

Why not learn sign language?

INTERNATIONAL Day of Sign Languages will be observed on Friday, and we are taking the opportunity to raise awareness and support deaf people and other sign language users, as well as encourage members of the public to consider learning sign language.

Sign language is the primary mode of communication used by the deaf and hard of hearing. The last census in TT gave a figure of 7,759 people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Internationally, according to the World Federation of the Deaf, there are more than 70 million deaf people worldwide. Many of these people are dependent on sign language as their means of interacting with others. For many people who are born deaf, sign language is their first language, and it is important for them to be able to effectively communicate with not only family members, but in the wider society.

It is useful for people to learn sign language to be able to communicate with the deaf and hard of hearing people as it allows the sharing of information and access to services. For people who are deaf, it helps knowing that they can communicate with someone to order a meal or go shopping on their own and be independent without being accompanied by an interpreter all the time. The deaf community has so much to offer and learning and using sign language allows people to tap into and learn from their experiences.

Still not convinced? Did you know that learning sign language provides all the same benefits as learning a foreign language? Bilingualism (whether signed or spoken) is a great brain booster that strengthens cognitive function.



The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises and promotes the use of sign languages as equal in status to spoken languages. People who are deaf or hard of hearing are entitled to the right to live full and complete lives.

Knowing and using sign language promotes inclusivity and for deaf people and the hard of hearing community, inclusivity means being afforded the same opportunity to access all services, often with the use of reasonable accommodation. Professional organisations can use sign language in their promotional material or promote the learning of sign language and create an opportunity to hire the best talent, which can include deaf people.

In 2017, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) enlisted the National Centre for Persons with Disabilities to train members of staff in sign language to increase our capacity to deliver service to all members of society. By 2020, more than half of the commission's staff were equipped to communicate using sign language and to better understand the deaf community and its culture. Staff can initiate a conversation using sign language by asking and responding to basic introductory questions such as what is your name, how are you and

what is your telephone number.

The Equal Opportunity Act protects people with disabilities and any person who has been discriminated against based on their disability can lodge a complaint at the EOC. This discrimination must fall under the categories of employment, education, provision of goods and services and provision of accommodation.

According to Qushiba La Fleur, parent advocate and disability consultant, the learning of sign language has increased tremendously since a drive to promote its learning was conducted in 2012/13. There are now more people in the population who can communicate more effectively with deaf people. There are also people who are training to become sign language interpreters as awareness of the importance of sign language has increased.

La Fleur, who is also founder and CEO of We Care Deaf Support Network, said that for a child who has been born deaf, sign language is their first language, and it is so important for parents to learn sign language so they can communicate effectively with their child. It helps with the child's emotional and cognitive development as well as academic and personal development. Without the means to communicate with family members, the child can miss so many opportunities for growth.

As we strive to promote equal opportunity in all spheres of life in TT, we join the international community in advocating for the inclusion of the deaf and hard of hearing community by promoting the learning and use of sign language for all people.