

Introduction

It is important that you as a hearing parent, who happens to have a child who is deaf, realize that you can learn the basics of American Sign Language (ASL). With regular practice and interaction with users of this visual language, you can progress well beyond the basics. By learning the basic principles and grammatical structures involved in ASL and actively using them with your child, you will be opening up a world of communication accessibility and will be providing your child with a full, complete language that will make the English language even more accessible.

By following the principles and absorbing the grammatical structure hints and vocabulary that are presented in this text, you can learn basic American Sign Language. You will find that the study of ASL is a rewarding and fascinating adventure. Your success or failure with this language depends very much upon your attitude as you approach the subject.

It is natural to be anxious concerning your ability to learn ASL, but remember that if you are motivated and are willing to put in the time and effort and follow the guidelines presented in this book, you will learn American Sign Language. You will be opening up a magnitude of positive social, educational, and emotional opportunities for your child that otherwise will remain closed.

You are embarking on a venture that will provide a natural means of communication for your child. American Sign Language is a beautiful, visual language that is easily accessible and will daily reinforce the fact that having a child who is deaf can be a wonderfully exciting experience.

Your child, by virtue of being deaf, is naturally a visual learner and will blossom linguistically, socially, and emotionally by having an accessible visual language.

What is American Sign Language?

American Sign Language is the visual language that is used by the majority of Deaf adults in the United States and Canada. It is a complete language with its own structure, grammatical rules, and idiomatic expressions. ASL is a highly complex language, allowing the free and natural expression of any thoughts and concepts that might be produced in a spoken language.

As noted author and American Sign Language expert Lou Fant states, “The uniqueness of ASL lies in the simple fact that it is based upon light waves rather than sound waves. It is a visual, as opposed to an aural language. Meaning is conveyed by sight, not sound.” Wouldn’t a language that is based on vision rather than hearing logically lend itself to fulfilling the communication needs of the parent and the child who is deaf—the child who because of not being able to hear the English language spoken will depend on his/her vision and will naturally gravitate toward a language that is of a visual nature?

How does American Sign Language differ from English and manually coded English sign systems?

Both English and American Sign Language are complete languages, each possessing its own unique word/sign order and linguistically appropriate properties. The main difference between the two is that English is a spoken and a written language while American Sign Language is a visual-spatial language that does not have a written form (however, with the

widespread use of videotapes, ASL might be considered to have a “written form”).

Speech is only one manifestation of having acquired the English language. Do not be tempted to equate speech and language! If your child has the ability to learn to use speech, the learning and use of ASL will in no way be a detraction. In fact, having a strong language base (ASL) can enhance the development of a second language.

The arranging of signs in English word order is referred to as manually coded English and is an attempt to present English in a visual manner. Manually coded English is a linguistic system; American Sign Language is a true language that is easier learned by both the hearing parent and the child who is deaf. American Sign Language is not simply a matter of arranging ASL signs in English word order and speaking English at the same time. Becoming fluent in ASL involves learning and using some basic principles and by interacting with the Deaf community as much as possible.

Why should you learn basic American Sign Language?

There are a number of valid reasons why the hearing parent of a deaf child might want to learn basic American Sign Language and use it as the language for meaningful, open communication in the home. First of all, research has shown that ASL presents to the child a visual-motor feedback system that parallels the auditory-articulatory (hearing-speaking) system utilized by hearing children in their spoken language. In fact, some scholars feel that American Sign Language should be the primary language presented to all children who are deaf, regardless of the degree of hearing loss, because it more readily affords access to the school curriculum. Other researchers even go so far as to state that there is adequate theoretical support to promote the incorporation of ASL in a bilingual program as a tool to teach English literacy skills.

Your mastery of basic American Sign Language will also open up to you as a hearing parent contacts and interaction with the Deaf community. You will learn that Deaf people are in no form handicapped and that given an equal education and equal opportunities, a person who is deaf can do anything that a hearing person can do. Deaf people do not view their deafness as a handicap: the only handicapping possibility occurs when a complete, natural language is not provided at an early age.

By learning American Sign Language, you will be providing your child the opportunity to interact meaningfully with members of both the Deaf and hearing cultures. You will be communicating a message to your child that few children who are deaf have the opportunity to understand: it is alright to be Deaf, and he/she can do and can be anything that his/her heart desires.

However, the most valid reason for you as a hearing parent to learn American Sign Language is that it will provide an avenue for you to have meaningful and direct one-on-one communication with your child. You can learn ASL!

Suggestions for practicing and applying the ASL that you will learn

Learning American Sign Language is like learning any foreign language: you must practice the language and interact with it on a regular basis, preferably with native users of the language, in order to become proficient. Sorry, there are no shortcuts. However, by following and practicing the principles presented in this text, the ease with which you learn basic ASL will be greatly enhanced.

Try to separate yourself from English during your practice times. Even though you will be tempted to try to use speech and ASL at the same time, you will find this impossible to do, because the word/sign order of the two languages are vastly different. Trying to use them simultaneously will only confuse you and slow down your progress in learning ASL. Force yourself not to use your voice as you practice. Instead, concentrate on the visual aspects of American Sign Language, and your practice times will be much more beneficial.

It is important that you constantly give yourself positive feedback regarding your ability to master the basic principles of American Sign Language. As you invest more time and energy in practice, you will become more confident in your ability to use ASL.

In your study of American Sign Language, you will be learning the rules and grammar that govern the language. Just like English or other spoken languages, American Sign Language is a flexible language; that is, there are always exceptions to the rules. The only way to become skilled in the complete language of ASL is to interact with native users of the language, the adults in the Deaf community. The importance of this interaction cannot be stressed enough because it is the foundation that facilitates your becoming a truly skilled user of American Sign Language and knowledgeable about the culture of the American Deaf community.

Congratulations to you and best wishes as you venture forth into learning a new language that will ultimately pay great dividends for both you and your child. You are taking the first step toward providing your child with a way to have an open and exciting language ... an open and exciting means for communicating ... and an entrance into an exciting world which without this first step by you might very possibly never occur.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter of your text has been divided into three basic sections: 1) Some information introducing the concept that the lesson focuses on, 2) Practice, and 3) Activities. This logical breakdown will assist you in mastering the basic principles of American Sign Language.

The initial paragraphs of the lesson provide a basic explanation of the ASL concept presented in the chapter. You will often be provided with a comparison/contrast to a similar construct that occurs in the English language.

The Practice section leads you immediately into a parallel between the English language and American Sign Language. This section will enable you to instantly use your knowledge of the ASL concept presented in the chapter by constructing complete ASL sentences. Often sentences in the Practice section will be demonstrated on the videotape. In addition, all material that appears on the Practice videotape is identified by an icon in the margin of the text. 

The Activities section provides you with games and activities that can be participated in by your child and other family members. Through this section you can begin interacting with your child via games and activities of a meaningful, hands-on nature that will enhance and facilitate linguistic growth.

There are also two other components that make up your complete package: 1) the portion of your text called Appendices, and 2) your videotapes.

The appendices of your text include illustrations of basic numbers and the manual alphabet, and a resources section to guide you to further study as you feel it useful.

Your two videotapes provide you with visual demonstrations of many of the practice sentences in the text as well as examples of various ASL concepts and structures from the book.

By utilizing your book and the accompanying videotapes, you will be on your way to becoming proficient in the basics of American Sign Language. Remember, however, how important it is that you become involved as much as possible with the adult Deaf community; it is through interaction with native users of ASL that you will become truly fluent.

Glosses: A Form of Translation

You will notice throughout your text that many ASL glosses are presented for you to practice. A gloss is the written ASL translation of an English sentence. By way of example, a word gloss might be explained by using a language with which you might be more familiar, Spanish.

Following is a sentence written in Spanish with an accompanying English gloss and translation:

Spanish sentence:
Le gusta a usted dulce?

English gloss for the Spanish sentence:
It like you candy?

English translation of the Spanish sentence:
Do you like candy?

Clearly, the gloss is not the correct way that the Spanish sentence would be spoken or written in English; it is only an approximation of a word-to-word comparison. The same holds true when writing an English gloss of an American Sign Language sentence.

Remember, you will never communicate by writing or speaking in English glosses for ASL, because it is impossible to incorporate the correct word order and intent of a visual language via speech or the printed word. American Sign Language is a visual language that is based on visual principles.

Therefore, the English glosses that occur throughout the book are only here to provide a hint as to the ASL sign order and how you should sign the sentence. Many aspects of ASL are very difficult to write in an English gloss. Therefore, you should pay particular attention to non-manual behaviors (facial expressions and body language) which are important parts of American Sign Language.