



Exploring Communication Choices: American Sign Language (ASL)

Families who have just had a child diagnosed with hearing loss often have many questions about how their child will be able to communicate. There are four main ways, or roads, to communicate with children who have limited or no hearing. One of those roads is American Sign Language (ASL).

Learning to communicate is a journey. At the end of that journey, most families want their child to be a successful communicator and learner.

Your task: Learning about hearing loss and its possible impact on listening and communicating is unexpected for most families. In some ways it's similar to being told you need to make an unexpected trip. Your trip needs to start as soon as possible and it will take time to get there. There are several different roads and all of the roads are available to you and your family on this journey. Some roads may be more difficult or may really slow you down; other roads may be much easier for your child and family. You could start down one road and then switch to another if it helps your child. Your task is to figure out which road you want to take first. There will always be mile markers so you know where you are and people to ask for directions along the way.

Which road? Each road is a different way you can share thoughts, ideas and feelings with your child. Each way will take extra effort by you and your family because a child with hearing loss needs help if they are to learn language well.

What to think about as you plan your route:

1. How much can your child hear? Can he hear at all?
2. How important is it to you that your child learns to speak clearly?
3. How important is it to you for your child to sign or communicate visually?
4. Are you willing to learn a new language or a new way of communicating that you would use whenever you are with your child?

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE as a route to communication development

- ASL is a true language, like English or French. Like many languages, it uses a different order (grammar, syntax) for presenting words or concepts than English.

- ASL is the language of individuals belonging to the Deaf culture, which has its own social groups, humor and cultural values. Learning ASL allows the child access to the Deaf community.
- Each sign may be a word or it may represent a concept. The single word 'run' in English can have many meanings (race, go, control, move, operate, carry on, compete, etc.). Each of these meanings uses a different conceptual sign in ASL.
- The main goal of ASL is to provide the child with a complete, rich language that is fully visual and does not rely on hearing to communicate.
- Children can learn ASL as their first language and then acquire English as a second language, necessary to teach reading. This is why ASL is also called a Bilingual/Bicultural approach to learning.
- Children who are learning ASL may attend special classes with other children who communicate with ASL and that are taught by specially trained teachers using ASL. Other children may attend their neighborhood school, with support by ASL Interpreters and Teachers for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing children.

What to think about as you plan your route: American Sign Language

1. **HEARING:** American Sign Language does not require any hearing. It is considered by the Deaf community to be their natural language. Wearing hearing aids and/or cochlear implants is not necessary for people who communicate with ASL. Many Deaf individuals choose to wear amplification so that they can be more tuned into sounds that occur around them, but usually not so that they can understand spoken language.
2. **SPEECH:** American Sign Language uses a different word order (syntax/grammar) than English so it is not possible to speak the words at the same time the message is signed. Some words or concepts may be mouthed at the same time as the sign is presented. Intelligible speech is typically not a main goal for people who communicate with ASL.
3. **VISUAL COMMUNICATION:** The primary way in which the child will communicate is through American Sign Language. The syntax of ASL will be the child's first language. Written English is typically introduced as the child approaches school-age.
4. **FAMILY MEMBERS LEARNING A NEW WAY TO COMMUNICATE:** Everyone around the child will need to sign their communication so that the child will be fully exposed to language. Sign-and-speak communication is not the same as ASL. Babies will learn **any** language that is used around them all the time, every day. Babies that live with family members who use American Sign Language, will learn language visually through ASL. To

learn ASL a child **must** have access to deaf or hearing adults who are fluent in ASL. If parents are not deaf and use ASL themselves, then they will need intense training to learn ASL. They will also need to learn about Deaf culture to interact with the local Deaf community as needed for the family to become proficient in using ASL.

American Sign Language:

The main goal of American Sign Language is to allow the child who is deaf or hard-of-hearing to learn a full language visually that will allow them to participate in the Deaf community.

American Sign Language:

- Does NOT require any hearing or speech.
- Is a full, true language.
- Is a visual mode of communication.
- Is most easily learned by being surrounded by individuals who use it every day to communicate their ideas, wants and needs. Hearing families who wish to communicate with their child in ASL will be most successful if they have a Deaf role model or are in regular contact with the Deaf community in their local area.
- Is considered the natural language of the Deaf culture.
- Requires constant learning of new vocabulary so that the family can continue to enrich the language of the child as his interests change and education advances.
- Takes practice to do quickly and communicate thoughts and ideas completely.

Other Questions to Ask in Your Community

1. Do other families of children with hearing loss use ASL where you live? Is there someone that works with your local school district Help Me Grow program that can help your family to learn ASL and introduce you to individuals in the local Deaf community? Are there children currently in your school district who are learning through the use of ASL in their classrooms?
2. Where can you go to learn ASL?
3. What do other parents of children with hearing loss and professionals who specialize in helping children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing say about these local services?

Your early intervention professional, your child's audiologist, or the deaf and hard of hearing teachers in your school district should be able to give you names of parents who have already gotten answers to these questions.

Remember

- **Each family is different.**
There isn't a "right" choice for all children or all families. Each child needs different things. Parents are also different, and have their own hopes for their child. Some

families choose one main way of communicating while other families make other choices.

- **Be flexible.**

Follow your child's lead. You may feel stressed out over choosing one of the communication choices. Some parents even combine ways of communicating. It's important to be flexible. Give one method your best effort. If it doesn't work, be open to trying other ways to communicate.

Related Information

To view an example of American Sign Language go to <http://www.ncbegin.org/Videos/asl.shtml>

Source – Beginnings

- American Society for Deaf Children
<http://www.deafchildren.org/resources.aspx>
- Beginnings for Parents: ASL
http://www.ncbegin.org/communication_options/asl.shtml
- Family Support Connection: Should I learn sign language, cued English, or any other communication system?
<http://www.familysupportconnection.org/html/HOHissues.htm>
- Raising Deaf Kids: Bilingual-bicultural: Learning American Sign Language
<http://www.raisingdeafkids.org/communicating/choices/bibi.php>
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders: American Sign Language
<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/asl.asp>
- Family Support Connection: Should I learn sign language, cued English, or any other communication system?
<http://www.familysupportconnection.org/html/HOHissues.htm>