

Attitudes Toward Deaf Individuals

Introduction

For deaf individuals, negative attitudes from deaf and hearing individuals can serve as a barrier to healthy social and emotional development²², social integration¹⁷, and academic and career success¹⁹. Societal attitudes toward deaf individuals is an important research topic because:

- Attitudes toward deaf individuals are critical aspects of integration into social and academic activities.²³
- Knowledge of attitudes toward deaf individuals contributes to understanding and positive interactions between hearing and deaf individuals.¹⁵

What does the research tell us about attitudes toward deaf people?

Researchers have assessed attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, as well as deaf individuals specifically. Some findings include:

- Negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have existed throughout history and still exist today.⁸
- There are differences in attitudes toward deaf people compared to people with other disabilities.¹⁶
- Hearing people have been found to hold more negative attitudes toward individuals with an intellectual disability than toward deaf individuals.^{7,10}

What is the relationship between attitudes and expectations?

- Attitudes can be conveyed through expectations; people tend to internalize and fulfill the expectations others have of them.⁶
- Parental expectations strongly influence their deaf child's future achievement across several factors:⁵
 - Independent living
 - Postsecondary enrollment and completion
 - Employment
- The belief that deaf people have limited occupational opportunities is a reflection of negative attitudes toward deaf individuals and their potential for career success.²⁰

“Attitudes toward people with disabilities represent an individual’s disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to those with a physical or mental disability.”¹

Other factors that influence attitudes toward deaf individuals include:

- **Age and gender:** The relationship between age and gender and attitudes toward deaf people is unclear, in that research findings on this topic have been mixed.⁷
- **Self-esteem:** People with higher self-esteem report a more positive attitude toward deaf people.⁷

- **Contact with deaf individuals:** More familiarity or contact with deaf individuals tend to be related to more positive attitudes, but the type of experience is a critical factor.^{7,11,24}

How is audism a barrier to attitudinal change?

Negative attitudes toward deaf individuals are created and perpetuated by societal beliefs and behaviors that assume the superiority of hearing over deaf individuals. This belief structure is known as *audism*³, which has been defined in several ways:

- The idea that superiority comes from the ability to hear, or to behave like a person who hears.¹⁴
- A societal system of advantage based on hearing ability.¹⁸
- An orientation that links human identity with speech.⁴

Examples of how audism manifests in the United States include:³

- Efforts to make deaf children more like hearing children.
- The idea that deafness is a deficiency and should be “fixed”.
- Systems of power, especially in education and medicine, that favor hearing over deafness, and speech over signing.

Some factors that perpetuate audism and limit the development of positive relationships between hearing and deaf individuals include:²¹

- Limited communication skills of both hearing and deaf individuals.
- Deaf individuals’ perception of hearing individuals’ negative attitudes.
- Unfamiliarity with deafness and limited meaningful contact with deaf individuals.

Recommendations for Promoting Positive Attitudes Toward Deaf Individuals

- Administrators and professionals at academic institutions can foster a culture that is inclusive and accommodating of diverse individuals.
- Changes in attitudes are shaped by positive experiences with deaf people, breaking down stereotypical attitudes, and awareness developed through educational workshops, courses, and training activities.^{9,12}
- Within school and workplace settings, introduce collaborative group activities to strengthen social relationships while building communication skills for both deaf and hearing individuals.
- Teach a “social/cultural view of being deaf” which can ultimately be aligned with more accepting and empowering attitudes toward deaf individuals.¹³

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