



# Case study: Safeguarding children with disabilities

Deaf Child Worldwide's approach to support and safeguard children with deafness



# Safeguarding children with disabilities



## Minimum standards



### Safeguarding Commitment 9:

We ensure our safeguarding policies and practices address the needs of vulnerable groups, including the different approaches needed to protect those at risk by their identity or circumstances, including women, children and disabled people. [Read the commitments.](#)

**Organisation:** Deaf Child Worldwide

**Date:** June 2020

#### Key recommendations:

- Empower children with disabilities to have as much voice as possible to communicate their needs, wishes and any concerns they have.
- Address negative societal attitudes and actions towards children with disabilities to enable all children to have their rights realised.
- Work with parents, caregivers, teachers, local organisations and others in communities to build their communication skills with children with disabilities.
- Promote informed choice: enabling children and their families to make the decisions that are best for them by providing impartial information, training and support.

## Deaf Child Worldwide works with partners to enable deaf children and young people to be fully included in their family, education and community life. Head of International Training Juliet Matthews and Safeguarding Assurance Manager Andrew Richardson explained why safeguarding deaf children requires tailored approaches.

There are an estimated 34 million deaf children worldwide, 80% of whom live in low/middle income countries. At Deaf Child Worldwide we use the term 'deaf' to refer to all levels and types of deafness and hearing loss from mild to profound. We support all deaf children and young people, regardless of their level or type of deafness, or how they prefer to communicate.

More than nine out of ten babies who are deaf from birth are born into families who have no experience of deafness and so do not know how to teach a deaf baby to communicate unless they receive information about all the options available to them, including but not limited to, sign language. In large parts of the world, sign languages are not recognised as official languages in their own right. There is little support for families, teachers or caregivers who want

to learn sign language, and even when support is in place, the quality is often poor.

These communication barriers can result in deaf children and young people becoming isolated from society and having their basic rights unmet. Deaf children in particular are rarely asked for their opinions or taken seriously and some are mostly kept at home.

Deaf children are three times more likely to be abused than hearing children<sup>1</sup>. When a deaf child makes a disclosure they may not always be understood or listened to and in some cases may not be believed.

To avoid this happening, deaf children need sufficient language and communication skills to be understood, as well as someone to understand the disclosure they are making. Additionally, they need to be taught to recognise and describe abusive behaviours, and to report these to someone with the training and skills to respond to the disclosure appropriately.

Not all disclosures come directly to a Deaf Child Worldwide staff member, many are passed on from the organisations we partner with to implement projects. This is a situation we often find ourselves in because we work through partner organisations rather than implementing projects directly. Some do not even come as full disclosures, but as reports of commonplace events that are not recognised as abuse either by the victim or the people around them (such as corporal punishment at school). Where the child is deaf or

<sup>1</sup> (Sullivan et al. 1987; Cross et al. 1993; Sullivan and Knutson 2000; Kvam 2004; Spencer et al. 2005; Briggs 2006; Fisher et al. 2008; Stalker et al. 2010; Stalker and McArthur 2012; Jones et al. 2012).

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has other communication challenges, there is an even greater chance of this kind of abuse going undisclosed or unreported.

Some of the key actions that Deaf Child Worldwide takes are:

- Giving deaf children a voice by including them in accessible workshops, project feedback or surveys: this may help lead to disclosures which would otherwise remain hidden
- Providing training for staff at our partner organisations. This equips them to recognise abuse and disclosures, and to better understand the additional challenges deaf children and young people face when making a disclosure. We would expect this to also lead to an increase in reporting of incidents which might otherwise be overlooked
- Supporting partners to develop practical tools and procedures that both help to prevent abuse and respond to concerns and disclosures. These need to be in line with national/local legislation and international best practice as informed by the UNCRC and the UNCRDP and accessible to all staff including those who are deaf

- Mapping local services and supporting partner organisations to build the capacity of those services to better recognise and support deaf children. This can include schools, places of worship, the police and wider judiciary and social services
- Working with the wider community to challenge stereotypes and attitudes towards deaf children and young people, for example through advocacy campaigns or community meetings and workshops/camps for deaf children/youth

“There needs to be more communication and transparency between local NGOs and all their donors and partners to put in place a joint plan for taking action on safeguarding and protecting deaf children and all children with disabilities. Only by working together can we bring about effective, organisation-level and systemic changes.”

**Juliet Matthews and Andrew Richardson**