

Language and Communication



Introduction

This is one of a series of papers produced by Deaf Child Worldwide¹. The purpose of the papers is to provide information for our partners; for families of deaf children² and for deaf children and young people themselves as well as for other audiences who may want to learn more about deafness and how it affects children and their families, especially those living in low resource settings.



Language and Communication

Language and communication are vital in every-day life. They allow us to build and sustain relationships; to share experiences; to express our own thoughts and feelings and to understand those of others. They are crucial in allowing us to develop social and emotional wellbeing and to negotiate and to learn.

Although language and communication are closely linked, they are not the same thing. To be able to understand and influence the world around us, we need to develop both language **and** communication skills effectively.

As described below, children who are deaf can learn language (signed and / or spoken) and communication skills, but they will learn in a different way from hearing children. Once families, communities and schools have a better understanding of the way in which deaf children learn language and communication skills they will be better able both to communicate with their deaf children and young people and to help them learn.

Communication and participation are basic human rights. The rights of children and young people to communicate, to be able to express their views, and to participate in decision making about their lives is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Articles 7 and 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability.

¹ Deaf Child Worldwide is the international arm of the National Deaf Children's Society in the UK

² Deaf Child Worldwide defines deafness as any level of hearing loss – mild, moderate, severe or profound

What is language?

Language can be described as the words (vocabulary), phrases, grammar and expressions we use and how we organize them in order to communicate. Language ability is both **receptive** (what we understand when others use it) and **expressive** (what we ourselves produce and use). Both are essential for individuals to be able to function well in society.

All languages have clear systems and structures. At its most basic, language is a system of:

- › sounds,
- › hand-shapes,
- › marks
- › or touches

All of these individual elements are used to form meaningful words. When humans use words together with rules (called grammar), they are able to communicate an endless amount of complicated information.

Some people think all language is spoken and written, but many deaf people use sign languages.

Language can be conveyed and received by:

- › speaking and hearing
- › writing and reading
- › signing and seeing
- › touching and feeling, or
- › a mix of any or all these ways of communicating.

Whatever the means used, language is the main way that people everywhere communicate with each other.

Sign language is a language like any other, with its own grammatical constructs. The difference is that it is communicated through hand movements and facial expressions and not through speech.



Sign languages are different all over the world, in the same way that spoken languages are.

What is communication?

Communication is the way we express ideas and thoughts so we can get our meaning across to others. It is vital in order for us to share information, and build relationships with people. It is also crucial for our social and emotional wellbeing.

Language is the most important part of human communication, but communication happens in many other ways - through sounds, facial expression, tone and pitch, touch, gesture, signs and drawn or written symbols.

Communication begins right from birth, long before a baby understands any words, when he or she cries, babbles, coos or smiles. Communication is a two-way process and involves things like eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.

With the right communication, deaf children can learn equally well as hearing children.

In many African languages, the word for 'to hear' e.g. the word 'kusikia' in Swahili, can be translated to mean to obey or to understand. When hearing is so linked to understanding it can take some families time to realise that although their deaf child cannot hear with their ears they can 'listen' with their eyes and learn to understand their parents and the world around them.

Why language and communication are important?

Everyone needs to develop and use both language and communication skills.

When we say someone is a 'good communicator' we do not mean only how well they speak or write, but how they express what they want to say.

It is essential to have a good command of a first language in order to be able to learn to read. The first language can be signed or spoken.³

Learning language is a key part of all other learning processes. Poor language development affects other areas of a child's development. No child can learn properly until they are able to communicate with other people and understand what others are saying to them. For children with hearing loss, developing good language and communication skills is vital if they are to achieve their educational and social potential.

How children learn language

The first three years are the most important for language development, whether the child is learning spoken or sign language.

Children who can hear

For a hearing child the process of learning language starts more than three months before they are born, when their ears have developed in the womb and they are able to start hearing their mother's speech. Newborn babies are already attuned to the sounds of their mother and can pick out the sound of their mother's voice from among the voices of other people.

Even before they can talk, hearing babies learn to link words with things (like banana, dog or mamma). By the time they are a year old, most babies will understand the meaning of many words they hear and/or the gestures they see. They will start to prefer the sounds of language over other sounds and will be able to understand that speech sounds carry meaning whilst other human sounds (like sneezing or coughing) do not.

As they experience communication with the people around them, children learn how to pay attention to objects, people and actions and understand the purpose of what people do and say.

The three main things that influence a child's natural language development are:

- › the quality of the language and communication that surrounds the child in their everyday lives
- › the number of interactions the child has with other people
- › how much the adults communicate with the child and support him or her to join in with conversations

Learning sign language will not stop your deaf child from learning speech.



³ Children need natural languages, signed or spoken, The Dana Foundation www.dana.org/Cerebrum/Default.aspx?id=39306



Deaf children

More than nine out of ten babies who are born deaf are born into families who have no deaf members and so do not know how to teach a deaf baby to communicate⁴. Deaf babies, just like hearing babies, have a very strong natural drive to communicate with others, so they will pick up information from body language and from whatever amount of speech they can hear.

Some deaf children are not born deaf, but become deaf because their hearing is damaged by an illness or accident. Deaf children can learn to speak although in many low resource settings the professional support required to help a deaf child develop fluent spoken language is not available and sign language is therefore the most effective means of communication.

Deaf babies will begin to develop their own special way of communicating, pointing at objects and using actions to demonstrate they are hungry or tired. If the child and their family have no opportunity to learn an official sign language, they will probably develop their own system of 'home signs'. These informal signs and gestures can convey a surprisingly rich range of thoughts, feeling and actions.

Some deaf babies are born to deaf parents who already use sign language. These babies begin the language journey as soon as they are born, first learning by touching and feeling and then, when their sight is developed, through seeing and understanding signs.

Deaf babies will learn sign language in much the same way as hearing babies learn spoken language. They will achieve similar milestones to other babies as long as they have frequent daily exposure to other fluent users of that language. Because most deaf children are born into hearing families, this is not always the case so it is important wherever possible for families to find opportunities for their child to meet and communicate with other deaf children and with deaf adults, particularly those who use sign language and those who have been deaf from a younger age. Just as with spoken language, the best time for a baby to learn its first signed language is in the first two to three years of life. After this early stage, it becomes more difficult to learn language (signed or spoken) and he or she will probably always have gaps in their language ability.

Children who become permanently deaf after learning to speak will still need some support in order to continue learning and using spoken language.

Uganda was one of the first countries in the world to recognise sign language in its constitution in 1995.

⁴ 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents with little or no experiences of deafness or knowledge of how to communicate with deaf person. The National Deaf Children's Society www.ndcs.org.uk/about_us/about_the_national_deaf_childrens_society/index.html

⁵ 60% of childhood hearing loss is due to preventable causes. World Health Organisation www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss

Challenges faced by deaf children and their families

Most deaf children live with parents who have little or no information about deafness.

Many parents do not know how to tell if a baby or small child is deaf, so they may not know that their child is different from others. If parents do not know that a child is deaf they often do not understand why the child's learning is slow. Even if they know their child is deaf, they often do not know how to teach their deaf child the things they teach their hearing children. If a deaf child has delayed language, parents need to try different ways of communicating with them to find out what works best for the child.

All deaf children want and need to communicate, but deafness can prevent a child's speech and language from developing in the usual ways. Deaf children can become very sad and withdrawn, or angry and frustrated, if they cannot express themselves or understand what other people say. Support with language and communication in the early years is crucial if deaf children are to be able to achieve at school and develop good social and emotional wellbeing.

The different communication methods for deaf children

The different methods can be grouped into three types:

- › Sign language as a first language as well as their local spoken and written language(s) (Bilingual/Multilingual)
- › Listening and speaking (Auditory-Oral or Oral / Aural)
- › Using a combination of methods flexibly – sign, speech and hearing, fingerspelling, gesture, facial expression and lip-reading (Total Communication)

Children with all levels of deafness can try communicating with any of these approaches. There is no one method which should be considered better than another – the important thing is that it works for the child and their family. Families need to try different methods to communicate with their child. This will vary depending on what help and support is available to them.

Lip-reading can be really difficult and it's easy to miss information.



Hearing technology?

When a child has mild, moderate or severe hearing loss there may be opportunities for them to benefit from hearing aids. Children with the most profound hearing loss sometimes have cochlear implants (hearing technology). These all need to be adjusted to meet the specific needs of each individual child. Children who are born deaf or who become deaf before they have learned any speech will find it much harder to develop spoken language than those who go deaf when they are older and have already learned a spoken language. In general, the sooner a deaf child has help to communicate the better they will be able to learn language.

In most low resource settings the majority of deaf babies and children have limited access to hearing technology or specialist audiology or speech therapy support which means that learning sign language is of paramount importance.

The role of the family

Because the first three years of life are so important for learning language and communication, families play a crucial role in helping their deaf child to develop these skills. Families need to be reassured that their deaf child **can** learn and to understand that all deaf children, like other children, have a **right** to learn. If children have language before they start school they are much more likely to succeed academically.

Although most families will not know sign language they can still communicate with their deaf child. They should try and communicate in any way they can.

Deaf children need to learn language before they can learn how to read and write. Language can be either signed or spoken.



Communicating with your deaf child

- › Get their attention. Try waving or tapping on their shoulder
- › Face them when you talk and make sure your child can see your mouth.
- › Use your hand – point at what you’re talking about.
- › Keep trying. Try writing a message down, use drawing and pictures.

Even when a deaf child cannot hear speech, or can only hear a small amount, they will be able to pick up meaning and learn to associate lip patterns with particular words or phrases. In order to do this, they must be able to see the faces of family members when they speak to them.

Deaf children will benefit from opportunities to meet and communicate with other deaf children and deaf adults. It is also important for parents to meet with other families who are raising a deaf child so that they can share information and get practical and emotional support from others who share similar experiences.

The majority of deaf children in a low resource setting start primary school with little or no language⁶.



⁶ These figures are based on evidence from projects that Deaf Child Worldwide has supported with 21 partners in South Asia (India and Bangladesh) and East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania)

Conclusion

Learning language is a key part of all other learning processes and is critical to the development and well-being of the child. The critical time for learning language is in the first three years. The majority of parents of deaf children in low resource settings have limited access to services to enable their deaf children to acquire language from early age.

The majority of deaf children in low resource settings have little or no language when they start primary school. Deaf children need to have language before they can learn to read and write. Early exposure to sign language and multilingualism prepares deaf children for their education and to achieve their aspirations.

With the right support from the start all deaf children can learn and achieve their potential. With the right communication support, deaf children can learn equally well as hearing children.

The sooner deafness is properly identified, the sooner the right support can be given to the child to help them learn language, and to families to help them support their deaf child.



Who are we?

Deaf Child Worldwide is the international arm of the National Deaf Children's Society. We are the UK's leading international charity for deaf children in developing countries. We work to remove the barriers faced by deaf children and young people in developing countries. We have been working with partner organisations in South Asia, East Africa and Latin America for over 15 years, facilitating work that enables deaf children and young people to be fully included in their family, education and community life.

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Deaf Child Worldwide is the international arm of The National Deaf Children's Society.
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