All About Being Deaf

What Is "Deaf"? What Is "deaf"? Or "Deafened"?

Most people have some idea about what "deaf" means. But the group we know as "deaf people" is a diverse group of individuals, and the variety of terms used can be confusing to the uninitiated. So we'll begin with those terms and the meanings behind them, because these words reveal important issues about this community.

Deaf Culture

Deaf with a capital D, or *big-D Deaf*, is used to identify a cultural category of deafness, rather than an audiological or medical one. They practice social and cultural norms that are distinct from those of the surrounding hearing community. The terms *Culturally Deaf* or *Deaf Culture* or *the Deaf Community* are also used in this context.

A cornerstone of Deaf identity is the use of American Sign Language (ASL) as a primary language. A Deaf person may learn ASL from Deaf parents from birth, or may be first exposed through early intervention or residential-school programs; they may learn ASL as a child, teen, or adult. It is not the length of time a person has used ASL that matters so much as the personal identification with the culture and heritage of sign-language users.

Members of the 1918 Colorado School of the Deaf and Blind Football Team

The educational experiences of Deaf individuals are another defining cultural characteristic. Related to an identity as ASL-users is being schooled at *state residential schools for the deaf*, where ASL use was expanded and refined, where deaf students encountered others who communicated as they did, and where students learned about Deaf History and other Deaf communities. At times in the last 150 years, the use of ASL was banned in classrooms at many residential schools, but students continued to use it outside of class. Although increasing numbers of deaf children are now being *mainstreamed*, or educated in schools with hearing children, deaf schools continue to be centers for learning, promoting, and preserving the use of ASL and Deaf Culture.

Deaf community members often consider themselves *bilingual* and *bicultural*, embracing elements of both ASL-based and spoken-language-based cultures. ASL has no written form, so Deaf people in America also use written English (or Spanish or other languages) to varying degrees—such as in TV and movie captions, and for TTY, email, or text-messaging communications. Some Deaf people spend a great deal of time with "hearing people" and others spend time with other Deaf people as much as possible. It depends on the individual.

Because being Deaf is a fluid social category, people with hearing also can be included in *Deaf Culture*, such as hearing children of Deaf parents (also called CODAs, Children of Deaf Adults), other family members, sign language interpreters, and educators. Thus, Deaf Culture includes any person who "identifies himself or herself as a member of the Deaf community, and other members accept that person as a part of the community."

Audiology, Disability, and Deaf Culture: Perspectives on Deafness and Identity

Mainstream American culture regards deafness as a disability. Health-care providers may focus on the medical aspects of deafness. But many Deaf people find this perspective restrictive and limiting, because it does not consider the sociological aspects of being deaf. Some Deaf people prefer to view deafness not as a handicap but as a shared experience underlying their sense of community. Rather than perceiving themselves as having lost something (hearing) many do not regard themselves as "broken" or impaired or disabled.

Students from the Michigan School for the Deaf sign the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee" in The Silent Worker*, 1906.*

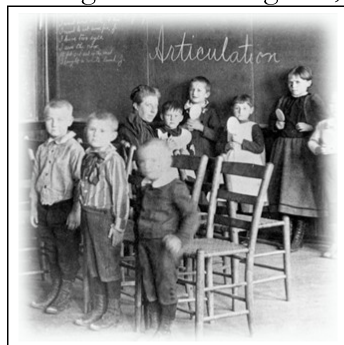
Instead, they celebrate and cherish their culture because it gives them the unique privilege of sharing a common history and language. ASL is seen as a positive asset that unifies a community and encourages shared experiences and traditions. Members of the Deaf community see parallels between their situation and those of other cultural and language minorities. For example, Deaf Culture resembles Hispanic-American cultures,

in which people maintain dual language identities and switch back and forth in different situations. In other ways, Deaf culture shares similarities with Gay and Lesbian culture, since members of both groups do not necessarily share the cultural identities of their parents, and they develop an identity with others outside the home and family. The causes of deafness are rarely passed on genetically, so the Deaf community is unusual among cultural groups because only 10 percent of Deaf people acquire Deaf Culture practices from their Deaf families. (Or, put another way, 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents.) Since the use of ASL is a primary binding characteristic of Deaf Culture, deaf people who do not use ASL are not considered part of this culture.

Oral or Non-Signing Deaf People

To contrast with the Culturally Deaf model, *deaf* or *little-d deaf* is often used to mean the audiological condition of hearing loss or the lack of sensitivity to sound. You could say, "He was identified as deaf at age 3, and he decided to identify himself as Deaf at age 22."

Another use of *little-d deaf* is in the phrase *oral deaf*, which refers to people with profound hearing loss or who were born deaf, and raised to communicate using speech and speech-reading rather than sign language. *Oral deaf adults* may have various degrees of hearing loss, from moderate to profound. Some may refer to themselves as "hard of hearing" rather than "deaf"—again, this is a culturally important identification, not a statement about the amount of hearing ability a person has. Many oral deaf children went to *mainstream schools* rather than *deaf schools*, or they may have attended schools that focused on *auditory-verbal training*.



Deaf schools also taught "oralism" (or lip-reading & speech) to students. These Colorado School for the Deaf & Blind students use hand mirrors to study "articulation."

Most oral deaf people were introduced to some form of sound amplification early in life, such as hearing aids or classroom amplification systems, and encouraged to combine sound from residual or amplified hearing with visual input from speechreading and other cues. Some children who were raised oral grow up to join the Deaf Community and embrace ASL. Some use sign language variants that are not true ASL, but use ASL signs in ways more closely patterned after English, such as Signed English, Signed Exact English (SEE), or Contact Sign.

Deafened or Late Deafened

Many people differentiate being *Deafened* or *Late Deafened* from being *Deaf*, because life experiences can vary greatly depending on the age of onset of deafness. Contrary to what many people think, the "late" in late deafened does not refer to late in life. It means instead, "became deaf after acquiring language through speech and hearing," so a 5-year-old could be considered late deafened. This is also called *post-lingual deafness* because it occurs after language development, as opposed to children who are *pre-lingually deaf* or who became deaf before acquiring language. Late deafness is also sometimes called *adventitious deafness*.

Deafened individuals share some characteristics with Deaf Community members, some common traits with hard of hearing people, and others with hearing people. They may also feel that they fall into the gaps between these groups. They may or may not use sign language or identify with Deaf Culture—this identity is a matter of personal choice rather than specific levels of hearing ability. *For more information, see the CCDHH Information Sheet* "Being Late Deafened."

Terms to Avoid

The term *hearing impaired* is generally avoided by Deaf and deaf and deafened people, often on the grounds that the term does not give enough useful information. Some feel that putting the focus on something that is lacking is a negative view, and ask how spoken-language users would feel if they were referred to as "sign-language impaired." *Hearing impaired* is sometimes used to include both Deaf and hard of hearing people, but people in those two groups may use very different adaptations and communication modes. Most people prefer to say "deaf and hard of hearing" instead, and to consider "deaf people" and "hard of hearing people" separate groups. One late deafened writer notes:

> "People who are not deaf or hard of hearing who use the term [hearing impaired] normally use it to subsume both audiological populations under the same umbrella, usually just for convenience in expression (four syllables for hearing impaired, compared to six for deaf-and-hard-of-hearing). This usage is ignorant or uncaring that the two groups differ in almost every respect except the anatomical location of their difference from 'normal,' reducing us to one body part."

The term *Deaf-Mute* is no longer used because Deaf people are not necessary without speech. Hearing loss and speech use are separate issues. And the term *Deaf and Dumb* is just plain offensive.

How do you know which term to use, or how a person prefers to communicate? *Ask the person!* Always.

Individual Characteristics

In Colorado, an estimated 42,000 people are considered deaf (2007 figures). Deafness is considered a "low-incidence" condition, since fewer than ten people per thousand are considered deaf. In contrast, over 375,000 people in Colorado are considered hard of hearing.

If a person is *Deaf,* does that person use their voice or not? It depends on the individual. Some Deaf people never use voices, some use their voices frequently, and others have learned to speak but prefer to use other modes of communication, such as ASL or writing. Current practice is to focus on what the person *does* to adapt, not what they lack. So you might refer to a *Deaf* acquaintance by saying "He uses sign language and does not use his voice." You could describe a *deaf* co-worker as "She is oral deaf, and uses speech-reading and speech rather than ASL." Another person is "late-deafened and uses her voice, and is learning sign language."

If a person is deaf, it does not necessarily mean that the person hears no sound at all. Deaf individuals vary in their ability to hear and interpret sounds. Some people, in fact, hear no sound at all, while others can hear certain frequencies at various degrees of loudness. Some deaf people hear environmental sounds somewhat, but not speech. In an *audioligical classification*, people with an average loss of 90 decibels (dB) or greater across the three frequencies in which most speech occurs are considered deaf. Often a *functional definition* is used: if a person needs visual representation in some form to understand speech (sign language interpreting, captions, speech-reading, writing), the person is considered deaf. For a *cultural definition:* one person "is Deaf and uses ASL," while another "has a profound hearing loss, uses hearing aids and lipreading, and English is her primary language." These two individuals may have similar levels of hearing ability.

> *Nature hates force. Just as the flowing stream seeks the easier path, so the mind seeks the way of least resistance. The sign-language offers to the deaf a broad and smooth avenue for the inflow and outflow of thought, and there is no other avenue for them like unto it.*
> George M. Teegarden
> Gallaudet Class of 1876

Some people believe that the use of hearing aids is a "dividing line" between those who are deaf and those who are hard of hearing. But some deaf people use hearing aids and some do not. Spotting a hearing aid does necessarily mean, for example, that the person is hard of hearing—a deaf person may use sounds from a hearing aid to help monitor their own voice levels as they speak. Others may use hearing aids to be aware of environmental sounds, but the aids may not help in understanding speech. Some deaf people have used hearing aids while growing up, but gave them up as adults when they no longer helped enough, or as part of embracing a Deaf Culture identity.

Deaf History in America

In 1817, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc founded the first permanent school for deaf children in Hartford, Connecticut. At the time, most Americans still lived on farms or in small towns. The scattered population made it difficult to establish schools, especially for deaf children, who were few and far between. Because schools for deaf children had to serve such large areas, most were boarding schools. In these residential settings, a community of deaf people began to form.

Laurent Clerc had arrived in Hartford in 1816 and brought with him the sign language of Paris, a city with a large deaf community. He taught this visually complex language to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and other teachers. Students at the school brought other sign languages with them from New York City, Philadelphia, and a tiny island off the coast of Massachusetts, Martha's Vineyard, which had an unusually large population of deaf people at the time. Out of this mix came what was called "the natural language of signs," known today as American Sign Language. *See the CCDHH Information Sheet "American Sign Language Basics" for more information.*

Gallaudet University and Higher Education

Gallaudet University, located in Washington, D.C., was the first school for advanced education of Deaf and hard of hearing people in the world, and it is still the world's only university specifically designed for deaf students. The university was named for Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. In June 1869, three young men received diplomas for having completed the entire four-year course of studies. Their diplomas were signed by President Ulysses S. Grant, and to this day the diplomas of all Gallaudet graduates are signed by the current U.S. President.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the college flourished. One survey of former students from the years 1931-1941 showed them engaged in 82 different occupations, including teaching, educational administration, and scientific research. In 1986, the student body totaled almost 2,000 undergraduate, graduate, and preparatory students. Gallaudet counted among its alumni successful lawyers, investment bankers, scholars, entrepreneurs and many other professionals.

In 1988, a new president was appointed at Gallaudet. Students were outraged when a hearing person was chosen to head the university, because they felt it was long overdue for Gallaudet to be lead by a Deaf president. A student strike erupted and the resulting events became a watershed moment in general American awareness of

The 1988 Gallaudet Deaf President Now movement & march on the U.S. Capitol.

Deaf culture. *Deaf President Now* student organizers and their allies staged rallies, forced the university to close, captured the attention of the media, and marched on the Capitol. Eventually, the hearing president resigned and was replaced by Gallaudet's first Deaf president, I. King Jordan. This protest helped frame the struggle of deaf people within the context of a civil rights movement. Having a leader who could understand and relate to being deaf was crucially important to the Deaf population. The Reverend Jesse Jackson commented at the time, "The problem is not that the students do not hear. The problem is that the hearing world does not listen."

Another well-known university program for Deaf students is the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), founded in 1965. It is the first and largest technological college in the world for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and is one of eight colleges within the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, New York. In 2007, NTID had about 800 students enrolled, and another 492 deaf and hard of hearing students were cross-enrolled in other programs with support from NTID. NTID offers Associate, Bachelor, and Master degree programs.

Other American universities offer programs in Deaf Studies or Deaf Education, often in conjunction with sign-language interpreter training programs. For a list of Colorado colleges and universities that offer ASL classes and related programs, visit the American Sign Language Teachers Association of Colorado (ASLTAC) website at www.asltac.org. Finally, the increasing use of sign language interpreters and live captioning (CART) in educational settings opens the doors for deaf students to colleges, universities, and specialized training programs across the country. The ADA and other laws ensure equal access rights and equal opportunities, and technological innovations open up job options, so 21st-century Deaf individuals face a bright future.

Colorado Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

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