

# Interaction with Deaf People: A to Z

*Keep in mind that no two deaf or Deaf people are alike; these are all general points to remember, and may or may not apply to every person you meet.*

**A – Ask** a Deaf person how they wish to communicate. Not all Deaf people communicate in the same way. American Sign Language (ASL), Signed English (SEE), lipreading/speechreading, writing, gesturing, and speaking are all methods of communication which may be utilized by different Deaf people.

**B – Behind** – Never approach a Deaf person from behind! Instead, walk around the person so he or she can see you are there, or otherwise signal your presence. If the deaf person is startled, don't feel bad... ask the best way to get his or her attention the next time.

**Bluntness** – Deaf people often seem blunt to a hearing person. While there is some debate about whether this is truly a Deaf culture issue or simply due to the lack of incidental education regarding appropriate use of language, the fact remains that hearing people who are used to the delicacy of social interaction are often shocked by the directness displayed by Deaf persons.

**C – Culture** – Culture is defined as a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who have their own language, values, rules of behavior, and traditions (Padden, 1988). Deaf people have a culture which centers around ASL, valuation of their community and history, behavioral expectations, and traditional Deaf events and activities.

**D – Deaf vs. deaf** – Be aware that if you see a capital “D” in the word “deaf,” this is a reference to a person who values her cultural identity within the Deaf community. As with any minority community, maintaining respect for self-identity is critical. Use of the small “d” is in reference to the state of having a profound to severe hearing loss, and is in no way indicative of a cultural state.

**E – Eye Contact** - In many social circles in America, in particular, eye contact has a specific meaning. This may range from aggression to romantic interest. In the Deaf community, however, eye contact is a critical part of communication, and should not be interpreted as anything more or less than paying attention and engaging in conversation.

**F – Facial Expressions** – As with bluntness, hearing people are often taken aback by the facial expressions exhibited by Deaf people. Facial expressions are an important part of communication in Sign. Additionally, deaf people learn to read facial expressions when communicating with hearing people. Be aware that your body language and face are communicating a great deal to a Deaf person, intentionally or not.

**G – Goodbyes** – The “Deaf Goodbye” is both a humorous label and a fact of life within the Deaf community. Open social interaction was, for generations, limited to those occasions when Deaf people were physically together and could communicate freely, as opposed to the constant social interaction that hearing people had. Taking full advantage of the opportunity often meant that leaving was a protracted affair characterized by

saying goodbye to nearly everyone in the room! Thus, the “goodbye” phase of an event may actually take (or at least seem to take) longer than the event itself.

**H – Hand Waving, Light Flashing, Foot Stomping** – These are all appropriate ways to get a Deaf person’s attention.

**Hugging** – Deaf people tend to hug each other on arrival and leaving, even if it is the first time they have met! This is sometimes jarring to an observer, but is an example of the instant camaraderie that often appears between two Deaf people even if they are from completely different backgrounds and areas of the country.

**I – Intelligence** – American society, in particular, takes stock of a person’s intelligence based on their skill or expertise with English. This is, of course, a grave mistake, and is often made with regards to Deaf people. Intelligence in the Deaf community, as with any group of people, varies... but is not at all dependent on the Deaf person’s grasp of English.

**Incidental Learning** – Learning which takes place outside of a formal educational setting. Hearing people have access to a wealth of (primarily auditory) environmental information that is soaked up and processed from casual conversations, TV, radio, etc. Some research has shown that up to 80% of what we know about interaction with the world around us is due to incidental learning. Deaf people often do not have access to this information on the same level as hearing people, and there may thus be pieces missing from their general knowledge base that most hearing people would consider to be obvious.

**J – Jargon** – When using an interpreter, try to either supply the interpreter and the Deaf person with vocabulary ahead of time, or explain any jargon used in practical terms to the interpreter. This will ease the interpretation and ensure the Deaf person understands the concept you are attempting to convey.

**K – Kmart interpreters** – a somewhat humorous, but unfortunately accurate label. As the story goes, a hearing mother and her deaf son were at Kmart stocking up at the beginning of the school year. The cashier noticed the mother signing to her son, and began to laboriously sign to the child. The mother perked right up and said to the cashier, “We haven’t been able to find an interpreter for him for school... would you be willing to interpret for him?” This illustrates the common and shocking level of ignorance regarding what, exactly, makes someone qualified to interpret. Standards are now becoming more established nationwide; however, Kmart interpreters are still out there.

**L – Labels** - The term “hearing impaired,” which implies that Deaf people are broken in some way, is not an appropriate label. Nor is “deaf and dumb,” “deaf-mute,” or any mutation thereof. “Deaf” and “hard of hearing” are the preferred terms. “Person with a hearing loss,” while better than other labels, is still unwieldy and not generally preferred.

**Lipreading** – Lipreading (or speechreading) is difficult at best for many deaf people. Only about 30% of the English language is actually visible on the lips; a skilled lipreader can bring her comprehension level to 70% with cues and knowledge of the subject matter. However, the near-mythical abilities of deaf people to lipread from afar are, by and large, mythical. Do not assume that all deaf people can read lips. This would be akin to assuming all hearing people can sing (which I’m sure you realize IS a myth!).

**M – Muscles** – When you listen, you are using no muscles. While you may become bored or tired of listening to a speaker, there are no muscles to become physically exhausted. Eyes, by contrast, have many muscles, and become physically tired. Deaf people must use their eyes constantly; for lipreading, watching an interpreter, identifying visual cues in their environment, etc. Interpreters often team up and interpret in short shifts so they get needed breaks; a deaf person does not get those breaks, and indeed is often seen to be rude if he closes his eyes briefly or leaves the room.

**N – Noises** – Deaf people are deaf, and generally not mute. They make noises while signing, may be oblivious to how loud they are when doing various things (i.e. closing doors, etc), and in general are just not as quiet as most people think they would be.

**O – Obstructions** – Obstructions to communication for Deaf people are not always apparent to hearing people. Pens in the mouth, flowers on the table, a glass held at just the wrong angle... all can interfere with communication. Don't be surprised if a Deaf person moves the condiments off the table at dinner!

**P – Paper and Pen** - Many deaf people carry paper and pen to communicate with those poor hearing people who don't understand sign language. They may also ask to borrow a pen to communicate with you.

**Pointing** is acceptable in the Deaf community, and is indeed often used as a means of establishing a reference point in ASL. This disconcerts many hearing people who were taught “it's not polite to point!”

**Q – Qualified Interpreter** – An interpreter may be certified, but not qualified. And a qualified interpreter may or may not be certified. An example: Someone who is certified to interpret and works as an interpreter with a five-year-old in kindergarten would generally **not** be qualified to interpret for that same child in a medical setting. Your best bet: ask the Deaf person if he or she is comfortable with **this** interpreter for **this** setting.

**R – Restating** - Oftentimes, when communicating via speech and lipreading, people tend to repeat themselves if a deaf person doesn't understand what is said. This is fine... once. After repeating once, if a deaf person still doesn't understand, RESTATE rather than repeat. Find a different way to say the same thing, whether it's a different word or explanation of the concept. This will often give the deaf person enough cues to figure out what was said.

**Referrals** – make sure that any referrals you make for a Deaf person are appropriate. For example: in referring a Deaf person to a therapist, make certain that therapist is prepared and willing to provide an interpreter for the Deaf person. If a referral is made to an inappropriate professional, the Deaf person will often simply give up in frustration. See “X” for further clarification.

**Relay** – Relay is a method of communication via phone which utilizes either an operator (traditional text-based relay) or an interpreter (video relay) for hearing people to communicate with deaf people and vice versa.

**S – Speech** – Do not assume that Deaf people cannot speak. Some can, but choose not to; some cannot. Compare this with hearing people and their ability or inability to sing... some can and choose not to, some cannot. Those Deaf people who do choose to speak will often have an accent which is sometimes difficult to understand; consider it an exotic adventure and don't give up!

**T – Touch** – Deaf people tend to touch during conversations, when greeting or taking their leave of each other. Additionally, it is perfectly permissible to touch a Deaf person to get their attention; this is in contrast with hearing social norms, which prohibit unsolicited touch.

**Topics** – During conversation (and particularly in group situations) it is helpful to “feed” the deaf person the topic, in particular if he or she is attempting to lipread. This holds true even if an interpreter is present.

**U – Use concepts** – When communicating with a deaf person, if a word is unfamiliar to him, try to explain the concept behind the word. Use small words as opposed to big words; an example would be to use the words “gun, knife, baseball bat, big pot” in place of the term “weapon,” or explaining the idea of “taxation” as “you pay the government a bunch of your money to provide you with services you may or may not need or want.”

**V – Visual Noise/ Environment** – Visual noise is just as disruptive to a deaf person as auditory noise can be to a hearing person. Visual noise is found in an environment that is visually distracting and chaotic; think flowered wallpaper or a restaurant decorated with very bright patterns. If you must be in an environment with this sort of visual noise, try to position the Deaf person with his or her back to the chaos. Also, be aware of lighting; make sure there is adequate lighting for the Deaf person, but not shining in his or her eyes. This includes natural light from windows, which can be very overwhelming and blinding.

**Visual Aids** – The value of visual aids and alerts cannot be overstated. This applies not only to communication (i.e. using handouts, overheads, powerpoint presentations, flip charts, paper and pen) but also to things such as weather alerts, fire alarms, and the like. Keep in mind that many people (not only deaf, but hearing as well) learn best with the aid of visuals; in an educational setting, try to accommodate different learning styles, and you will also be accommodating a Deaf person's needs.

**Vibration** – Deaf people are often very sensitive to vibration. They may feel someone coming down the hall before a hearing person hears the approach, or a sound that a hearing person can ignore creates so much vibration that a deaf person cannot ignore it. Also, do not assume that a deaf person can work in a noisy environment; many have residual hearing on top of their sensitivity to vibration, and noisy environments are often just as difficult for them as for someone who can hear.

**W – Walking through a conversation** – When walking through a conversation between two signers, it is not necessary to crawl on the floor or stand and wait for a lull in the conversation. Simply walk quickly and politely between the signers.

**X – eXtreme frustration of being deaf in a hearing world** – (Hey, **you** come up with a better example for “X!”) There are two layers to this: the world and the personal. At the world level, there is what I call Hearing Privilege. The world is set up for people who can hear; for examples, look at drive through windows, phone menu trees, buzzers on shelter doors, intercoms on planes. When a deaf person asks for modification of these things, hearing people often act as if this is a huge imposition... thus making the deaf person feel of less value as a human being. At the personal level is something I call Hearism... the assumption that everyone can hear. Thus, when a deaf person does not respond to something which is said or announced, the assumption is that the deaf person is rude, stupid, or obstinate... instead of just deaf. Being confronted by these attitudes and behaviors on a daily basis is demeaning and frustrating for a Deaf person.

**Y – Yelling** – People tend to speak very loudly, and even yell, at deaf people, believing this will make it easier for the deaf person to understand them. News flash: a deaf person is DEAF... this means they cannot hear, and yelling won't help! The person will still be deaf!

**Z – last handshape in an ASL ABC story** – ABC stories are an example of one of the cherished traditions in Deaf culture. ABC stories use the handshapes of the American Sign Language alphabet, in alphabetical order, of course, to tell a story. Excellent examples can be found online (on YouTube, or by using a search engine and typing in “ASL ABC Stories”).

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