

DEAF CULTURE

*“When all else seems impossible,
I remember her first sign ...”*

— Anonymous



Introduction

Deaf children, like all children who are neurologically intact, are born with the amazing ability to learn and develop language. From the earliest moments of life, they begin to communicate their needs and to interact with those around them. Through cries, squeals, hand clapping and eye gaze, deaf and hearing children begin to engage in the process of language learning. We watch them carefully and listen to them, certain that every thing they say is meaningful. In this manner we recognize and build their skills. Through their daily efforts to make sense of the sounds of voices and/or the signs on hands, children activate the ability they are born with, to learn and develop the most sophisticated communication system of all - language.

Language, whether it is spoken or signed, whether it is English, French, or American Sign Language, is learned through interaction. Children must actively participate in figuring out meanings, rules, and structures. They cannot learn by passively observing or mimicking the language of others. Cognitive and social experiences with meaningful linguistic data must be present in large doses and in natural situations for all children. By the time hearing children enter school, they have already mastered language. They have done so without formal language instruction. In our culture, the language most often learned is English.

Deaf children have the same ability to learn language as hearing children do. However, they must interact with their world through sight instead of through hearing. Instead of listening and speaking, they watch and often gesture to make their ideas and thoughts known. Their access to interaction is through sight in a world where most people depend on hearing. It is this basic mismatch of systems which often keeps deaf children from participating in, and learning language.

It is up to you as parents, and caregivers to maximize the interactive process for your deaf child through sight. By including deaf children in social and cognitive activities, by concentrating on communicat-

ing meaning (not structure), and by providing visual (sight) access to communication whenever possible, we can take advantage of the strengths of deaf children. Sign language provides an avenue which is minimal in speech and audition. It ensures deaf children's participation in the language learning process. It helps us to expand our communication and this in itself leads to a stronger language skill.

— Margaret Finnegan, Ph.D. parent and educator

The American Society for Deaf Children (ASDC) sets out the following principles, which ASDC believes apply to all deaf infants/children, their families, and the professionals who serve them. These principles apply regardless of whether the family chooses a cochlear implant for their infant/child, hearing aids, other hearing technology, or no hearing technology at all.

ASDC believes that parents of deaf children:

- Have the right to make informed decisions on behalf of their infants/children.
- Benefit from meeting other parents of deaf infants/children from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and philosophies.
- Benefit from meeting successful deaf infants/children and members of the deaf community from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and philosophies.

ASDC believes that deaf infants/children have the right to:

- Be valued and respected as whole infants/children capable of high achievement, regardless of their degree of technology use.
- Meet, socialize, and be educated with other deaf children.
- Achieve fluency reading and writing English, and to the extent of their ability, speaking English.

ASDC believes that medical, hearing health, and educational professionals serving deaf infants/children and their families have a responsibility to:

- Be informed about the successes of deaf persons from all walks of life, including those who use American Sign Language as their main language and those who do and do not use cochlear implants.
- Recognize the benefits of early language – including sign language - and work to ensure that deaf infant/children’s language development – whether signed, spoken, or both – progresses at a rate equivalent to that of their hearing peers.

Refer parents to a wide range of information sources, including deaf individuals, families with deaf children, schools for the deaf, and local, state and national parent and deaf adult organizations.

“It is important to nurture and encourage the fire in the child’s belly; persistence is a characteristic trait among well-rounded deaf adults living in mainstream. Encourage the child to read books, newspapers and journals so that knowledge will become a powerful tool. Encourage the child to live on the edge and thus develop independence in the mainstream.”

— John (adult)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Deaf Community?

A community is a group of people who share common interests and a common heritage. The Deaf Community is made up of people, both deaf and hearing, who to different degrees have similar community goals that come from Deaf cultural influences.

Why are there so many different terms to describe deafness?

The different terms reflect differing views of deafness. The terms most often used are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing Impaired. Some professionals use the term, "Hearing Impaired," to identify an infant/child with a hearing loss. This is a medical or clinical term that implies a need to fix or change. Within the Deaf community, people don't consider themselves "impaired". Members of the Deaf community, and some hearing professionals, who share this view, prefer, and use the terms Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing may have individual preferences. Their choices to use one term or the other may be based on many factors, including communication and culture.

What is Deaf Culture?

A culture is generally defined as a system of values, beliefs, and standards that guide a group of people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The Deaf Culture is made up of five areas including:

- *Language: American Sign Language (ASL)* is a language in which the placement, movement, and expression of the hands and body are actually part of the language. ASL is considered by the deaf community to be the native language of people who are deaf. ASL has its own grammatical structure and linguistic principles. It is one of the most complete sign systems in the world, and it can express abstract thoughts. ASL is now accepted as a true and complete language.
- *Identity:* It is important in any culture to know your identity. It is critical for an infant/child who is deaf to have Deaf role models, so he/she will have a better idea of the future. It is equally important for that infant/child who is deaf or hard of hearing to understand both Deaf and Hearing cultures and both languages (ASL and English)

in order to succeed in a larger society. A lot of young children are exposed to more than one language and culture, and it is perfectly permissible for Deaf/Hard of Hearing children to understand more about Deaf Culture and American Sign Language.

- *Values:* Individuals who are Deaf want to have clear communication without any barriers. This is an important and shared value. It is easy to understand why people who are Deaf feel comfortable using American Sign Language. They value their eyes because they can't depend on their hearing ability. Eye contact is often used to carry on a conversation. Deaf individuals use their hands to communicate. There is not a high value placed on the use of speech, as not all of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people are able to use their speech skills. The Deaf World is really a small world. It's easy to become friends with many Deaf people in many cities and countries because individuals share common values.
- *Rules of Social Interaction:* It is essential to know general rules of both cultures, so your infant/child can have an opportunity to function well in any setting. Here are a few rules of interaction in the Deaf Culture.
 - Maintain eye contact, do not stare
 - Use attention getting devices such as waving, tapping the shoulder, stamping on the floor and turning the lights on and off
 - Be blunt, "tell it like it is"
 - Engage in long departures from a social event
 - Hug when greeting or leaving
 - Pointing is polite
 - Touch during conversations
 - Avoid "excuse me" when walking between two people who are signing, it is not necessary to say "excuse me"
- *Deaf Traditions:* There are many traditions that are an important part of the Deaf Culture. They include:
 - Storytelling using American Sign Language
 - Sharing folklore
 - Giving name signs that reflect something about the person