids and speech therapy for a balanced approach (British Academy of Audiology, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, hearing impairment in children presents significant challenges, especially in communication, learning, and social inclusion. Early identification is crucial, but delays, particularly for mild or progressive hearing loss, are common (NICE, 2020; NDCS, 2021). These delays are compounded by systemic issues such as limited staff training and inconsistent referral pathways, leading to academic underachievement and emotional distress (Young et al., 2010; DFN, 2024). Signalong, a sign supported communication strategy, offers an inclusive solution, improving language development and engagement (Hall School Norfolk, n.d.; Robinson & Pemberton, 2019). However, its effectiveness relies on consistent staff training and a whole school approach. Addressing barriers like delayed diagnosis and enhancing staff awareness, alongside integrating Signalong, can improve outcomes for children with hearing impairments. Creating inclusive environments where all learners thrive depends on timely support, well-trained staff, and a shared commitment to inclusivity.

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