

# Seven Tips to Improve Communication With Your Deaf Teenager During COVID-19



The lives of many deaf teenagers and young adults suddenly changed when they were told by high schools and colleges to finish the spring semester online due to the coronavirus crisis.

Some are at home with parents. Others may be somewhere new, staying with family members or friends. In these situations, communication can be a challenge.

If you have a deaf teenager at home, whether you're a parent, guardian, or host, here are seven quick tips to improve communication and create a household that's happier for everyone.

## 1. Check in and ask questions.

First and foremost: Check in with your deaf teenager, express your desire and hope to improve communication, and ask them about their communication preferences. Start the conversation with questions such as "How do you prefer to communicate?" or "What can I do differently to better communicate?" Deaf people know what is best for them. Let them take the lead and then check in periodically.

## 2. Try not to make assumptions.

If the deaf teenager in your home is a guest, don't assume they can read lips. Deaf people are often asked whether they can read lips. Even if they have some residual hearing and can read lips, it's hard work, which can be exhausting—especially during these stressful times. Sometimes it can be tempting to ask a deaf person to teach you American Sign Language (ASL). Instead of putting the burden on them, take the initiative to learn basic ASL signs through online tutorials, smartphone apps, or books.

## 3. Create a private space.

If space in your home is tight, it will add to everyone's stress, especially when isolating or sheltering in place. For a deaf college student who lived on campus and was used to their independence, this can be especially difficult. If they don't have their own room, try to create a private space in your home for them to study and work, as well as to unplug. Then, respect their privacy. It will also give you a much-needed break.

## 4. Take advantage of technology.

As you have probably already realized, texting is sometimes the best way to reach a teenager, even when they are at home. Try using a voice-to-text app on your **iPhone** or **Android** device that transcribes what you say—although note that these devices do not work perfectly. Or go low-tech and use a notepad or a small whiteboard to handwrite your messages and questions. When watching television, don't forget to turn on the captions (even **hearing teens love them**).

## 5. Play deaf-friendly games.

Finding ways to relax and play together is important in any household. Avoid any games or group activities that are heavily dependent on speaking or listening. Instead, choose **deaf-friendly games** that rely more on visual cues or physical competition.

## 6. Make the most of your downtime.

Have extra time in your day and already watched too much Netflix? Learn more about deaf people and culture. Take a free online course called **Deaf 101**, which in just a few hours provides the basic knowledge and tools necessary to communicate effectively with deaf people, or check out other **online resources**.

## 7. Set reasonable expectations.

This is a tough transition period—not just for your deaf teenager, but for you, too! Be sure to set reasonable expectations, make time and space for yourself, and continue to have open and honest conversations that respect everyone’s values, perspectives, and uniqueness.



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