A teacher’s guide to working with Deaf parents and their children

Resource made possible by the Flora & Frank Leith Charitable Trust
Let's Talk - a teacher's guide to working with Deaf parents and their children is designed for anyone working in schools. Information is provided for teachers, administrators, and additional school staff such as counsellors, integration aides and Outside School Hours Care staff.

The information is intended to give the reader a sense of the cultural and familial experiences of hearing children who grow up in families with Deaf parents. It also aims to increase cultural and linguistic awareness around issues related to hearing children who have Deaf parents.

This guide was developed in response to feedback received from Deaf parents about the lack of access to their chosen schools and the keen interest they wish to develop in their child's schooling and educational needs.

There have also been some reports that professionals can have a tendency to bypass Deaf parents and deal directly with the hearing child or the hearing grandparents, usurping the parent’s authority in their family. This guide aims to address these challenges and help you to develop a strong, functional relationship with the Deaf parents in your school community.

The teacher, the student and the parent form a very important communication triangle. Through cooperative efforts, parents can contribute productively to a child’s educational experience and outcomes.

Teachers can play a role in ensuring that the communication triangle functions properly. Establishing communication with parents is important and the time spent on developing effective two-way communication is time well spent.
“The teachers would not pass on an important message about my child to my husband because he is a signing Deaf person. They waited nearly a week until they saw me in person to tell me that my child had been moved to a different room with a different teacher!”

Deaf mother with two kids

Introduction

Approximately 80-90% of children born to Deaf parents can hear. Hearing children who are born to Deaf parents are often born into a bilingual, bicultural family. Being bilingual they grow up exposed to a language other than English – in this context, Australian Sign Language (Auslan). A bicultural environment refers to the family’s culture which includes Deaf culture.

Although hearing children of Deaf parents do not share their parents’ functional condition (hearing loss), they inherit a sensitivity which is different from other hearing children. Their socialisation can be different from their own Deaf parents – most of whom were raised in hearing families.

There has been some evidence to suggest that there is some concern about the possible risk of placing too much responsibility upon the child if he or she becomes the interpreter and principal ‘channel’ of communication for the parents.

Hearing children of Deaf parents are raised through experiences of both the Deaf and hearing worlds and often spend more time with the Deaf community. As children and as adults, they are linked to a world that is usually only superficially accessible to those who can hear and a Deaf environment that does not.

At the heart of this is the issue of control over the situation. Deaf parents, like all parents, wish to take responsibility for their children without any intermediary.
About Deaf People

The Deaf community in Australia is a diverse cultural and linguistic minority group that encompasses a vast network of social, political, religious, artistic and sporting groups – most of whom use Auslan as their primary mode of communication.

Accepting deafness as part of a person’s identity is critical in developing a connection with the Deaf community, often described as Deaf with a capital ‘D’ to emphasise their Deaf identity.

Deaf people typically turn to each other for real conversation and intimate friendships, for information about parenting, and to foster a sense of family.

Deaf people immersed in Deaf culture emphasise interpersonal relationships. Developing trust is an important first step towards building a relationship.

Terminology

Used with a lower case ‘d’, the term ‘deaf’ includes all who are hard of hearing, hearing impaired or signing Deaf.

Some people use the upper case “D” (Deaf) to refer to those with a strong sense of identity, rooted in Deaf culture and Australian Sign Language. Others associate big “D” with those who attended all-Deaf schools. There are also others who use it as a label to establish the cultural status of an individual rather than their medical status.

In this resource, we have chosen to focus primarily on “Deaf” people – those who choose Auslan as their first language for communication.

About Deaf Culture

Members of the Deaf community tend to view deafness as a difference in human experience rather than a disability. Generally, the one unifying feature of the Deaf community is the sharing of language – Auslan.

However, Deaf culture is not only about sharing a language, but also similar experiences and expectations. It is a culture that is heavily reliant on group dynamics and being able to participate in a group is highly valued.

Some examples of cultural mannerisms include enhanced eye contact (compared to spoken language cultures), the use of touch, physical proximity (space to sign) and directness when communicating.

These cultural differences can present challenges for school staff and education providers in areas such as communication, sharing of information and the child-parent-school relationship.
“We need to be educating the school system about the issues, the different learning needs of hearing children from Deaf parents, their talking and communicating a lot in class and potential literacy issues when doing homework and so on.”

*Deaf mother with a child in primary school*

**Tips for Getting Deaf Parents Involved in Your School Community**

Many Deaf parents have reported problems with school staff – repeatedly describing how they are excluded from active participation in their child’s education and experience of schooling. This guide will take you through the steps in making your school community inclusive of Deaf families.

- Teach them about the school’s website to help them keep up-to-date with their child’s learning and to communicate with teachers
- Encourage them to read the school newsletter and other school notices
- Invite them to attend school open days, family events and other special activities at school
- Involve parents in school learning, such as occasionally teaching basic Auslan to their child’s class
- Ask them to help out with fundraising activities, sports days, excursions and other events (and provide interpreters if they request it)
- Invite them to talk to your class about their experience growing up as Deaf person using Auslan
- Be involved with the school council or parents’ club
- Encourage their child to use Auslan/Sign Language in school performances
**SUPPORTING DEAF PARENTS**

**Good Communication from the Start**

The first step in supporting Deaf parents in the school community is to gain clarity around their expectations of the school and its staff. It may be necessary to clarify what the school can and cannot do and how the school is there to support their child’s learning.

At the start of each school year, make a time to meet with the parents to go through any concerns they may have about their child and any events they may wish to participate in so you have plenty of time to plan ahead and arrange the appropriate support.

Deaf Awareness Training is accessible through Vicdeaf for a small fee – this basic training delivered by a qualified Deaf trainer is a valuable experience in understanding the needs of Deaf people and how best to involve them in your school community.

Deaf Awareness Training provides information such as how to access interpreters and work with them successfully, how to use loop systems and information about a variety of assistive devices that can enhance communication.

Auslan is now also offered as a LOTE subject in many schools. This might also be something to consider. From 2013 onwards Auslan will form part of the National Curriculum - this may be a proactive way to welcome Deaf families into your school community.

Do ask the Deaf person how they prefer to communicate (‘do you sign, lip read, talk or write?’). Whichever method you use, make sure the Deaf person is comfortable.
Communication is a two-way process. Each person needs to contribute their fair share so that the other party can feel understood and understand the person they are communicating with.

Sometimes it can be frustrating when we don’t have a variety of strategies to approach communication with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Below is a variety of situations you may find yourself in, followed by information on how to approach those situations and how to maximise that method of communication.

You might first meet a Deaf parent on an orientation day, or when they first enquire about enrolling their child in school – you may not have known they were Deaf beforehand so this might catch you off guard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking during school drop-off and pick-up times</td>
<td>Orientation days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing canteen duty</td>
<td>Parent–teacher interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly reading, writing and maths programs</td>
<td>Class excursions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting in school clubs, programs or coaching</td>
<td>School concerts and other events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Bees</td>
<td>School council or parent association meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REDSUCING THE BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

“I’ve got my daughter’s first play tonight… and I’m quite nervous and hoping that I’ll get there and get the front seat. I don’t want to say to the teacher ‘Could I have the seat at the front?’… So I’m quite nervous and hoping that I will pick up something from that, because to me the first one’s quite important.”

Deaf mother with two children

Informal Communications

• Firstly, gain the Deaf person’s attention by wave or gentle touch on the arm of shoulder
• Do face the person throughout, keeping your face clear, with enough light
• Do watch for indications of understanding (nods at appropriate moments, a negative shaking of the head, a questioning look or a slight frown)
• Do talk slowly, naturally and pleasantly. Do not shout (it can create tension and distorts lip patterns). Lip reading is an incredibly difficult skill to master and reading ability and proficiency varies. Only 30 to 40 per cent of speech is recognisable through lip reading. For many Deaf people, English is a second language (Auslan being their first) so ability to read and write proficiently in English varies greatly
• Use a pen and note pad to communicate short messages
• Do rephrase your message if at first you are not understood. Remember to establish the topic before the comment or question. Give visual clues. Keep messages short and do not waffle
• Do give the Deaf person time to answer
• Do not pretend to understand the Deaf person when you don’t
• Be patient and take time to communicate. Saying “never mind” or “it’s not important” causes the person who is Deaf to feel they are not important
• Be aware of fatigue. People who are Deaf or hard of hearing must work harder to communicate, and this can be extremely tiring
Formal Communications

- Ask the parent to choose the best seating for his or her communication needs
- The parent may need to sit next to or across from the speaker so he or she can see the speaker’s face or has direct view of the interpreter
- Face the person throughout, keeping your face clear, with enough light
- When using an interpreter, speak directly to the Deaf person. When the interpreter voices what the Deaf person signs, look at the Deaf person, not the interpreter
- Explain clearly what is happening or what is going to happen, so the Deaf person is not left out or left guessing
- Do give the Deaf person time to answer.
- Do not hesitate to ask a Deaf person to slow down (“slow please”) or repeat (“again please”) with his/her message
- Remember, it is not possible for a Deaf person to lip-read or look at an interpreter at the same time as reading and watching videos or presentations — allow some time for all information to be absorbed
Classroom Behaviours
Some teachers will often find that some students with Deaf parents have particular behaviours which are not displayed in other students.

I’m Not Ignoring You
Often, sound has no meaning and students will not respond to their name being called if they are not facing their teacher. This doesn’t mean they are deliberately ignoring you. You may be talking and they can’t see your face, sometimes this will not trigger a response in the student. This can be called “cerebral deafness” where the ears function but the mind does not respond readily to sound.

Not So Loud
Capture the student’s attention first by walking up to their desk and tapping the table in front of them. This is a cultural cue for them to pay attention to what you’re saying.

Continuing with the topic of cerebral deafness, students with Deaf parents can sometimes be overtly loud. One possible hypothesis is that when a child of Deaf parents screams or yells, it doesn’t bother their parents and is overlooked in their household. When going into a school environment, these students may not realise it is not acceptable and they need reminding to lower their voice because everyone in the room can hear them just fine.

The reduced awareness of their vocal volume may result in these students being very chatty in the classroom. This might be a remedy for catching up on the lack of ‘talking’ time (using voice) at home and their emotional need to speak to fill in that communication gap. This is obviously not a huge problem if they are finishing their tasks and allowing other students to complete work first. You may want to offer classroom tasks that require group work and discussion so as to meet that need and ensure discussion is around classroom topics.
I’m Listening
Some students with Deaf parents may be hypersensitive to sound and may listen to everything and anything happening in their immediate environment. This can be distracting for them when trying to complete classroom tasks. This type of response comes from an unconscious need to know about the conversations in the immediate area. In the family environment this would be normal, as children might be in the habit of relaying information to their parents. An easy remedy is to implement quiet work times where the stress of having to absorb information from all angles is reduced.

Getting Your Attention
You might also find that students with Deaf parents might try to gain your attention by walking up to you and tapping you on the shoulder. You may need to remind them that they can put their hand up to gain your attention without having to leave their seat.

Not Pulling a Face
You may notice that some students use enhanced facial expressions to convey their emotions clearly – this is a cultural response to an auditory world. Another cultural response includes children trying to work out spelling of words with the use of fingerspelling. Fingerspelling is using letters in the alphabet produced using two handed signing, to spell words.

This is because they first learn how to spell in Auslan and later make connections with English letters. Often you will find that spelling comprehension in these students is quite good because of this trait.

Hearing children with Deaf parents do not see their family as different to others. This is the only type of family they know and it is therefore “normal” to them and it’s important to acknowledge this.
Communication

Students from Deaf families will be used to very direct communication where meaning is delivered very efficiently. This can sometimes be misinterpreted as a simplistic understanding of topics. You will need to encourage them to elaborate and extract the meaning more completely from what they are saying. Directness can also be perceived as rude – and that is not the intention. Deaf culture very much feeds this need for direct communication and the student must be taught that there are a variety of ways to communicate without coming across as blunt or rude.

In addition to their directness, you inturn may need to provide direct answers to your student’s questions. Students raised within Deaf culture may not understand vague responses and will continue to question you until they feel satisfied that they understand the answer. If you genuinely do not have an answer, it is better to tell them that you don’t have the answer and direct them to where they might find what they are looking for. This encourages lateral thinking and research skills as well as less reliance on “hearing” people who are traditionally assumed to have all the answers.

Being Different

Hearing children often notice their Deaf parents’ differences during early childhood years through other hearing family members, media or public events. Their first years of school tend to be a major adjustment since it is often their first experience in a setting where all or most other people around them are hearing. When these children enter school, they are straddling two worlds with two languages, spoken English and Auslan. Dealing with the communication issues and barriers within these worlds may cause stress, but most eventually learn to balance them.

Additionally, when these students make the transition from adolescence to adulthood, they may experience confusion or other mixed feelings about where they belong. For some, this new independence can mean giving up a whole community and way of life that is significantly different from the hearing world in which they will spend most of their time.

Healthy adjustment for these children means acknowledging the experience of a dual or alternating identity (i.e. Deaf and hearing) and being aware that their difference from their family of origin includes possibilities for stress, growth, learning and strength.
Speech/Language

Because children with Deaf parents often have different or delayed speech patterns and language production methods, Deaf parents may find it difficult to help their children communicate in the hearing community. This can be evident in early primary years.

Sometimes students will arrive at a school in Prep without much exposure to the hearing world and therefore their speech may seem delayed or unintelligible. As a result, many of these children are misdiagnosed as speech impaired or language delayed and early intervention is put into place before necessary.

It is important to allow the student some time to mix with other classmates and talk to teachers who can monitor their speech development. Often it will be a matter of weeks and the student will be of the same speech production level as his or her peers. If you feel your student is not progressing as quickly as they should be, perhaps meet with their parents to discuss strategies and professionals who may be able to help.

Reading

In the early years it is helpful to suggest parents read to their children using sign language, encourage them to ask another trusted adult or older sibling to support them with pronunciation and recognising phonemes within school readers.

You can also suggest that they turn on the TV with Closed Captions to assist in comprehension and allowing the child to hear how words are pronounced as well as how they look when spelled. There is also a range of iPad applications such as storytelling books that read out loud in addition to displaying the written word on screen which can help with word sounds and spelling. There are even stories available on iPad in Auslan to encourage the multi-lingual approach to language learning.

If students continue to struggle with phonics and reading comprehension, you may wish to suggest a tutor who can support the student in reading aloud in private (this can often be a problem in a class where reading aloud is required).
When Deaf family members must meet with professionals, it is critical for the professional to ensure that Auslan interpreters are available. This is especially important for meetings with parents and teachers, school counsellors or on excursions where there are presentations taking place.

Legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), the Victorian Charter for Human Rights and Responsibilities (2006) and the Equal Opportunity Act (2010) dictates that all schools are expected to provide communication services to Deaf or hard of hearing parents of pupils (hearing or non-hearing) so that parents can access information about their child’s education and participate in public life.

There are several types of communication services available including Auslan interpreters and note takers.

Note takers are trained in writing down spoken information for people who cannot otherwise hear or understand what is being said.

All Victorian government schools can provide access to certain interpreting and translating services, free of charge, for parents from language backgrounds other than English. Encourage your school to contact the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for more information on how to access this free service.

**Schools can provide interpreters for:**

- Orientation days and student enrolment meetings.
- Parent–teacher interviews.
- Information sessions on new/changing school programs.
- Issues concerning discipline or student and family welfare.
- Educational assessment of students.
- Large-scale assemblies and graduations.

Sign language interpreters are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), as are all language interpreters in Australia. Aside from this, accredited interpreters can guarantee a certain level of proficiency to ensure a smooth conversation. To check an interpreter’s accreditation you can ask for their NAATI number.

“Counselling sessions for children at schools do not provide interpreters for Deaf parents. Deaf parents want to become involved to improve relationships.”

*Deaf father with two children*
To ensure the best communication exchange possible it is a good idea to ask the Deaf parent who their preferred interpreter is, and always make sure the interpreter is appropriately qualified. The right interpreter is crucial to the communication process. Not all interpreters are appropriate for all Deaf people.

**The Role of an Interpreter**
- The interpreter will facilitate communication between two parties who do not share the same language.
- The interpreter will sign what is spoken and speak what is signed, conveying meaning and intent.
- The interpreter will not add, embellish or delete information.
- The only time the interpreter should be involved in the discussion is when a word or phrase needs to be clarified from either the hearing or Deaf person.

To ensure that you provide access to these services for Deaf parents, in the first instance, contact the parents and ask them about the type of communication service they need and when it is needed (time/day/date).

See Appendix 1 for a list of sign language interpreter booking agencies.

**Pen and Paper/Using a Computer**
When other methods are not readily available or possible (some Deaf people cannot or choose not to lip-read) and the communication requirements are short and informal, pen and paper or typing notes on an iPad or laptop may be an option for communicating with Deaf parents.

When some Deaf people wish to write, they will often use English words that are associated with an Auslan sign and write using the grammatical structure of Auslan. To a non-signing person, this doesn’t always make sense in English and this can alter their perception of a Deaf person’s intelligence. If you are using this method, make sure your sentences are short, clear and that the Deaf person is comfortable with this kind of communication.

It’s important to remember that English is not often a Deaf person’s first language and sometimes this can result in misunderstandings between the hearing person and the Deaf parent.

Sometimes a Deaf parent might feel comfortable using their voice to communicate to a teacher or other school staff member. This might be a new situation for a person who may not understand the vocalisations of a Deaf person. It is important for staff to remain calm during this type of communications which can easily become frustrating for both parties.

A good strategy is confidently offering the Deaf person communication strategies so that you can understand them better. Remember to use short sentences and get to the point quickly.
“If my child was sick, because they didn’t want to SMS me, they rang my hearing parents to let them know, or they rang my work and told the receptionist the details of what happened to my child and asked that I pick him up.”

*Deaf mum with two kids*

**Real Time Captioning**

“Real-time captioning,” also called “computer-assisted real-time translation” (CART) is a service for communicating with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. The transcriber takes down the speaker’s words using either a stenography machine or a computer. Almost immediately, the words appear in text on a screen so the Deaf person can “read” what the speaker is saying. This service is useful for people who prefer English.

**Can Real Time Captioning replace Auslan Interpreters?**

Not necessarily. Captioners and sign interpreters address two different groups of Deaf people.

Pre-lingually Deaf people (those who are usually born Deaf or lose their before hearing they learn to speak) generally use Auslan as their first language. Those who identify Auslan as their first language are generally more comfortable and comprehend vast amounts of information with an interpreter.

Post-lingually Deaf people (those who lose their hearing after they learn to speak) generally learn English before they learn to sign, if they learn to sign at all.

For this group, captions might provide a better level of comprehension, for example, in a presentation with heavy use of proper nouns and specialised terminology. This system generally does not allow for the Deaf or hard of hearing person to respond back in any mode other than voice.

It is best practice to address this option with the Deaf or hard of hearing person and match their communication needs rather than assume what would best suit their needs.

Real Time Captioning is provided as fee-for-service. Contact an agency to check rates.

*See Appendix 2 for a list of Real Time Captioning agencies.*
What if I need to talk to a Deaf person outside of school hours?

Emerging advances in telecommunications that prove very useful to the Deaf community include wireless internet access and smart phones that offer voice to text and text to voice relay, video relay, SMS and email, within a single unit. Whilst not all Deaf people possess these phones, at a minimum they will have access to a mobile phone for SMS.

**SMS**

Text messaging on a mobile phone has become the communication of choice for short messages to and from Deaf people. Schools who have children with Deaf parents should seriously consider having a dedicated mobile phone number for contact with Deaf parents. This is particularly useful for alerting parents to emergency situations with their children, confirming appointments, changing appointment times and transmitting short pieces of information.

A good strategy is to SMS a parent to make a time for them to call you using the National Relay Service or Video Relay Service, for example to discuss short issues such as homework problems or changes to classes.

There are services who now offer email to SMS or a web-based SMS system which makes this a practical communication tool for schools.

**Email**

Although email does not guarantee real-time communication, it can be an effective communication tool and is inexpensive and accessible.

Use email to follow up on informal conversations and meetings and to notify parents of any notices or reports that may be coming in the mail or via their child.

While electronic communications are appropriate for some settings and information exchange, they cannot serve as substitutes for face-to-face communication.

Avoid depending on a Relay service, SMS and emails to communicate. Make time to meet the Deaf parent face-to-face to learn the richness of his or her personality and allow them to be fully involved in the school community.
National Relay Service
Advances in telecommunications and information technology in recent years have greatly simplified and expanded the availability of communication for Deaf families. Foremost, the National Relay Service will offer access between Deaf and hearing callers. When your school becomes accessible via the National Relay Service, the information should be published in the school newsletter and website, informing parents that this option is available. Free training is available for staff to be trained in its use.

A relay operator speaks printed messages from the Deaf caller who types and types spoken messages back to the Deaf users (see image).

For more information contact the National Relay Service:

- **Phone:** 1800 555 660
- **Email:** helpdesk@relayservice.com.au
- **Web:** http://www.relayservice.com.au/
**Video Relay Service**

The Video Relay Service (VRS), allows a Deaf person to telephone a hearing person using a sign language interpreter and vice versa. The interpreter and the Deaf person communicate in sign language using a broadband video connection, while the interpreter speaks with the hearing person via speakerphone or headset.

**How does Video Relay Service work?**

- The interpreter is set up with a video camera.
- Their image is transmitted to the Deaf person, who is also set up with a video camera.
- Both people can see each other.
- The Deaf person uses Auslan to communicate to the interpreter, who then communicates to the hearing person on the phone.

**VRS can:**

- Improve communication flow and enhance people's conversations.
- Offer Deaf people an alternative to TTY (telephone type writer).
- Offer Deaf people with Auslan as their first language the tools to communicate in their first language.
- Offer better use Australia's limited Auslan interpreter services.
- Make accessible services available in regional areas.

For more information about the Video Relay Service contact the Australian Communication Exchange (ACE):

**Phone:** 07 3815 7600

**Email:** vrssupport@aceinfo.net.au

**Web:** http://aceinfo.net.au/
Appendix 1

Auslan Interpreter Booking Agencies in Victoria

Vicdeaf Preferred Interpreting Agency
Sign Language Communications Victoria
Phone: 03 9473 1117
Email: slc@vicdeaf.com.au

Echo Interpreting & Notetaking
Phone: 03 9761 2208
Email: info@echointerpreting.com.au

OnCall Interpreters and Translators
Phone: 03 9867 3788
Web: http://www.oncallinterpreters.com/on-site-interpreting.html

Auslan Services
Phone: 1300 287 526
Email: admin@auslanservices.com
Web: http://www.auslanservices.com/index.html

All-Graduates Interpreting
Phone: 03 9605 3000
Email: admin@allgraduates.com.au
Web: http://www.allgraduates.com.au

National Auslan Booking Service (NABS)
NABS provide free interpreter bookings for private health care appointments (including counselling etc.)
Phone: 1800 246 945
Email: bookings@nabs.org.au
Web: http://www.nabs.org.au/

Appendix 2

Agencies that provide Real Time Captioning

The Captioning Studio
Phone: 08 8463 1639
Email: info@captioningstudio.com
Web: http://captioningstudio.com

Caption It
Email: info@captioning.com.au
Web: http://www.captioning.com.au

Red Bee Media
Phone: 03 9696 1996
Email: sales@redbeemedia.com.au
Web: http://www.redbeemedia.com.au

Ai-Media
Phone: 02 8870 7700
Email: info@ai-media.tv
Web: http://www.ai-media.tv/