
COMMUNICATING WITH DEAF PEOPLE: A Primer

Condensed from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf's publication "Celebrate Diversity."

DEAF CULTURE

AN INVISIBLE POPULATION

COMMUNICATION

RESIDUAL HEARING AND HEARING AIDS

LIPREADING

LEARNING A LANGUAGE

USING VOICE

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES OF CONVERSATION

GETTING ATTENTION

NOISE

INTERRUPTING A SIGNED CONVERSATION

TIPS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS

WALKING THROUGH/AROUND A CONVERSATION

SAYING GOODBYE

TTYs AND RELAY SERVICES



Deaf Culture

Deaf culture is based on the heritage and traditions of the Deaf community. Features of Deaf culture include a shared language (American Sign Language) and customs; literature and art; intermarriage; and social, political, business and sport organizations. Not all people who are deaf participate in Deaf culture, just as not all people born Jewish participate in Jewish culture.

An Invisible Population

The man you nod to as you pass him working in his garden or the jogger whose path you cross every morning—any one of them may be deaf. Deafness is invisible. Be careful not to stereotype people. Deaf people differ from each other as much as hearing people do.

Communication

People communicate in many ways—through speech, writing, pictures and gestures. Hearing people supplement their spoken words with voice tone and inflection, facial expression and hand gestures. Most deaf people use sign language and fingerspelling. Some prefer to lipread and use their voices. Many use a combination of these methods.

Sign language is a visual language using a combination of hand movements and hand shapes to represent concepts, letters and words. American Sign Language (ASL) is a true language and has its own grammatical structure. It is cherished by the Deaf community for its beauty and ease of expressing and receiving both complex and abstract concepts. In fingerspelling, 26 hand shapes represent the letters of the alphabet and messages or individual words are spelled out. Slight pauses indicate the end of a word. Fingerspelling may be used in signed conversations to express a proper name or a particular term.

Residual Hearing and Hearing Aids

Hearing losses vary. Most deaf people have some residual hearing. The sounds they hear may seem faint, distorted or incomplete. Some deaf individuals have no residual hearing.

Hearing aids do not restore perfect hearing; they make sounds louder, but not clearer. Depending on the degree of hearing loss, deaf individuals may be able to use hearing aids to help understand speech sounds, monitor the loudness of their own voices and/or recognize environmental sounds. Not every deaf person wears a hearing aid; some do not find them beneficial, some do not feel comfortable using them, and others choose not to use them for personal or cultural reasons.

Lipreading

Lipreaders or speechreaders must watch not only the lips, but also the cheeks, teeth, tongue, neck and facial expression of the speaker. Still, only 40% of speech is visible, and many sounds look similar on the lips. Most people would find it impossible to tell the difference between words like “bat,” “mat,” “pat,” “bad,” “mad,” “pad,” “ban,” “man,” and “pan” from lipreading. Or combinations of words may look confusing to the lipreader: “I love fried eggs” and “I love Fridays,” or “I’d like 15 stamps” and “I’d like 50 stamps.” Very few deaf people can depend entirely on lipreading; some use a system of hand signals (cued speech) to guide lipreading.

Learning a Language

Some deaf people are born deaf or lose their hearing before they learn a spoken language. Others become deaf later in life because of illness, injury or congenital conditions. Ninety percent of deaf babies are born to hearing families; the 10 percent born to deaf families grow up learning sign language very much as hearing babies learn spoken language—by observing (instead of listening) and imitating. Learning English can be a slow process for children deafened before they learned a spoken language and who were raised without a visual language.

Using Voice

Some deaf people use their voices and some do not. Most have had years of speech therapy and training, and some have developed clear speech. Many have developed speech that is understandable upon repetition but which is marked with unclear pronunciation or intonation. Some deaf people mouth words without voicing them. Whatever the choice of the individual, use of voice is not an indicator of intelligence or academic standing.

Customs and Courtesies of Conversation

Deaf people appreciate the efforts of hearing people to learn and use sign. The slow communication speed is a common experience of anyone learning a new language. A deaf person will understand a hearing person's message even with mistakes, just as a hearing person will usually understand the spoken message of a person just learning English who makes some mispronunciations and grammatical errors.

Good lighting, unobstructed vision and a non-distracting, non-glare background are essential environmental conditions for successful and comfortable visual-based communication. A table in the middle of the room forces people to stand in a circle and provides them with a full view of each other. Loud noise interferes with successful and comfortable auditory-based interaction.

Facial expressions are a critical part of communication because they convey the emotions and tone of the conversation. Signing without facial expression is similar to monotone speech. Also, using voice and mouth movement helps a deaf person who has some lipreading skills and/or residual hearing. However, a loud voice and exaggerated mouth movement interferes with understanding the voiced message.

Getting Attention

Some of the ways to get the attention of a deaf person are to tap the person on the shoulder, wave hands, flash lights or stomp feet on the floor. Deaf people may use these methods to get the attention of others. If one person can't get the attention of the intended person but does get the attention of someone near that person, the signaler may point to the person wanted and the nearby person may tap that person on the shoulder. Your shoulder may be tapped in the process of getting someone else's attention.

Noise

Deaf people are not always aware that they are making noise that is disturbing to hearing people. They appreciate knowing this and being told so in a friendly way.

Interrupting a Signed Conversation

Deaf people usually do not have private conversations where they can be "overseen," so a deaf person knows it is OK to watch for a pause in a signed conversation, interrupt with a gesture, deliver the message and leave. Hearing people, however, will not watch what they believe to be a private conversation, and will stand by, waiting to be acknowledged. If you do this with deaf people, they will not understand your intention and will continue their conversation. To interrupt a signed conversation, make your desire known by eye contact and gesture without waiting for a pause, then stand by without observing until the person you want to talk to turns to you.

Tips for Group Discussions

When conversing with groups including deaf people, be sure to restate the topic as a courtesy every time someone joins your conversation or group. At meetings, it is often helpful to write an agenda on a board or an overhead transparency, and indicate the current item under discussion with arrows.

Focus attention on one speaker at a time so everyone is looking in the right direction before the message begins. Have the last speaker always acknowledge the next speaker by pointing. When using an interpreter, make sure the message has been translated and understood before moving on to the next speaker. Be sensitive to everyone's desire to participate, especially before changing the topic. Remember that a deaf person has no way of hearing the drop-off in voice intonation that many hearing people use to indicate they have finished speaking, and may thus jump in at any pause. The person is not being rude; too much caution before "jumping in" may mean the deaf person never gets to participate at all, or may make a comment too late for it to be on topic.

Walking Through/Around a Conversation

A deaf person would consider it impolite for someone to interrupt a conversation in order to ask to pass by, yet a hearing person would consider it impolite for someone to just walk between two people having a conversation. If you encounter two deaf people having a conversation, see if there is a path around them; if not, walk quickly and unobtrusively between them, signing "excuse me" whether or not the people see it. Conversely, if you are in conversation with another hearing person and blocking the path of a deaf person, that person may touch your back so you will step forward and allow you to walk behind him.

Saying Goodbye

Some people say that long and reluctant goodbyes are a part of Deaf culture. Before technology allowed deaf people to communicate with each other and hearing people more easily, all communication had to take place face-to-face, and such meetings were often difficult to arrange. The old tradition of saying goodbye only after much repetition and reluctance seems to have held. Even when communicating on a TTY, for example, the signoff signal (SK) is usually repeated, and a person never elects to end the conversation without making sure the other person or people are really ready to end it ("GA or SK" — "go ahead or sign off").

TTYs and Relay Services

A TTY (also sometimes called a TDD) is a machine that allows deaf or hearing people to communicate over phone lines with others who have similar equipment by typing their messages back and forth. To learn more about TTY etiquette, read guides especially written for using this device.

A telephone relay service enables deaf and hearing people to communicate via a dual-party phone system. This way, the hearing person need not have a TTY to communicate on the phone with a deaf person. Either individual dials a relay service number, and an operator places the call to the other person. The operator announces the caller to the person being called (by voice or by typing on a TTY), types voiced messages from the hearing caller to the deaf caller, and voices the deaf caller's TTY messages to the hearing caller. All relay calls are confidential.