

# Growing up Deaf in Thailand

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*For deaf people in Thailand, access to quality education is not a given. A residential schooling system provides opportunities for educational success, at a time where some children may be falling through the cracks. Two students at the Khon Kaen School for the Deaf share their stories.*

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Photography by Shelby Gordon

Chanticha and Athit have attended the Khon Kaen School for the Deaf (KKSD) since the age of three. Now successful teenage students, they reflect on their experiences in the education system for deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Thailand.



Sixteen-year-old Chanticha (left) and nineteen-year-old Athit (right) stand inside the school's gardens, where students grow fruits and vegetables.

Athit remembers the years of his childhood before he learned Thai Sign Language (TSL), the main language of instruction at KKSD and the one spoken by many deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Thailand. "I had to use other ways to communicate when my family couldn't understand me."

His parents first acquired TSL as part of his kindergarten program.

Despite their family being less conventional, their mother Sarika Khuenchaiyapoom says that others in their neighborhood did not treat them differently. “They know that [Chanticha and Athit] are good students, and the other kids would play with them more because of that.”

Chanticha stresses the importance of having access to sign language education for her success. “I need sign language to communicate,” she says. “I have to go to school to see the world.”

## Thai Sign Language

TSL, according to [the Ethnologue](#), originates from both indigenous sign languages and American Sign Language (ASL), which was introduced when the first deaf education program was established in 1951 at a public school in Bangkok. Fifty-two percent of signs in TSL are cognates with ASL. Its other roots lie in Chiang Mai Sign Language and Bangkok Sign Language.



A carved mural on the classroom building gives instructions on fingerspelling in Thai Sign Language (TSL).

Like other sign languages, TSL is just as complex and sophisticated as spoken languages, and is able to express the full range of communication that a spoken language can. The fingerspelling system used in TSL is based on the Thai writing system and incorporates the Thai script characters. TSL is however distinct from Thai itself.

For deaf people around the world, sign language is often the easiest and most natural way to communicate. Chanticha and Athit say that they, along with others who are deaf and Thai, don't like when hearing people in Thailand use the term *bai* to describe them as it carries the meaning of 'You can't speak,' which is not true. They can speak, just in a different modality. Instead, they much

prefer the word *'huu nuaak,'* or 'deaf'.

Without sign language education, students in Thailand and elsewhere often experience 'language deprivation.' Not learning a language in your childhood not only affects your ability to learn concepts in school, but limits your cognitive functioning [in other ways](#).

## **Residential schooling**

Today, there are 20 residential schools around the country, with six of them located in Isaan in Chaiyaphum, Khon Kaen, Mukdahan, Roi Et, Surin, and Udon Thani Provinces. They are free to attend like other public schools, and students from first through twelfth grade are given food, bedding, and other amenities.

KKSD follows the same curriculum as public schools in Thailand, but the similarities end there. In each classroom, two teachers instruct ten students bilingually, in TSL and Thai. Along with the standard subjects students also learn American Sign Language.



Students learn written Thai, English, and some American Sign Language.

Students are allowed to remain at school on weekends if they choose, and with the many activities to do in high school, Chanticha and Athit often stay. "Sometimes they can't get enough of their friends, and we have to do something to get them to come home," their mother says, laughing. "Like cooking food that they like, or saying 'It's my birthday.'"

Both siblings have strong extracurricular interests as well. Chanticha participates in traditional Thai dance, and often competes against hearing and deaf students from other schools. Athit enjoys

making clothes and cooking.

While at school, each of them receives an allowance of 300 baht a week from their parents for snacks and other extras. The school also organizes activities for students to earn additional money. Chanticha puts together scarf dolls and Athit sews bags for the school gift shop.

### **A population underserved**

About 50,000 deaf people attend school around the country. This number, out of an estimated 300,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing, begs the question of who is not being served in this system and why.

When asked, families, school administrators, and students alike all say that KKSD does an excellent job of recruiting their students.

There are currently 195 students attending KKSD. Despite this seemingly large number, attendance rates have dropped for several years.

The current pathway to finding deaf students is through those that already attend the school. Once a connection is made in a community, school staff will visit and ask each household if they know any other deaf children in that area or others.

But why are attendance rates dropping? Those connected with the school cite recent advancements in preventative healthcare. Additionally, they state that more students than ever are being 'mainstreamed' (sent to a regular public school) to be able to stay closer to their families.

This is made possible by a resolution passed by the Minister of Education in 1999. This law however does not make adequate services guaranteed. Depending on the situation, an interpreter or two might be all that is provided, while some schools have established programs.

In 2017, 18.71% of all deaf people in Thailand were born deaf, while still others become deaf [from illness \(34.24%\) and accidents \(29.23%\)](#). Only about 4,200 deaf students in the country attend the residential schools. Whether or not decreased enrollment is due to healthcare improvements, there are thousands of children left without an education that can provide them with the tools to succeed.

In Isaan, and perhaps around the country, this means that a more vigorous outreach is needed to seek them out. Continued improvement to the educational system is necessary for other children to have opportunities like Athit and Chanticha, and to expand the benefits that they have enjoyed.

### **A bright future**

For those that attend KKSD, the future is brighter.

Athit is graduating this semester, and plans to move to Bangkok to work at a hotel. Chanticha is unsure what her plans are and will decide when she reaches the twelfth grade.

In the long term, Athit knows that he loves making clothes, and sees that as a possible avenue for his career. Whatever they do, their mother will be sad to see them go and is not prepared for them to leave yet.



Chanticha and Athit with their parents, grandmother and younger sibling.

“I am proud of them as a mother,” Sarika says. “I want them to do whatever they want to do [in their lives] as much as they can.”

According to the director of KKSD, around half of graduating students attend college. For those that do, interpreters are provided. Many others will take up careers in the service industry. Occupational opportunities are more common in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and the two cities are also home to a larger population of deaf people. As Deaf primary education continues to improve, so will the career prospects of students like Athit and Chanticha. Then, just as anyone else, they can fully achieve their dreams.

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