Deaf and Hard of Hearing Early Years Language Services

What We Learned Report

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Executive summary

From February 9 to April 3, 2026, the Ministry of Children and Family Development worked with the Ministry of Citizens' Services to gather input on early language services[1] in B.C. for Deaf and hard of hearing children aged 0 to 5 and their families. Specifically, the scope of this engagement focused on the time period starting when families connect with early intervention/early language services up to and including the transition from these services to kindergarten.

The engagement asked participants what services are needed, how services should be delivered, and what matters most to families. Participants shared input through 89 one-on-one interviews with parents and guardians, 2 focus groups, and an online survey with 237 responses.

Families described their journeys across multiple systems, including health care, early intervention, and education. As a result, feedback included experiences with services provided by the Ministry of Health, including the BC Early Hearing Program, as well as transitions into school-based services supported by the Ministry of Education and Child Care. Where relevant, this report includes these perspectives because they provide important context for understanding families' experiences and the connections between service systems. However, the findings and recommendations should be interpreted within the scope of MCFD funded early language services, recognizing that responsibility for some services rests with other ministries and programs.

This public report summarizes what participants told us. It does not make findings about what the B.C. Government should do. It does not make policy recommendations. The purpose is to inform public understanding of the themes raised in the engagement. This report uses the terms Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) and hearing difference interchangeably throughout.

Main themes across the engagement activities

- Families need clear, simple information that is shared in stages.
- Families value an identified person who can guide them through services and answer questions.
- Participants want services to be better connected, with less burden on families to coordinate support.
- Participants want families to receive balanced information about all language options, including ASL, spoken language or both.
- Families want regular language assessment, clear explanations and practical next steps.
- Parent connections, peer connections and Deaf and hard of hearing role models were identified as important.
- Families need earlier and clearer support, from early intervention services, when children move into kindergarten.
- Home community, work schedules, culture, language and child having multiple diagnoses can shape family's experience.

[1] Early Intervention Services and Early Language Services will be used interchangeably throughout this document.

The findings from the engagement showed that families do not experience services in the same way. Some families described receiving timely, coordinated, and well-supported services, while others described gaps, confusion, or the need to advocate to access information and supports. Despite differing perspectives on language option(s) and service model(s), participants consistently identified the need for clearer information, stronger support, and better coordination across services.

About the engagement

Purpose

The purpose of the engagement was to gather public input about early language services for Deaf and hard of hearing children aged 0 to 5. The engagement focused on services funded through a Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) service agreement.

Participants were asked about their experience in each service areas such as referral and intake, planning, assessment, language services, parent education, group or immersive language opportunities, service coordination and navigation, and transition to kindergarten. The report is organized around these service areas.

The report

This report is a summary of what people told us. It is not an evaluation of people, programs, or service providers. It does not rank views. It does not decide which views are correct. It presents the main themes presented by engagement participants across all engagement activities.

Who shared input

- Parents and guardians of Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing children who were receiving, had received, or needed early language services in B.C. within the last 10 years
- Early language and early years professionals and service providers
- Representatives and individuals from the Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing community
- Other interested parties who completed the online survey

How input was gathered

- 89 semi-structured interviews with parents and guardians
- 2 focus groups: one with service providers and professionals, and one with Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals
- An online survey that received 237 responses

Participants were asked open-ended questions and were able to share the experiences, priorities, and perspectives that were most important to them. The percentages presented in this report reflect the proportion of participants who raised a particular theme in response to an open-ended question. They are not intended to measure the importance, strength of agreement, or level of support for a theme. A theme being mentioned by fewer participants does not mean that others

disagreed or did not value the issue; they may not have raised it during their response. Similarly, a theme mentioned by more participants does not represent the views of all participants. Percentages are included to provide context about the frequency with which themes emerged during engagement discussions.

About the participants

The engagement included 89 parent and guardian interview participants. Of these, 60 were past service recipients and 29 were current service recipients. The survey included 124 respondents, who self-identified as parents or guardians, 77 who self-identified as service providers and 17 who self-identified as Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals.

Some people may have had more than one role. For example, some service providers may also have been parents or members of the Deaf, Deafblind or hard of hearing community. Participants were grouped based on how they identified themselves when they took part.

Important context

- The online survey was open to a wider group than the parent interviews. It includes responses from those who self-identified as parents, service providers and professionals, Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives, individuals and allies. There were some respondents that did not identify with any of the above groups.
- Survey respondents may also have taken part in an interview or focus group.
- Focus group responses were not counted in the same way as individual survey or interview responses. Engagement feedback was reported by group as opposed to being tied to individual respondents within that group.
- Participants were asked open-ended questions. This report does not use counts, percentages, or frequency of responses to determine the importance of a theme or perspective.

Starting services: referral, intake and planning

Participants described the period after learning that their child is Deaf or hard of hearing as a key point in the family's journey. Many families told us this time can feel emotional, confusing and time sensitive. They also described how their early experiences with services and support influenced their confidence in the system and their ability to navigate future decisions.

Key message

- Families told us they need clear information, time to process it and an identified person to help them understand what to do next.

What parents and guardians told us

Some parents described strong early support. Eighteen percent of interview participants described a fast diagnosis and immediate referral to the MCFD funded early intervention program. These

parents often linked their positive experience to strong newborn screening follow-up or proactive support from audiologists and the B.C. Early Hearing Program.

A common theme was that information is most helpful when it is timed well and not received at once. Forty-three percent of interviewed parents told us information should be staged, paced, and framed in a way that families can understand. Parents want information that answered the question: what do I need to know now, and what can wait?

- Parents want a clear roadmap of next steps
- They want plain-language information, not jargon
- They value short videos, visuals and one-page summaries
- They want to revisit information after they've had time to process the diagnosis

Many parents told us that the early period before or at diagnosis was overwhelming and that timely, coordinated support was important. Forty percent of parents identified timeliness and coordination as valued characteristics of service provision during the diagnosis and referral process. Families valued professionals who listened to their concerns, responded quickly, and helped connect them to appropriate services and supports. Parents told us that families of children who have especially complex health needs, who may be navigating multiple providers, assessments and service systems, value individualized support and coordinated services. Parents emphasized the importance of providers who understand their child's unique needs, communicate with one another, and help families access the right supports without having to coordinate everything on their own.

While the findings above are not within the scope of services that were the focus of this engagement, they are important. Delays in diagnosis can lead to delays in referrals to early intervention services.

Once families connected with services, many described challenges understanding how the service system was organized and how providers worked together. Some told us they received many contacts, forms, and printed material but still did not understand how the overall system worked. Others did not know why different providers were contacting them and how services differed. Printed materials alone were not enough if families did not have someone to help interpret and apply the information. They wanted information on how services fit together provincially, who does what, how organizations connect and why families see multiple providers.

Many participants told us families should not be expected to make decisions about language immediately after diagnosis or before connecting with the service provider of their choice. They described these conversations as ongoing and said they should continue as families learn more about their child's hearing profile and language needs. Families also described feeling responsible for coordinating appointments, referrals and communication between providers. They valued continuity of relationships with service providers, integrated services, and being included in communication about their child's care.

"Families need support at the time of diagnosis and after. The first conversation is not enough."

"You just gave birth, and then there is a lot of information to process. It can feel like too much at once."

What service providers told us

Service providers described the early period after diagnosis as important and sensitive. Thirty-eight percent of service provider survey respondents, and several comments in the focus group, emphasized that families need information to be paced and in stages. They told us families may not be ready to absorb all information immediately after diagnosis.

Twenty-nine percent of service providers raised the importance of a consistent advisor or point of contact early in the service journey. They described the benefit of an identified person who provides guidance to families and helps coordinate support over time.

- Service providers told us that it is important, for families, that there is a simple explanation of services, options and next steps.
- They told us information should be shared over more than one conversation and repeated.
- They emphasized that information should reflect a family's culture, values and readiness.
- They told us early information should focus first on the diagnosis, access to services and options, service provider roles and immediate next steps.

What Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals raised similar points about families receiving clear information and early services. They shared that the information shared with families should focus on the importance of early access to a natural and accessible language to prevent language deficits. This information should be shared with parents before they choose the types of language(s) or service provider.

Forty-one percent stated the need for this clear information and the value of a "human advisor" who has direct lived experience. They told us information should be strength-based, honest, positive, and inclusive. Some emphasized that information provided to families should be balanced and hopeful, rather than focusing only on hearing difference as a loss or deficit. The information should include that children can develop language, learn, and thrive with early access to a natural and accessible language.

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals also told us families should be able to find clear online information and know how to self-refer to services. They suggested that online search results should lead families to clear next steps and helpful information about language access.

Summary

Across groups, participants did not describe intake as only an administrative step. They described it as a time when families need emotional support, practical and information, and an identified guide. Participants told us families need information that is clear, repeated, and paced over time from initial intake and throughout their child's early intervention journey.

"Families need to know where to go next. The first information they find should be clear and useful."

Ongoing service support and navigation

Many participants told us families need support beyond the first referral to services. They described early language services as a journey that can involve many service providers, appointments, decisions, and transitions, especially when the child has additional diagnoses in addition to a hearing difference.

Key message

- Families want services to feel coordinated and connected. They do not want to have to piece supports and services together on their own.

What parents and guardians told us

Families shared with us their priorities and desired supports. In interviews, thirty-nine percent of parents emphasized the need for navigation and service coordination services, including access to expert and unbiased guidance, help preparing for appointments, information about questions to ask, and guidance on services available in their community. Parents also expressed the importance of having a consistent contact person who could help them understand information, options, and next steps throughout the age 0-5 time period, not only during the initial intake. In addition, parents value having someone help them understand how services connect, including who provides what support and how different providers work together across the province. They also wanted to know more about tax credits, grants and other supports in addition to the early intervention services.

Parents described the value of high-quality, continuity of care, frequent and accessible support, and coordinated services that support both children and families. Some families described receiving a list of contacts rather than direct connections to services. They told us warm referrals and introductions would reduce the burden of navigating services on their own. They also appreciated service models where multiple supports are available together. In interviews, parents highlighted the value of speech-language pathologists, audiologists, ASL teachers, Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing mentors, parent-to-parent mentors, and pre-school settings that understood and supported their child's language and communication needs. In the online surveys, fifty percent of parent respondents identified speech-language pathologists and audiologists as important supports. Twenty-two percent of parents shared the need for more qualified and ASL fluent early intervention staff, expanded service hours and supports that are accessible for families in rural communities.

Parents appreciated preschool settings that supported and understood their child and their language needs. It was reassuring for parents to know they could leave their child in a language-rich environment where their communication and developmental needs were supported. This was

especially valuable for parents who were learning sign language themselves, as it gave them time to build their own language skills while their child continued to learn and develop in an accessible environment. Parents of children with additional support needs beyond hearing differences also described these settings as particularly beneficial.

Families with Deaf and hard of hearing children with additional support needs found it overwhelming to go to many different service providers for their child's specific needs. They would like to see services to be more coordinated and work together.

"Families should not have to piece things together while they are already overwhelmed."

What service providers told us

Service providers also focused on continuity and coordination. Thirty percent called for service provision that is continuous and integrated. Many told us families should not have to repeat their story numerous times.

Thirty-five percent of service providers commented on service quality. They linked quality to staff skills, cultural safety, family-centred practice, and continuity of care. Some noted staffing shortages and rural inequity.

- Providers told us families need consistent access to a range of services and supports throughout the early years, as a child's language development, hearing profiles, and support needs may become clearer over time. Services should be flexible enough to respond to a child's evolving language needs, including the provision of additional supports to help children meet developmental language milestones.
- They called for multi-disciplinary teams that may include audiologists, speech-language pathologists, teachers of the Deaf and hard of hearing, occupational therapists, psychologists, early childhood educators and Deaf and hard of hearing role models.
- They emphasized communication, and information sharing, among professionals, with families included.

What Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us service quality depends on how services are delivered and by whom. They emphasized that coordination also requires culturally informed services and meaningful involvement of Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing people in the design and delivery of services. Twenty-four percent recognized the need for speech-language pathologists and audiologists while emphasizing the value of them being fluent in ASL so they can support all children on the hearing spectrum.

They also told us that Deaf and hard of hearing people should be meaningfully included in the design and delivery of services and in the development of information for families. Participants described this as a strength-based approach that recognizes the value of both spoken and signed languages from the beginning of a family's journey. They emphasized that including Deaf and hard

of hearing people as visible leaders, mentors, and service providers which helps families see that children who use signed language are valued and supported from the start. Their involvement also ensures that materials are appropriate and culturally sensitive.

Participants shared that families often choose the language that they are most familiar with. For families who use spoken language, learning about signed language may be new and unfamiliar. They emphasized the importance of professionals presenting both language approaches as valuable options and demonstrating respect for both languages in their interactions with families. Many participants noted that signed language should be introduced as an important communication option from the beginning, rather than only being considered when the listening and spoken language approach has not met a child's needs.

Summary

Participants described navigation as an ongoing need throughout the early years, not only during initial referral or intake. Families told us they need consistent guidance to understand available services, child development, language options, and next steps as they move through the early years.

Participants emphasized that families should not have to coordinate multiple services and supports on their own. They identified the value of an identified contact person who can provide reliable information, help connect families to services, and support coordination among providers.

Many participants associated service quality with consistent relationships, skilled providers, and culturally responsive practices (ie. access to sign language or spoken language interpreters), and coordinated services. They emphasized the importance of families having access to a range of knowledgeable professionals, including both hearing and Deaf and hard of hearing service providers and role models.

Language options

Participants across the engagement described language options as one of the most nuanced themes. While participants had different views about how language options should be presented or emphasized, there was broad agreement that families need clear, balanced information to support informed decision-making. Participants shared perspectives on ASL, spoken language, and both approaches.

Key message

- Participants want families to have access to the full range of language options and clear, balanced information about those options.

What parents and guardians told us

Many parents emphasized the importance of choices. In interviews, thirty-one percent of parents discussed language choices. Some linked success to bilingualism and wanted their children to have

access to both signed and spoken language. Others emphasized that parents should be able to choose the language and approach that best fits their child and family. Some parents expressed a need for information to make informed choices while others felt this was not possible due to information overload. Several also expressed that their child's needs evolve over time, so they need access to all language options throughout.

Seventeen percent of interviewed parents indicated tensions around language choices. Some asked that bilingualism be normalized or made central. Others wanted parental choice to be retained and did not want one approach to be required for all families. Some parents described spoken language as an important goal for their child and valued services that supported listening and spoken language development, particularly when hearing technology met their child's communication needs.

In the survey, twenty-two percent of parent respondents told us parents should be able to choose ASL, spoken language, or both throughout the early years. Twelve percent advised that parents need information about factors that may influence language choices over time. Participants noted that a child's hearing profile, language and communication needs, and developmental pathway may not be fully known immediately after diagnosis. Families expressed the need to receive information about factors such as changing hearing profiles, the role of hearing technology, the importance of early and accessible language, and the potential impacts of delayed language development to support informed decision-making.

Participants also emphasized that language decisions affect the whole family. Families identified the importance of supporting siblings, grandparents, and other caregivers to communicate with the child and be part of their language journey. Twelve percent of parent survey respondents suggested expanding ASL learning opportunities to extended family members and the broader community, including siblings, grandparents, and other caregivers who may need these skills to communicate with the child.

Some parents emphasized that language decisions should remain flexible over time and that families should be supported to add or change language/ communication approaches as their child's needs evolve. Some families emphasized the importance of being able to explore different language approaches over time without losing existing relationships, supports, or connections.

Some parents encouraged ASL use because hearing technology is not always effective in all situations or environments.

"Retain parental choice because children and families have different needs."

"Give children and families all the language and communication tools available."

What service providers told us

Fifty-six percent of service providers recommended that families retain choice. They told us that all Deaf and hard of hearing children should have access to all programs and services. Some suggested a centre of excellence that provides access to all language options, offering consistent

information, ongoing support, and connections to services for families. Families who choose a particular language path would benefit from ongoing opportunities to learn about and experience other language options through group-based activities, events, and connections with diverse children and families, and Deaf and hard of hearing community.

Participants shared that families often make decisions based on the information and experiences available to them, and that early exposure to a range of language options can support informed decision making, broaden understanding and promote acceptance of different communication identities and choices.

Thirty-four percent of service providers told us parents may receive conflicting guidance. They noted that families may receive different messages about language options, which can leave parents feeling uncertain or overwhelmed. They emphasized the importance of clear, balanced information that supports families to understand the benefits and considerations of different approaches. They recommended clear information about early intervention service options, language options, provider roles, child's hearing profiles and information on both spoken and signed languages.

Twenty-nine percent suggested offering early access to American Sign Language for families starting at infancy. Participants described ASL as one way to support early language access while families continue to learn about their child's hearing profile, communication needs, and developmental pathway. They emphasized that children should have access to an accessible language from infancy.

Service providers recommended that families have ongoing opportunities to learn about and experience different language and communication approaches through group activities, events, and connections with diverse children, families and members of the Deaf and hard of hearing community. They emphasized that continued exposure to different approaches can support informed decision-making as children's communication needs evolve over time.

> *"Parents need neutral information about language and communication opportunities as their child grows."*

What Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals often emphasized the desire for centralized and community-based access to Deaf and hard of hearing services and professionals. Fifty-three percent recommended one point of entry where families could access ongoing information and services across language options.

Twenty-three percent told us parents are often overwhelmed after diagnosis and may not be ready to make informed language decisions right away. They suggested videos, workshops and resources that explain language access and brain development written in plain language be made available to families at all times.

Forty-one percent want extended family, caregivers and siblings to learn ASL with parents. They expressed the need for Deaf representation in developing assessments, materials, presentations and services.

Deaf and hard of hearing representatives and individuals emphasized that families should have opportunities to learn about the benefits of ASL/English bilingualism for Deaf and hard of hearing children.

Participants said seeing Deaf and hard of hearing professionals and mentors in visible roles helps families recognize that signed language, Deaf identity, and Deaf lives are valued from the beginning of their journey.

Summary

Participants held different views about language options and approaches. Some emphasized early access to both signed and spoken language, while others emphasized spoken language or signed language development or parental choice based on each child and family's needs. Across groups, there was broad agreement that families should receive clear, balanced information and ongoing opportunities to revisit language decisions as their child's needs evolve.

Assessments: understanding child's progress

Assessment were discussed as a way to understand how children develop language and communication skills. Participants told us families need clear information about their child's hearing profile, progress, developmental milestones, and practical next steps as their child grows.

Key message

- Families want regular easy-to-understand assessments that help them understand language development, their child's progress and practical next steps as their child evolves.

What parents and guardians told us

Parents in interviews and survey responses emphasized the need for consistency and clarity. Thirty-seven percent of interviewed parents and thirty-eight percent of parent survey respondents gave emphasize to the desire for regular assessments and check-ins with their SLP and/or ASL teacher.

Parents valued regular conversations with service providers. Thirty-six percent of parents interviewed, and twenty-two percent of parent survey respondents appreciated access to specialists who could explain milestones, set goals and answer questions.

Accessible information was a major theme. Thirty-six percent of parents interviewed, and thirty-nine percent of parent survey respondents emphasized wanting simple, understandable information about language development. Parents want clear developmental or adjusted developmental milestones, checklists, regular reports, visuals, and plain-language explanations.

Parents also emphasized the importance of understanding their child's progress over time. They wanted assessments to begin early and continue regularly, accompanied with practical strategies and resources to support their child's language development at home and in other environments, including preschool, and childcare.

Emphasis was placed on assessment tools that reflect Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing children. Some parents told us that standard developmental milestones may not always consider the experiences of Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing children. They wanted approaches that measure their unique language and communication approaches, including signed language, spoken language, or both.

"Families need to know what progress looks like and what to do next."

What service providers told us

Sixty-one percent of service providers emphasized the need for consistent, ongoing assessment. They told us families understand progress best when assessment(s) occur regularly overtime and results are explained in clear, meaningful ways.

Fifty-seven percent of service providers indicated the need for parents to understand their child's language and communication development. They told us families benefit from clear explanations of developmental milestones, average expectations, listening age (the amount of time a child has had access to sound through hearing technology), and their role in supporting language development. Some also suggested giving parents opportunities to observe therapy sessions or classroom activities, followed by discussions with service providers.

Service providers recommended using a combination of formal assessments, observations, language samples, checklists, and progress reports to provide a more complete picture of a child's language development. While recommendations of the frequency of assessments varied, many suggested regular reviews throughout the year to monitor progress, adjust goals, and guide service planning. They also emphasized that assessments should recognize each child's unique developmental pathway while helping families understand typical developmental milestones and appropriate next steps.

What Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals emphasized the importance of clear goals, consistent assessment practices, and communication with families. Twenty-four percent told us that language assessments should be structured and consistent. They want qualified specialists to assess progress and explain results in ways families can understand.

Eighteen percent emphasized the value of frequent milestone reviews, at least three to four times per year. They told us these reviews should involve a collaborative team that includes Deaf and hard of hearing and hearing professionals who are fluent in ASL.

Eighteen percent mentioned standardized assessments as a way to help families understand language and communication progress over time. Participants also emphasized the importance of using assessment approaches that are appropriate for Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing children ages 0–5 and that recognize children's language and communication approaches, including ASL, spoken language, or both. They emphasized that both signed and spoken languages are important and should be recognized and assessed with the goal of supporting children's continued language development and progress.

Participants also emphasized that trust is an important part of the assessment process. They highlighted the need for families to understand the purpose of assessments, who is involved, and how results will be used to guide supports and services for their child.

Summary

Participants described assessment as more than measurement. They viewed it as an ongoing process that helps families understand their child's language development, monitor progress over time, celebrate achievements, identify emerging needs, and have regular conversations about goals and supports. Across groups, participants emphasized that assessment information should be clear, easy to understand, and linked to practical guidance for families.

"Assessment should help families understand progress, not just produce a score."

Group-based programs, parent connection and immersive language learning

Participants told us children and families benefit from opportunities to connect with others while developing languages in natural, everyday environments. This included connections with peers, other families, and Deaf and hard of hearing adults, through community events, playgroups, camps, and immersive language experiences. Participants also described the value of preschool and childcare programs that provide accessible language environments and integrated supports, including listening and spoken language environments and opportunities to use ASL in everyday settings.

Key message

- Connection was one of the strongest themes. Participants told us it can reduce isolation, build confidence, and support a child's early language development.

What parents and guardians told us

In interviews, twenty-two percent of parents identified Deaf camps, family camps, ASL immersion weekends, family events, playdates, playgroups, and other family social opportunities as valuable ways to build connection and community. Sixteen percent of parents described playdates and

playgroups as natural settings for children to develop language and communication skills while families built relationships with one another.

Parents also described the value of learning practical strategies from other families, including ideas and experiences that may not be available through formal services. Twenty-five percent said family social opportunities helped them learn from other families, use ASL in everyday situations, build confidence, and develop lasting relationships. Some parents also expressed a desire for more opportunities to experience and use ASL in group programs, family events, and community activities.

Parents whose children use spoken language also highlighted the value of immersive listening and spoken language environments, including preschool and before- and after-school programs with accessible listening environments and integrated audiology supports.

In the survey, 44 percent of parent respondents identified parent-to-parent connection as one of the most valued forms of support. Parents told us these connections reduced isolation, provided emotional support, and created opportunities to learn from families with similar experiences. Thirty percent also highlighted the importance of role models, including Deaf and hard of hearing teachers, Deaf mentors, older Deaf children, and community members. Parents also shared that seeing Deaf and hard of hearing adults and older children helped them imagine positive possibilities for their child's future. Parents shared that immersive language experiences and group programs helped children and families use language more naturally, build confidence, and form relationships that often continued beyond the program itself.

Some parents identified the value of full ASL immersion opportunities, where families can learn and use ASL in a natural language environment. They described these settings as important opportunities for children and families to build language skills, confidence, and connection through regular interaction with fluent ASL users.

"Meeting other families helped us feel less alone."

What service providers told us

Forty-four percent of service providers emphasized the importance of language models and mentors in supporting children's language development. They told us that regular interaction with fluent language users in everyday settings helps children develop natural communication skills. For some families, this included opportunities to learn and use ASL with Deaf mentors, professionals, and community members.

Forty-seven percent of service providers described parent connections as valuable. They told us parent circles can help families adjust, learn practical strategies, share experiences, and feel less alone.

Thirty-six percent recommended playdates and peer-based opportunities to support language development through social interaction. Several noted that playdates facilitated by Deaf and hard of hearing adults could provide valuable opportunities for children and families to build connections and see language used naturally.

Forty-eight percent of service providers told us families benefit from a range of accessible social opportunities because different formats work for different families. They emphasized the importance of offering choices, including group programs, family events, peer connections, and immersive language opportunities, while recognizing that participation should remain voluntary. Participants also identified barriers such as limited local opportunities in rural and remote communities, family schedules, and readiness to participate. They recommended flexible options, including virtual, evening, weekend, and regional formats, with ongoing invitations that do not create pressure for families.

What Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals also emphasized social and community connection. Forty-one percent identified social opportunities with Deaf, hard of hearing and hearing peers as valuable. These included peers who share a language and/or who also use hearing devices, as well as opportunities with hearing peers.

Forty-seven percent emphasized the important role of Deaf and hard of hearing role models and mentors. They told us meeting Deaf people helps children see language used in natural settings and provides families with examples of Deaf and hard of hearing adults who are also parents.

Forty-one percent recommended parent connection opportunities because they provide space to share experiences, reduce isolation, and build community. Participants also emphasized the value of opportunities where families can experience language in natural environments and develop relationships with others who share similar experiences.

Summary

Participants described group and community opportunities as a critical part of early intervention, not an “extra”. They told us these opportunities support children’s language development by providing meaningful interactions, language models, peer relationships, and opportunities to build confidence. Families also benefit from connections with others who can share experiences, reduce isolation, and provide ongoing support.

Transition to kindergarten

Participants told us the move into kindergarten can be a significant transition for children and families. The school system may feel new and complex, and families need support to understand available services, accommodations, meetings, equipment, and how to advocate for their child’s needs.

For Deaf and hard of hearing children, transition planning may include ensuring the child’s language and communication needs are understood and supported in the school environment.

Participants emphasized that early planning helps ensure children enter Kindergarten with the support needed to participate, learn, and build relationships.

Key message

- Families want early planning, clear information, and direct support to communicate with schools and prepare for a successful transition.

What parents and guardians told us

Sixty-three percent of parents interviewed, and thirty-four percent of parent survey respondents described uncertainty about what supports, services, or accommodations to request when their child entered kindergarten. Parents told us they often had to explain their child's language needs multiple times to different people within the school system.

Parents identified several factors that support a successful transition, including early planning, accessible language environments, coordination between early intervention services and schools, and sufficient time to prepare before the school year begins. They emphasized the importance of schools understanding a child's language needs and accessibility requirements before kindergarten starts, rather than arranging supports after entry.

Participants provided examples of supports that may be needed depending on a child's language needs. For children who use ASL, this may include access to fluent ASL users, such as qualified interpreters or school professionals who are fluent in ASL. For children who use listening and spoken language, this may include access to hearing technology, classroom equipment, and trained educators who understand how to support technology use during daily learning.

Some parents of children who use listening and spoken language shared that their child had strong supports and technology available during preschool, and that transitioning to a school environment with different access to technology, resources, or expertise was challenging.

Nineteen percent of parents interviewed whose children had an easier transition described planning that began at least one year before kindergarten entry. These families identified workshops, written resources, self-advocacy support, school visits, and opportunities to practice routines, equipment care, and troubleshooting as helpful.

Parents described relying on early intervention staff, speech-language pathologists, Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and other program staff to support communication with schools. They wanted support with understanding school processes, meetings, documentation, individualized education plans (IEPs), funding, equipment, and how to advocate for their child's language and learning needs.

Parents also shared that successful transitions require schools to have a clear understanding of a child's language needs and accessibility requirements before kindergarten begins. Families described the importance of early planning to ensure appropriate supports are in place at the start

of the school year, rather than being arranged after the child has entered kindergarten. Participants noted that some supports, such as recruiting and hiring qualified staff or arranging specialized language supports, can require significant planning time and should begin well before school entry.

"The timeline was too tight. Families need more time to put supports in place."

"A good transition starts before the first day of school."

What service providers told us

Thirty-five percent of service providers suggested that early interventionists join Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in transition meetings before kindergarten entry. A few participants suggested planning a full year prior to child starting kindergarten. In the focus group, service providers recommended that support from them continue into the child's first year of school.

Twenty-seven percent described the importance of advocacy within the school system. For example, some service providers told us equipment recommendations should be sent to the school, well in advance, so they have time to prepare.

Twenty-three percent told us parents need early information about school support, options for school, registration, classroom accommodations, technology and local or provincial programs. Parents provided examples of support that may be needed depending on a child's language needs. For children who use ASL, this may include access to fluent ASL users, such as qualified interpreters or school professionals who are fluent in ASL. For children who use listening and spoken language, this may include ensuring hearing technology and classroom equipment are available, tested, and supported by trained educators who understand how to use the technology during daily learning.

Thirty-eight percent described daycare and preschool as important to prepare children to be language ready or kindergarten. They told us these settings can help children build confidence, communication, self-regulation, and routines.

What Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals told us

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals also emphasized school advocacy, preparation, and coordinated support. Twelve percent told us service providers should share information with schools and help prepare kindergarten teachers to understand and support each child's language and access needs.

Eighteen percent highlighted the role of Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. They told us these teachers are important school experts for accessibility, equipment, and the environment.

Twenty-four percent advocated for ASL use in preschools and daycares across the province, so Deaf and hard of hearing children have access to ASL in early learning environments and have strong language foundation when they enter kindergarten.

Families told us they need guidance to understand the school system and advocate for their child's language and learning needs. Service providers and Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals also emphasized the importance of coordination between early years services and schools to support a smoother transition.

Summary

Participants described kindergarten transition as a process that should start early, ideally at least one year before school entry. Early planning allows the school, families and service providers time to understand a child's language needs, identify accessibility requirements, and arrange appropriate supports before the school year begins. This may include planning for signed language access, hearing technology, equipment, accommodations, and other supports.

Other topics participants raised

Participants also raised other topics that shaped families' experiences of accessing early language services. While these topics did not always fit within one service area, they are important for understanding the range of supports families might need.

Additional diagnoses and intersecting needs

Twenty-two percent of parents interviewed told us that additional diagnoses or co-occurring medical conditions made their service journey more complex. Some described challenges related to receiving multiple diagnoses, navigating funding, and accessing services that did not fit within existing service categories. Examples included autism, immune conditions, and rare medical conditions.

Parents told us children with additional needs may benefit from individualized support, coordinated services, and providers who understand each child and family's unique circumstances. They emphasized the value of more integrated services to reduce the burden of coordinating multiple supports.

Ten percent of service providers also identified that additional diagnoses or co-occurring needs can create more complex service journeys. They noted that families may need to work with multiple providers, including pediatricians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, behavioural interventionists, and assessment teams. Participants emphasized that managing multiple appointments, services, and sometimes differing recommendations can be overwhelming for families.

Participants told us families of children with concurrent diagnoses and/or disabilities need flexible, patient, and individualized approaches that recognize their child's unique needs.

Work schedules and service access

Parents told us that work schedules and program availability can affect their ability to participate in services. Twenty-seven percent of parents interviewed, and eight percent of parent survey respondents described challenges for working families.

Parents identified several barriers, including but not limited to:

- difficulty taking time away from work for appointments;
- limited ability to attend daytime social activities;
- managing multiple emails, registrations, and scheduling requirements; and daycare or preschool hours at early intervention sites that do not always align with full workdays.

Some families also described challenges accessing programs that were not available locally, such as preschool or group programs offered only in larger centres. Parents identified the value of flexible service options, including evening and weekend appointments, virtual options, recurring drop-in activities, and expanded access to programs in various locations. They emphasized the importance of service models that reduce scheduling burden and allow families to participate without having to choose between work, travel, and their child's supports.

> *"Access [to services] depends on more than whether a service exists. It also depends on whether families can realistically use it."*

Services outside of urban centres

Many parents told us that where a family lives can affect the services, supports, and connections available to them. In interviews, fifty-two percent of parents identified regional differences, and fifteen percent of parent survey respondents raised this topic. Families outside larger urban centres described challenges related to travelling long distances, access to specialists, fewer social opportunities, limited access to groups or immersive language experiences, and smaller local Deaf and hard of hearing communities.

Participants identified several factors that can affect access to services, including location, work schedules, transportation, family income, language, cultural background, child's additional support needs, and service availability. Families living in rural and remote areas described fewer local options, costly and time-consuming travel, and fewer opportunities for peer and community connections. Some families told us medical appointments often took priority over social or language-based opportunities.

Parents and service providers identified the need for flexible and creative approaches to address access barriers. These included virtual options, travel support, evening and weekend

appointments, recurring drop-in opportunities, and increased access to local, in-person services. Twenty-nine percent of service providers emphasized the importance of local providers having access to training, ASL fluency, knowledge of hearing technology, and connections to specialized provincial supports. Thirty-five percent of Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals emphasized the importance of consistent access to services across the province, including access to ASL-fluent educators and interpreters within local programs.

COVID-19 impact

Ten percent of parents interviewed told us the COVID-19 pandemic affected access to services. Families described assessment delays, increased reliance on virtual services, fewer social opportunities, and additional costs associated with accessing some private, in-person services. Some families felt these changes affected language development and social connection.

Culture and language

Parents, service providers, and Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives, individuals and allies highlighted the importance of culturally and linguistically accessible services. Eleven percent of parents interviewed and twenty-seven percent of parent survey respondents identified the need for knowledgeable ASL/English and other language interpreters, plain-language materials, and culturally responsive service providers.

Fifty-six percent of service providers told us families whose first language is not English need clear, accessible information and culturally responsive guidance. They noted that general language interpretation may not always include familiarity with Deaf and hard of hearing terminology, experiences, or service systems.

Forty-one percent of Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives, individuals and allies recommended access to translation services and assessments in multiple languages. They also emphasized the importance of diverse service teams that reflect and respect different cultural backgrounds. Some participants noted that in some cultures, disability may be viewed differently or families may feel hesitant to seek support. They emphasized the importance of culturally responsive education and relationship-building to help families understand available services, access supports early, and support their child's development and success.

Participants described culturally responsive services as important for building trust and creating safer experiences for families. They emphasized that providers should recognize families' cultural and language backgrounds, understand that families may have different experiences navigating systems, and use approaches that are respectful, relationship-based, and trauma-informed. Plain-language information and appropriate interpretation support were identified as important for ensuring families can understand services, options, and next steps.

Accessibility

Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives and individuals emphasized that accessibility must be built into all programs, services, and communication. They identified the importance of consistent access to ASL/English interpreters, captioning, and other communication supports to ensure equitable participation. Participants also emphasized that information should be accessible in multiple formats, including ASL videos alongside written materials, websites, and other public information.

Participants shared that visible accessibility helps families understand what communication access can look like for Deaf and hard of hearing children and adults. Seeing ASL, captioning, Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, and role models represented in services can help families feel more comfortable using accessible communication approaches and recognize the value of these supports from the beginning of their child's journey. They emphasized that accessible communication should be routinely available across services, meetings, events, and information sharing, rather than requiring individuals and families to repeatedly request accommodations.

Overall themes

Themes heard across sections

- Information must be clear, repeated and easy to access.
- Families need direct service support, from an identified core person, not only written materials.
- Services work better when they are coordinated and providers communicate with each other.
- Families need choice, flexibility and support throughout the 0-5 period and transition to school entry.
- Community connection can help reduce isolation and build confidence.
- Access is shaped by geography, paid work schedules, culture, language and complexity of needs.

Across the engagement activities, participants often returned to similar core ideas. Families need information they can access and understand. Families need consistent and responsive support from people they trust. They need services that are simple to navigate. They need opportunities to connect with other families, peers, and role models.

Participants also raised that family needs vary. Some families need more support with diagnosis and intake. Others need ongoing navigation, assessment, information on language choices, school transition, or regional access. Many need several of these services at once.

Overall summary

This engagement gathered input from families, service providers, and Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing representatives, individuals and allies about early language services for Deaf and hard of hearing children aged 0 to 5 in B.C.

Across the engagement, participants emphasized that families need clear information from the beginning. Information should be shared in stages, in plain language, and in ways families can return to as they learn more about their child's hearing profile, language development, and available supports. Many families also identified the value of having a consistent and responsive person who can provide guidance through early decisions and ongoing service needs, including supports outside MCFD-funded early language services.

Participants emphasized that services should be experienced by families as coordinated and connected. Families should not have to navigate multiple services and supports on their own. Many valued relationships with skilled providers and identified continuity of providers as important throughout the early years.

Participants shared a range of perspectives about language. Across groups, there was agreement that families need access to the full range of language options, including ASL, spoken language, or both throughout the age 0 to 5 period. Participants emphasized that information about language and language development should be balanced, clear, and flexible as children grow, and their needs evolve.

Participants described assessment as an ongoing process that helps families understand their child's progress and next steps. Families want clear developmental or adjusted developmental milestones, practical tools, and conversations with providers who can explain assessment results and how they relate to services.

Participants identified community connection as an important support for children and families. Parent groups, peer play, camps, immersive language opportunities, and Deaf and hard of hearing role models were described as valuable ways to build connection, confidence, and belonging.

Participants emphasized that transition to kindergarten requires early planning and support. Families often need guidance to understand school processes, prepare for meetings, and ensure their child's language, learning, and accessibility needs are understood and supported.

Participants also identified factors that can influence access to services, including co-occurring diagnoses, paid work schedules, regional differences, and cultural or language needs.

Many participants also reflected on the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on early language services. Families described disruptions to in-person services, reduced opportunities for children to interact with peers and role models, and delays in accessing assessments, interventions, and community supports.

Overall, participants described an early language service system where families are informed, supported, and connected, with consistent access to a full range of language options, information, and services throughout the early years.