



# COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

## *Deaf Culture & Community*

### What is Deaf Culture?

The American Deaf community values American Sign Language as the core of a culturally Deaf identity. Through ASL, members are given a unique medium for personal expression, a spatial and visual language that does not require the use of sound and emphasizes hands, faces, bodies and eyes. Members of this community share a common history, values, morals and experiences. Deaf individuals come from diverse backgrounds and influences, and as a result that variation is reflected in the community. Different types of sign systems are used to varying degrees, and the Deaf community welcomes this variety.

Deaf culture focuses on the stimulation of the eyes and the enhanced visual perceptiveness of Deaf individuals. This has resulted in a great history of rich ASL literature and storytelling. The oral tradition of storytelling has allowed members of the Deaf community to pass down the histories of great Deaf men and women, providing for Deaf children access to role models that enable them to feel rooted in history, while also giving them mentors with common experiences.

The American Deaf community is different from many thriving cultural groups around the world because it is not commonly recognized as distinct and discrete. Most people are born within an existing cultural group gaining direct access to their family and community cultural traditions, norms and values that are passed down from parent to child. Most deaf children, on the other hand, are born to hearing parents. For most Deaf children transmission of the culture of the family or that of the deaf community does not automatically occur. Deaf children typically gain access to the Deaf community through education in Deaf programs with other

deaf children and adults. It is in these visual-spatial environments that a Deaf child becomes “acculturated” through language immersion as well as social interactions with others who share the same language and a similar world view that is experienced primarily through visual rather than auditory experiences. In programs designed with deaf children in mind, Deaf children are not only surrounded by a sizable number of Deaf students, which provides them with a socially accessible environment, but are also exposed to educational programming through which the student gains access to the Deaf community, the history and the values of Deaf culture.

Deaf organizations, at the local, state and national levels have been around for over a century. These groups provide a chance for members to socialize and often provide a system of support. For instance, The National Association of the Deaf does a great deal of work advocating for the civil rights of Deaf members and empowering individuals to become active within their own local communities. Deaf organizations cater to every aspect of an individual’s life from the athletic members who participate in the Deaf Olympics, to those seeking religious access in Deaf churches and through church interpreters. Deaf organizations provide a network for camaraderie and socialization, and many members remain loyal for their entire lives.

Often Deaf people talk about the sense of belonging they feel upon their first experience in this type of environment. There is a feeling of “home,” and community that comes from interaction with other Deaf people. The degree of hearing or fluency in sign language are not the only factors that define identification with the Deaf community. Deaf people describe a sense of connection and a shared understanding of what it means to be a deaf person that is felt almost immediately upon meeting another person who is deaf.

Scholars have attempted to describe the shared worldview experienced by most deaf people. Ben Bahan, in 1989, published an essay on the “Seeing Person.” The Seeing person requires a re-placement of focus, rather than on the deaf-ness of an individual, but on the shared qualities of deaf people as a cultural group. This view of being deaf emphasizes the visual nature of the Deaf individual and is celebrated. The source of connection between Deaf individuals becomes a study of the eyes, not the ears.

Markku Jokinen (2001), on the other hand, describes the community based on their access to sign language. For Jokinen, the community is identified through the use of Sign Language. According to this model, Sign Language Persons represent those individuals that are fluent sign language users from birth or a very young age. Jokinen’s analysis provides a celebration of visual language skills, which again highlights the use of the eyes, the body and movement. Both Bahan and Jokinen provide a look at the Deaf community that is based on Deaf values and perspectives. Deaf people don’t focus on the inability to hear. Instead, classifying Deaf people as Seeing People and Sign Language Persons upholds positive traits that are valued and cherished.

### **What every parent and professional should know:**

A key point for consideration is communication opportunities. Deaf children of Deaf parents have access to both ASL and English. Deaf households are primarily bilingual and members of the Deaf community highly value literacy. Historically, the Deaf community and educators have engaged in an

impassioned debate over the method of instruction and often English and ASL are presented as mutually exclusive terms. Often parents feel pressured to choose one language option. Deaf cultural perspective holds that communication access multiplies when several opportunities are available. Rather than believing that education should be presented in strictly English or strictly sign language, instructors can capitalize on the many avenues of communication. A bilingual environment may be unique to the needs of the child, a profoundly deaf child can be bilingual in ASL and written English and a child with some auditory access may also be bilingual in spoken and written English and ASL. Language access is not described in terms of the use of one language, independently of any other. Instead, families should seek out communication opportunities in ASL and English and other ways of communicating that engage, educate and benefit their child.

It is important to provide a Deaf child with access to visual technology. These tools, such as video phones with access to video relay services (VRS), cell phones or pagers with data plans for emailing and texting, light flashers connected to doorbells and phones, and closed captioning on the television, create an environment that is compatible with a Deaf worldview, and making them a permanent facet of a Deaf child's life provides him or her full access to the environment.

Cochlear implants (CI) have been on the forefront of Deaf cultural discussions for two decades. While implantation can be seen as a hot-button issue, it is important to make several distinctions. First, CIs are a product of a medical philosophical model that views deafness as an impairment to be cured. The child is measured in terms of hearing "loss" and reasonably expected gains and a great deal of physical and mental work is done to repair the deafened child. While this is seen to be in direct opposition to a Deaf cultural model, members of Deaf culture recognize and embrace the diversity of the Deaf community. Children with CIs are not permanently "cured," and CIs, regardless of their ability to improve access to information through "hearing" do not change a deaf person into a hearing person. ASL and Deaf culture can and should continue to play an important role in the life of any child born deaf – including those using cochlear implant technology - as an opportunity for cultural enrichment and self-identify.

Parents of Deaf children will want to familiarize themselves with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act and other educational laws which impact the lives of Deaf children. These laws provide government support in creating an accessible education and accessible environments. Parents can use these resources and empower their families to advocate for greater opportunities for their Deaf child.

### **What issues are at the forefront?**

The creation of a home environment that is linguistically accessible to a deaf child is and has been at the forefront of this field for decades. In American society today, hearing parents are using American Sign Language (ASL) to establish early communication with their hearing infants. This revolution in Baby Signs has occurred because hearing parents desire to have the ability to communicate with their hearing children at prior to their ability to speak. Researchers have shown that providing access to language to children while they are young improves intelligence as they grow (see Acredolo and Goodwyn's longitudinal study available at [babysigns.com](http://babysigns.com) linked below). This rationale for early communication access is applicable to deaf children as well as hearing children. Access to a visual language at any age provides

the opportunity to converse with all participating members of the household. It is important for family members to learn and use ASL with their deaf child, to provide them with the same communication access as hearing children.

Some hearing parents fear that the Deaf community will “steal” their child, or that somehow the deaf child will be “lost” to Deaf culture. Family members that embrace deaf culture and become ASL users don’t need to fear this. In fact, hearing family members who embrace the Deaf community can actually strengthen the bonds between themselves and their child. All members of the family can participate in Deaf culture, and from a Deaf cultural perspective, this is preferred. There are a great many options for family members to obtain access to ASL or sign language. Classes are available in most communities and there is a wealth of online resources available.

Deaf culture represents a shift away from medical models of deafness, which present images of deafness as a pathology, or as synonymous with disability or dysfunction. A medical model reinforces limitations rather than the abilities of deaf children. This approach tends to marginalize the Deaf. Those that are Deaf do not view Deafness as a lack of anything at all. You cannot lament the loss of music, of speech, of sound, if you have never heard it. Denying deaf children visual communication access, however, forces them into a world of visual “silence” in which they are surrounded by visual cues and interchanges that lack the accompanying messages. It is crucial for parents and professionals to understand the difference between medical and cultural perspectives of deafness. The medical perspective emphasizes the “loss” of hearing, stresses the importance of speech and assistive technologies and focuses the child’s ability to be seen as normal. Despite the prevalent images of deafness, which stress the ears, with terms like “hearing loss” or “hearing impairment”, the cultural perspective provides a deaf child with a community, a language and a history that reflects their strengths and abilities. Denying cultural access is a rejection of people that have shared experiences and denial of a cultural identity that is rewarding and stimulating. The medical model conveys the impression to deaf children that there is something inherently wrong with them. The cultural model values the remarkable and extraordinary variations in all of human kind and the uniqueness of us all.

### **Suggested Reading:**

*Inside Deaf Culture*, Carol A. Padden and Tom L. Humphries

*A Journey Into the Deaf-World*, Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan

*Deaf Culture Our Way*, Roy K. Holcomb

*Keys to Raising a Deaf Child*, Virginia Frazier-Maiwald and Lenore M. Williams

*The Silent Garden: Raising Your Deaf Child*, Paul Ogden

### **Films:**

*Audism Unveiled*

*History Through Deaf Eyes*

**Websites:**

<http://deafness.about.com/cs/signfeats1/a/signclasses.htm>

<https://www.babysigns.com/index.cfm?id=113>

<http://www.deafchildren.org>

**Author****Beth Sonnenstrahl Benedict**

Dr. Benedict, a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Gallaudet University, obtained her Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in Early Communication and Family Involvement from Gallaudet University in 2003. Her work has focused on family involvement in schools with deaf and hard of hearing children, early childhood education, advocacy, early communication and partnerships between deaf and hearing professionals.

Currently a member of the Joint Committee on Infant Hearing, she represents the Council of Education of the Deaf which developed a 2007 Position Statement. She was also a member of the U.S. Office on Disability's Health and Human Services Constituent Expert Working Group on Effective Interventions for Infants and Young Children with Hearing Loss. She has served on several boards and councils such as Maryland Universal Newborn Hearing Screening Advisory Council and is the current president of the American Society for Deaf Children.

A frequent presenter at national and international conferences, schools and for family organizations, Dr. Benedict's published works include articles and chapters in numerous books related to early communication development.

Dr. Benedict, a deaf mother of two deaf daughters (Rachel, 20 & Lauren, 18), is married to A. Dwight Benedict. Her family often participates in research projects that investigate the development of communication and literacy.

**Jannelle Legg** is a graduate student at Gallaudet in pursuit of a degree in Deaf Studies. She obtained her Bachelors Degree from the University of Iowa in 2007, focusing on Anthropology, minoring in Sociology and earning certificates in ASL/Deaf Studies and Sexuality Studies. Jannelle is a CODA, raised in Iowa with two Deaf parents and two siblings. She has been actively involved in the Cedar Rapids Deaf community and worked for several years at Koda Camp programs at Camp Mark Seven in Old Forge, New York.

---

*Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that's designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We've recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!*