

Communication Methods

The purpose of this paper is to give a brief outline of the different communication methods which are currently used in the education of deaf children. It is important to understand that each deaf child has different needs when it comes to communication and these needs may change over time. Open-mindedness and flexibility are important when considering good communication.

Families need to look for resources, programmes and informed people, both deaf and hearing to learn as much as they can about each communication method and then choose a method that best suits their child and their family.

What is meant by communication methods for deaf children?

The term “communication methods” refers to the ways a child with a hearing loss naturally adopt when interacting with other people. Examples of methods include using Auslan or another signed language, using Signed English, verbal speech, listening and lip-reading, using cued speech, or even a combination of all or some of these.

This information sheet covers three main methods of communication. These are:

- Bilingual
- Oral
- Total Communication

Bilingual

The aim of bilingual education is to promote the learning of two languages by deaf children, English and Auslan. This method of communication uses a combination of Auslan (Australian Sign Language) and written or spoken English. Auslan is used as the method of instruction for understanding all work and in everyday conversations in the classroom.

Auslan may be considered to be the child's first language (L1). Both English and Auslan are considered to be of equal importance. In an ideal educational environment English is taught through reading and writing after the deaf child has gained skills in Auslan. English is therefore taught as a second language (L2). If the student is interested in using speech, then that is also emphasised.

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There is a strong belief in children needing to develop a positive identity as a deaf person. Access to deaf adults as role models is very important and the teaching of deaf culture and heritage is strongly encouraged as well.

Challenges for Families

Some of the challenges for families choosing this option are:

- How to create bilingual opportunities for single or small groups of deaf children in regular schools
- How to access Auslan classes for children and their families
- How to access qualified and skilled professionals such as bilingual teachers and interpreters
- How to make sure deaf children have access to hearing peers.

Oral

This consists of two different approaches. These are:

Auditory Verbal

In this method the child is taught through intensive teaching to use their remaining hearing to learn to speak. No visual cues, such as lipreading, facial expression or natural gestures are used. Emphasis is placed on the child's personal amplification system and/or cochlear implant.

Oral/Aural

This method also aims to teach deaf children to speak and lipread, but this method accepts the use of lipreading and natural gestures. Children will use their hearing aids and/or cochlear implant.

Challenges for Families

Some of the challenges for families choosing this option are:

- How to prevent isolation from deaf peers
- How to promote a positive deaf identity
- If language outcomes are unsatisfactory, what other coping strategies will the child develop
- How long are families prepared to wait for outcomes.

Total Communication

Total communication uses a combination of methods of communication at the same time. This means the child with a hearing loss are exposed to speech, lipreading and signing when communicating with others. The aim is to develop the child's speech and lipreading skills and signing skills to assist communication and

language development. It is expected that children use their hearing aids and/or cochlear implants.

The signed system used in a Total Communication method is signed English. Auslan is not used in a Total Communication method as it is impossible to speak English and sign Auslan at the same time as they are two different languages with two very different grammatical structures.

Challenges for Families

Some of the challenges for families choosing this option are how to make sure that children are receiving appropriate language input.

One of the concerns of Total Communication is that it is extremely difficult to sign and speak at the same time. What often happens is that the person speaking leaves out many parts of the signed sentence. As a result, the signed communication can be difficult to understand.

What are the different ways of signing in Australia?

Auslan

This is the natural and preferred method of communicating among members of the deaf community and those hearing children who are born to deaf adults. Auslan is recognised as a community language under Australia's Language and Literacy Policy. Auslan is not signing in English word order but is a unique visual language which has its own grammatical features. Many deaf children show a natural tendency to acquire, learn and use Auslan. [There is an information sheet on this topic.]

Signed English

This is a made-up code for English which is not used outside of educational settings. Deaf adults rarely use signed English. It is a system which aims to improve deaf children's access to English by exposing them to English on the hands. What is signed is intended to be exactly the same as what is spoken with all grammatical markers, such as "-ing," "-ed" etc added through the use of fingerspelling. People speak and sign at the same time when signed English is used. [There is a fact sheet on this topic.]

Makaton

This is a made-up sign system that uses some signs from Auslan and grammatical signs from signed English. Makaton is not a sign language and has a vocabulary of only about 450 basic signs and so is an aide to communication, not a complete communication system. Makaton is sometimes used with those deaf and hearing children with communication and learning disabilities. Makaton should not be used in place of a fully developed sign language such as Auslan.

How do families choose the best method of communication to use?

It is very important that families have as much information on all types of communication methods. They can do this by browsing the internet, reading books, contacting other parents of children with a hearing loss, seeking the opinions of professionals and most importantly observing their child closely to see how they prefer to communicate. Don't forget the importance of deaf adults. These people are an excellent resource and families should try to meet with them at every opportunity to gain their advice and opinion. They will provide excellent language role models and will usually engage readily with young deaf children.

It is also important that families ask themselves if communication with their child is easy. What is easy for the family may be difficult for the deaf child, so it's necessary for families to try and place themselves in their child's shoes and consider communication from their perspective.

Families need to be prepared to follow their deaf child's lead. It is important to remember that children's needs may change as they get older and any decisions about communication can be considered again in consultation with those individuals listed above.

The quality and quantity of the communications the deaf child receives is critical for the development of all language skills. The child needs many opportunities to observe other people communicating and to be involved in natural communication exchanges.

If people sign with deaf children, will it stop them from talking?

Many people believe that signing will stop or slow speech development but extensive research has found that this is simply not true. Signing does not inhibit a deaf child from speaking. It is important to give the deaf child as much language as possible so that they can develop language and thinking skills at the same pace as their hearing peers. In fact, research has shown that if the deaf child has a strong language base, they may be more motivated to develop their speech.

Is it easy to lipread?

Lipreading (sometimes called speech reading) is the ability to watch a person's lips and understand what they are saying. Many deaf children will learn to lipread naturally but their skills will vary widely. Only about 30% of speech sounds can be seen on the lips alone; the rest are hidden such as /k/, /t/ or /ng/. So lipreading is a lot of guess work, filling in gaps and using the context of the situation to understand what has been said. Deaf and hard of hearing children will also watch for facial expressions and natural gestures to understand. Some useable hearing helps when lipreading so that what can be heard can be combined with what can be seen on the face to aid understanding.

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The ability to lipread depends on having a good understanding of English vocabulary and structure. This means the person who is lipreading needs to know how sentences are put together and what words are likely to be used so that they can fill the gaps for the words and phrases they miss when lipreading.

It also helps to speak in whole sentences rather than single words. Single words are much more difficult to understand because there is no context to help understanding.

Resources

http://www.beginningssvcs.com/communication_options/comm_options_chart.htm

[*Communications Options - Reference Chart*](#)

<http://www.ndcs.org.uk/information/index.html>

[*Communication with Deaf Children and Young People*](#)

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