

What you need to know about Swedish Sign Language



Sign Language – a visual language

A sign language is a visual language that simultaneously uses hand movements and hand shapes, facial expressions, eye gaze, mouth movements and body posture. All elements are significant. Signed languages, just like spoken languages, have emerged spontaneously from people's wishes and need for communication, and have evolved into complete and fully developed languages in interactions between people who are deaf.

There is also a tactile form of sign language in which you keep your hands on the other person's hands while they sign. This allows you to read the hand movements. Tactile signing is used by people with deafblindness.

One of many sign languages in the world

Swedish Sign Language is one of about 160 different sign languages in the world and is thus not international. A sign language, just like a spoken language, is strongly linked to the culture of its country. Although all countries have their own sign language, people from different countries who use sign language are more likely to understand each other than people speaking different languages. There is an international manual alphabet and a set of international signs that have been agreed upon by sign language users in international meetings.

The right to Swedish Sign Language and bilingualism

It was not until 1981 that the Swedish parliament recognised Swedish Sign Language as a language with its own grammar. Sweden was the first country in the world to recognise the right of deaf people to bilingualism in Swedish Sign Language and Swedish, and to recognise that Swedish Sign Language should be used in deaf education. In 1983, bilingual education was introduced in special schools, and in the 1994 curriculum Swedish Sign Language became a separate school subject with its own syllabus.

Swedish Sign Language was given a boost in 2009, when it was given equal status with national minority languages in the Language Act. The Language Act says that society shall 'protect and promote Swedish Sign Language' and that those who are deaf or hard of hearing or for other reasons need to communicate through sign language should have 'the opportunity to learn, develop and use Swedish Sign Language.' The Swedish Language Council estimates that around 30,000 people speak Swedish Sign Language, of which 13,000 have Swedish Sign Language as their mother tongue.

Being bilingual

If you can use both a country's sign language and a country's written language, you are bilingual. Being bilingual is an asset and gives those who are deaf or hard of hearing the opportunity of freedom of choice, participation and accessibility in a variety

of contexts. You are able to choose the language according to the situation. The freedom of choice becomes even greater if you can use sign language interpreters, for example in higher education. This has many advantages, if the hearing technology is not working, for example. You can then expend your energy on gaining knowledge, rather than on straining to hear.

Speech and signing, different modalities

There is a big difference between Swedish Sign Language and Swedish in spoken form. It is not possible to sign and speak at the same time without one of the languages being affected. In situations where people speak and sign at the same time, it tends to be always Swedish in spoken form that dominates at the expense of Swedish Sign Language; facial expressions, eye gaze, mouth movements and body posture are neglected and word order goes wrong. It turns into communication without correct grammar, which can be difficult to understand. Swedish Sign Language should not be confused with sign-supported speech, where speech is supplemented with signs for certain words.

Sign language environment at our schools

In our bilingual special schools, children and students who are deaf or hard of hearing receive bilingual education in a sign language environment. Read more about our schools at www.spsm.se/specialskola

More on the web

On our website you can find more information about Swedish Sign Language. Read more at www.spsm.se

The Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools distributes state funding to education providers who arrange sign language learning for parents (TUFF – teckenspråksutbildning för föräldrar in Swedish). Siblings and child-

ren of people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and children who are deaf or hard of hearing and who go to school have the opportunity to learn sign language from us. More information can be found at www.spsm.se

Learn more about Swedish Sign Language on the Swedish Language Council's website www.sprakochfolkminnen.se

The Swedish Sign Language Dictionary can be found at www.teckensprakslexikon.su.se

Anyone can learn Swedish Sign Language. You can search for sign language courses at www.folkhogskola.nu, www.ling.su.se, www.studieforbunden.se, among others, and at deaf associations all over Sweden.

The Swedish Sign Language manual alphabet

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H	I	J
K	L	M	N	O
P	Q	R	S	T
U	V	W	X	Y
Z	Å	Ä	Ö	

In Swedish Sign Language there is a manual alphabet. The manual alphabet has different hand shapes for all the letters of the alphabet. It is used for fingerspelling names and certain words. The Swedish manual alphabet was created by Pär Aron Borg. In 1809 he founded the first Swedish school for the deaf, the Manilla School in Stockholm.