



# COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

## *American Sign Language*

### **1. What is American Sign Language?**

In the 19th century, American Sign Language (ASL) evolved from a combination of French Sign Language and homemade signs from Martha's Vineyard and New England homes with deaf children.

In the 1960's, researchers William C. Stokoe, Dorothy S. Casterline and Carl Croneberg noticed that ASL has linguistic parameters (phonology, morphology, syntax) found in other languages. They recognized ASL as a bona fide language with its own rules of grammar, sentence and sign formation. Like Spanish, French, Chinese and other languages, ASL is a language in and of itself, separate from English. The only difference is that ASL is visual rather than auditory.

ASL users convey critical information with their hands through the use of handshapes, locations, movements, palm orientations and non-manual grammatical signals (eyes, face, head, shoulders). Providing full visual access to communication and language, ASL can convey subtle, complex, and abstract thoughts. In short, ASL can communicate anything.

The English language has individual letters. Likewise, ASL and other signed languages consist of handshapes. In English, the letters must be arranged in specific ways to convey meanings. It is also true for ASL: handshapes are arranged syntactically.

Often the first language for many Deaf North Americans, it is now the fourth most commonly used language in the United States (Nakamura, 2002). It is best learned from other Deaf persons or through interac-

tion with other competent ASL users. Research shows a strong correlation between fluency of ASL and written English, meaning highly skilled ASL users are often competent in written English (Strong & Prinz, 2000).

ASL is recognized by many organizations, and universities and colleges, including Gallaudet University, as an official language in its own right (<http://www.nad.org/site/pp.asp?c=foINKQMBF&b=176627>) (<http://www.gallaudet.edu/x3946.xml>).

## **2. What issues are at the forefront of ASL?**

Among many issues relating to ASL is the proficiency in teachers of the deaf and interpreters who work with students communicating in this mode. This is a big concern among Deaf adults who acknowledge the proliferation of mainstreamed programs across the country in where deaf children are enrolled. Too often the teachers and interpreters at these sites are not trained to work with these children. In selecting the best educational placement for their deaf children, it is highly recommended that the parents are aware of this issue and do research of their local public school(s) should they desire a mainstreamed placement. These teachers should have had training in the education of deaf children, and be proficient ASL users. Likewise, interpreters should be certified by either the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and/or the National Association of the Deaf (see websites below).

## **3. What questions should parents be asking about ASL?**

### **a. Why should my deaf child learn ASL?**

Because it is a visual-spatial language best accessible for children (and adults) who cannot access auditory languages.

### **b. Why should we as parents learn ASL?**

As parents, you would want to be able to interact fully with your deaf children the same way you would want if they were not deaf. You would know how their day at school went, how their basketball game fared, how their camping trip went, how they did at their first job interview.

### **c. Would using ASL deter oral skills?**

This is a myth. In fact, research shows that spoken language is effective when combined with visual supports including ASL, (Calderon & Greenberg, 1997). Many competent Deaf ASL users are also fluent in spoken English.

### **d. How would using ASL promote the learning of written English?**

Bilingual research shows that mastery in one language often promotes fluency in a second language (Grosjean, 1982; Romaine, 1995, Strong & Prinz, 2000). Thus mastering ASL can lead to fluency in written English.

**e. If my child uses ASL on a regular basis, would he/she be able to have a career?**

The Deaf community is proud of its members who are actors/actresses, architects, artists, athletes, authors, automobile mechanics, bankers, chefs, clerks, computer whizzes, construction workers, educators, engineers, hoteliers, landlords, lawyers, medical doctors, merchants, paramedics, publishers, stockbrokers...in short, the sky is the limit.

#### **4. What books or websites do you recommend on ASL?**

##### **Books:**

Eriksson, P. 1998. *The History of Deaf People*, trans. by James Schmale. Orebro, Sweden: Tryckmakarna.

Lane, H. 1984. *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf*. NY: Random

Lane, H., R. Hoffmeister, B. Bahan. 1996. *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD*. San Diego: Dawn-SignPress.

Padden, C. & T. Humphries. 2005. *Inside Deaf Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Smith, A., E. L. Jacobowitz. 2006. *Have You Ever Seen...? An American Sign Language (ASL) Handshape DVD/Book*. Frederick, MD: ASL Rose.

Van Cleve, J. V., B. Crouch. 1989. *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*. DC: Gallaudet University Press.

##### **Websites:**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Sign\\_Language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Sign_Language)

<http://www.signingtime.com>

<http://www.lifeprint.com/>

<http://www.edgateway.net/pub/docs/pel/bilingualism.htm>

RID: <http://rid.org/>

## REFERENCES USED IN THIS ESSAY

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- Calderon, R., & Greenberg, M. (1997) The effectiveness of early intervention for deaf children and children with hearing loss. In M.J. Guralnik (Ed.), *The effectiveness of early intervention* (pp. 455-482). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Nakamura: <http://www.deaflibrary.org/asl.html>
- Grosjean, F. 1982. *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Strong, M., P. Prinz. 2000. "Is American Sign Language skill related to English literacy?" in. C. Chamberlain, J. Morford & R. Mayberry (eds.), *Language Acquisition by Eye* (pp. 131-141). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Romaine, S. 1995. *Bilingualism*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Valli, C., C. Lucas, K. Mulrooney. 2005. *Linguistics of American Sign Language: An Introduction*. D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.

## AUTHORS CREDIT

### Biography: Arlene Blumenthal Kelly

A Baltimore native with Deaf parents, Dr. Kelly has been teaching at Gallaudet's Department of ASL and Deaf Studies since August 1995. Prior to that, she was a researcher at the Gallaudet Research Institute and a librarian at the Tucson (Arizona) Public Library.

Dr. Kelly's B.A. (1977) is in English and M.A. (1992) in linguistics, both from Gallaudet College. Her doctorate (2001) is in American Studies from University of Maryland, College Park. The title of her dissertation is "How Deaf Women Construct Teaching, Culture and Language, and Gender: An Ethnographic Study of ASL Teachers."

A frequent lecturer across the country, Dr. Kelly's topics cover various themes such Cultural Studies, Deaf History, Deaf Women and Fingerspelling. Her published works have appeared in several journals, including *American Annals of the Deaf and Disability Studies Quarterly*. She also serves on the advisory board of the ASL Program at the Frederick Community College.

Married to Jim Kelly, they live in a farmhouse with their Border Collie and two cats.

**Biography: Beth Sonnenstrahl Benedict**

Dr. Benedict, an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Gallaudet University, obtained her Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in Early Communication and Family Involvement from Gallaudet University in 2003.

Her work has focused on family involvement in schools with deaf and hard of hearing children, early childhood education, advocacy, early communication and partnerships between deaf and hearing professionals.

Currently a member of the Joint Committee on Infant Hearing, she represents the Council of Education of the Deaf which is developing a 2007 Position Statement. She was also a member of the U.S. Office on Disability's Health and Human Services Constituent Expert Working Group on Effective Interventions for Infants and Young Children with Hearing Loss. She has served on several boards and councils such as Maryland Universal Newborn Hearing Screening Advisory Council and is the current president of the American Society for Deaf Children.

A frequent presenter at national and international conferences, schools and for family organizations, Dr. Benedict's published works include articles and chapters in numerous books related to early communication development.

Dr. Benedict, a deaf mother of two deaf daughters (Rachel, 18 & Lauren, 16), is married to A. Dwight Benedict. Her family often participates in research projects that investigate the development of communication and literacy.

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*Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that's designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We've recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!*