

MENTAL HEALTH FOR ALL – STATEMENT ON DHH CHILDREN IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) children in mainstream school systems, particularly those whose first language is American Sign Language (ASL), are at risk of social isolation leading to poor mental health in schools designed for hearing children and a hearing culture. Social isolation has a direct and lasting impact on a child's physical and mental health. CMHA-NL believes strongly in our core value; Mental Health for All.

Children in the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) community and culture are vulnerable in their schools, particularly if their first language is ASL. Depending on the level of supports and services available in-school, DHH children can be excluded in important and valuable learning, language development, communication processes, and social connection opportunities.

For Children belonging to the DHH community and their families, having basic developmental needs met in mainstream schools can be a complex process in a system not built for them. Mainstream schools are the foundation of learning and advancement for children and without proper support DHH children can be left at both a social and academic disadvantage. The development of social and emotional skills for children and youth in school is equally important in curriculum learning, to prevent social isolation and maintain positive mental health. However, although there are some supports in place to accommodate DHH needs in mainstream schools, at times these accommodations can not suitably be met. *We have become a culture of accommodation, rather than one of universal access and acceptance.*

CMHA-NL supports Universal Design (UD) or Universal Access (UA). These terms stand for the design of places and spaces that are barrier-free. Building our society both architecturally and socially with a "universal recognition that all structures have to be built and all activities have to be organized for the widest practical range of human abilities" (Wendell 1996, 55). School environments should be both physically accessible and socially inclusive of all abilities. This is necessary for DHH children to have equitable opportunities for learning, socialization, and experience positive mental health. Until our schools are equipped with not simply the right technology and supports, but the right perspectives and frameworks for action, children in the DHH community will be denied equity and will be at increased risk of mental illness.

Healthy development - including positive mental health - is a right for all children. We are responsible for creating environments where all children can thrive, feel included, socialize, and experience positive mental health. The Canadian Mental Health Association Newfoundland and Labrador believes in the right of all children to experience positive mental health. However, this is impossible without taking action to change existing structures in our education system which create barriers for our children.

We support the design of places and spaces which are barrier-free in order to achieve mental health.

References:

Canadian Hard of Hearing Association. (2020). <https://www.chha.ca/about-us/advocacy/>



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Office of the Child & Youth Advocate. (June 2020). *The Sounds of Silence – Perspectives on the Education System’s Response to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children*. Newfoundland & Labrador.

Wendell, Susan. (1996). *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. New York: Routledge.

Acknowledgements:

¹Footnote: The Department of Education in partnership with NLESD have begun the integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) into the school system and specifically within the DHH school community. The Director of Provincial Programs for DHH Children and Youth asserted, “We understand that children and youth with significant hearing loss can feel isolated and we are cognizant of the importance of developing language skills and social skills to promote learning, resilience and self advocacy.” In response to this, Schools in our province now have DHH itinerant teachers, specifically assigned to case manage and provide support to DHH children. Among their responsibilities, Itinerants assist with social emotional skills and promote mental health.