



## SO YOU WANT TO LEARN TO SIGN

### What is Sign Language.....?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the natural language of the Deaf Community in Britain. It is quite different from spoken English, and is rich, varied and as complex as any other language. It can appear quite fascinating to people who don't understand it and makes many people keen to find out more. Once you start learning, you will be hooked! It is important to remember that it is a living language, and you cannot separate BSL from the community who use it; it is their language, and in learning it you are opening up a door into another world.

### A few myths dispelled.....

- ◆ British Sign Language is not a visual form of English: it has its own grammar and structure so it is just like learning a foreign language.
- ◆ Sign language is not universal; each country has its own sign language.
- ◆ BSL is not a form of glorified mime, pantomime or a performance art.
- ◆ Being able to sign does not mean you can automatically lipread!

### Why learn to Sign.....?

Deaf people face barriers in their lives everyday. Announcements over tannoy systems, traffic noises, radio, TV, and basic communication with staff in shops, banks and public services can all be inaccessible to Deaf people. With English as a second language, it can be very frustrating to always have to try and communicate with people who have no experience of deafness and no idea what to do. To meet someone who has learnt a few signs, had deaf awareness training, and made the effort, can be the key to a happy customer or the beginning of a lifelong friendship!

## **Frequent comments.....**

### ◆ *Is it easy to learn?*

Remember BSL is not a form of mime or glorified gesture: it is a language in its own right and so has all the intricacies and enjoyment of learning any foreign language. How quickly and easily you learn will be down to the time you spend practicing and doing the course work.

### ◆ *Can I practice at my local Deaf Club?*

Bear in mind this is a social club, for Deaf people wanting to chat to their deaf friends. You may find that your local club offers special nights for students to use their signing, without interfering with social events. When you have a good knowledge of basic BSL, your local Deaf club is a great way of making new friends and meeting people; do not view it solely as a place to practice.

### ◆ *I want to help Deaf people!*

This is an honourable sentiment to have, but do remember not all Deaf people will want or need to be helped! Deafness is primarily a communication barrier, not an illness or disability needing constant support. If you want to work with deaf people in a supporting capacity, why not ask your local Deaf association if you can become a volunteer? They will be able to advise you on opportunities available in your area.

### ◆ *I want to work with deaf people*

You will need to achieve at least BSL Level 2 to work effectively with deaf people. If you are interested please contact us for a copy of our fact sheet 'So you want to work with Deaf people...?' for more information.

### ◆ *I want to interpret!*

Sign Language Interpreters go through many years of training to enable them to work between the two languages and cultures of British Sign Language & English. It takes dedication to both the language and interpreting training, as well as regular contact with the community, to develop and hone the right skills before you even start interpreting. There is more information in the 'So you want to work with Deaf people...?' fact sheet available from the Deaf Direct office.

## **What do you want to learn.....?**

### **◆ *The basics***

Just want to talk to someone who is Deaf? Just want to be able to welcome them and show that you are prepared to make an effort to communicate? Or always had a fascination with Sign? Level 1 courses are offered all over the country, usually as evening classes, for people who want to learn how to communicate at a very basic level with Deaf people. If you are not sure you want to commit to a structured course, you may find there are 'taster' sessions being run in your area; this should give you an idea of whether you want to go on a course. Why not contact one of your local training centres to chat about it?

There is also a complimentary short course, covering Communication Tactics and Deaf Awareness. This qualification will give you some insight into the Deaf community which is vital knowledge that will make it easier to understand and learn the language.

### **◆ *Building up your skills***

Need to build on the basics you learnt at BSL Level 1? Then a Level 2 course is for you. Increase your vocabulary, practise your comprehension and start getting to grips with the language. Completion of Level 2 can open doors into a career working with Deaf people using basic everyday communication skills. Some providers teach Level 2 over one year but other providers teach over two years so you need to consider which is most appropriate for your personal circumstances.

### **◆ *Signing everyday***

Are you using your BSL everyday? Perhaps you work with Deaf people, or want to really feel confident that you have mastered the fundamentals of the language. The NVQ Level 3 in BSL is aimed at those working with Deaf people regularly and wanting to progress professionally. The pre-assessment courses for NVQ 3 run for approximately 8-12 months.

### **◆ *Interpreting***

You will need to have achieved BSL Levels 1, 2 & then BSL NVQ 3 alongside an interpreter training course before starting any interpreting work. To qualify as an interpreter you will need to

pass the BSL NVQ 4 as well as interpreter courses that have been mapped as reaching the national standard. British Sign Language/English Interpreters are bilingual and bicultural, with experience of working in a variety of settings with different dialects, idiosyncrasies, and language levels, and only once this level of proficiency has been achieved are you ready to interpret in any capacity. For more information contact us for our fact sheet 'So you want to work with Deaf People.....?'

**Remember, you don't have to take the exams if you don't want to; courses are worth doing for their own sake! However, if you wish to use your skills in a career or profession, and to progress to further levels of training, you will need to pass the exams.**

### **Your tutors.....**

- ◆ Should meet the knowledge criteria for the course as set by the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP)
- ◆ Should have undertaken training to qualify them to teach
- ◆ May be Deaf or hearing

Don't be afraid to ask about the tutors, so that you can feel confident you are getting quality tuition during your course.

### **Resources.....**

There are a wide variety of books, videos and CD-ROMs available to aid your training and broaden your knowledge.

The following organisations can provide resources and information:

Council for the Advancement of  
Communication with Deaf  
People (CACDP)  
Durham University Science  
Park  
Block 4 Stockton Road  
Durham, DH1 3UX  
Text/voice: 0191 3831155  
Web: [www.cacdp.org.uk](http://www.cacdp.org.uk)

The Forest Bookshop  
The New Building  
Ellwood Road  
Milkwall  
Coleford, GL16 7LE  
Tel/Text: 01594 833858  
Fax: 01594 833446  
Web: [www.forestbooks.com](http://www.forestbooks.com)