

The Deaf Community: An Introduction

Overview

It often comes as a surprise to people that many deaf individuals refer to themselves as being members of the Deaf community and ascribe to Deaf culture. These individuals view themselves as a unique cultural and linguistic minority who use sign language as their primary language. The characteristics of Deaf culture are formed out of many shared life experiences rooted in a visual world designed for communication ease.

Terms such as hearing impaired, deaf-mute, deaf and dumb, and hearing deficient may be used by the media and society to refer to deaf individuals. Within the Deaf community, these terms are seen as offensive since they imply that the deaf individual is “broken” or “inferior.” A generic and more widely accepted phrase is “deaf and hard of hearing” which refers to all people with hearing loss. The term “deaf” may also be used in an all-inclusive manner, to include people who may identify as Deaf, deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired.

What is American Sign Language?

Sign languages differ across countries and even vary within regions. There is no universal sign language. In America, the Deaf community uses American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a complete, grammatically complex language. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) explains that in ASL “...the shape, placement, and movement of the hands, as well as facial expressions and body movements, all play important parts in conveying information.”¹ ASL is not a communication code designed to represent English.

Attaining proficiency in ASL mirrors other spoken languages. To attain proficiency requires extensive instruction and immersion in the culture and language. In terms of ASL, this occurs with ongoing use of ASL at home, in school, and/or with members of the Deaf Community.

What are some of the unique features of Deaf culture?

Values, behaviors, and traditions of Deaf culture include:

- A reliance on eyesight, including the use of a visual language, which then influences the configuration of an environment. In support of a visual lifestyle, architectural and interior designs highlight lighting, both adequate and creative, open floor plans and spatial positioning of furniture that enhance visual sight lines.²
- Valuing the sign language of the region, and supporting sign language usage in educational settings, such as bilingual ASL/English programs in the US.
- A high degree of networking and deep connections within the Deaf community.

- Use of technology to overcome traditional communication barriers.
- Maintaining cultural traditions through social activities including athletic events, Deaf clubs, organizational involvement, and school reunions.
- Promoting Deaf culture through art forms such as painting, drawing, film, folklore, literature, storytelling, and poetry.
- Specific communication norms and behaviors such as consistent eye contact and visual attention during conversations.
- Using visual strategies to gain a person’s attention, such as:
 - Gently tapping a person on the shoulder
 - Waving at the person within his or her line of sight
 - Flicking a light switch

Do all deaf individuals identify with Deaf culture?

Not all deaf individuals identify with Deaf culture. While some individuals fully embrace all aspects of Deaf culture and community, others may only identify marginally, and others not at all. Identity is a highly personal process that is always evolving.

Deaf individuals undergo many changes in their beliefs and identity as they mature from childhood into adulthood, including how they self-identify in terms of their hearing loss. Some individuals discover Deaf culture for the first time as adolescents or young adults and make a conscious decision to be a part of the Deaf community.

For more information on communication and the Deaf Community, please read *Communicating with Deaf Individuals*: www.nationaldeafcenter.org/communication101

Additional Resources

- NAD’s Deaf Community and Culture Frequently Asked Questions: www.tinyurl.com/nadFAQdeaf
- Gallaudet Deaf History Museum and Resources:
<http://www.gallaudet.edu/museum/deaf-historical-resources>
- *Introduction to American Deaf Culture* by Thomas Holcomb (2012)

Additional resources on this subject may be available at www.NationalDeafCenter.org.

References

¹ National Association of the Deaf (NAD): American Sign Language. Retrieved from:
www.tinyurl.com/NADresourcesASL

² Bauman, H. (2014). DeafSpace: a rich sensory world. *Access By Design*, (139), 17-25.



This document was originally developed by pepnet2 and has been redeveloped by NDC under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, OSEP #HD326D160001. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. www.nationaldeafcenter.org