

COMMUNICATING WITH A DEAF PERSON

The key to effectively communicating with a Deaf person is discovering what techniques work best.



“Deaf can do anything but hear” I. King Jordan

A conversation with a Deaf person is the same as having a conversation with a hearing person – the difference is only the method used. Like hearing people, Deaf people are unique individuals with interesting qualities and skills. They have families, jobs and hobbies.

You can communicate with Deaf people in several ways – including New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), spoken English or a mixture of both. Appropriate use of gesture, body language and facial expressions can also be very effective, as Deaf people communicate visually.

Not all Deaf people can lip read – it is estimated that 70 percent of lip reading is guesswork, even if the speaker articulates clearly.

Communication Tips

Where possible, book an NZSL interpreter. It is the right of a Deaf person to have access to information in their first/primary language – NZSL. For more information visit www.deaf.org.nz. If time does not permit you to book an interpreter, the tips below will help you mix easily with Deaf people, even if you don't know NZSL.

- Face the Deaf person and gain their attention before speaking. Eye contact is very important so try to maintain it and don't turn away when the Deaf person is signing
- Deaf people ask for attention by waving, stamping, touching or tapping one another, or switching lights on and off
- If you didn't understand what a person signed to you, ask them to sign it again. It's ok to check, clarify, tell them to slow down
- If the Deaf person did not understand you, rephrase your words in a different way, add body language and facial expressions. Speak slowly and clearly
- Keep lips and face clear of obstruction (hands, cups, chewing gum, large moustaches)
- Deaf people need sufficient personal space for arm movements
- Deaf people can't interrupt conversations the way hearing people can. They need to see what is being said, so can only pay attention to one person at a time. Deaf people wait until the person signing stops, before they start signing
- To talk in a group situation, signers usually have eye contact with all “listeners”, they wait for others to stop signing, then move hand/s slowly to start signing, lift a finger or wave a hand (in a meeting this means “I want to talk”)

- Dim light makes it hard to see facial expressions and NZSL; try not to stand in front of a window
- Avoid background noise when communicating with someone who has a hearing aid
- Use simple gestures, write information and point to indicate subjects or objects
- At meetings, sit in a semi-circle or circle so everyone can see each other
- Learn NZSL – for more information please visit www.nzsign.co.nz

There are culturally polite ways to interrupt a signed conversation. For example:

- Wait for a small pause before interrupting
- Wave or tap the shoulder lightly and then wait for the person to look. If it is urgent, tap harder
- Before breaking off a conversation, tell the person you are talking with to ‘hold’, or point to the interruption so they can see why you will look away
- Deaf people get annoyed when they are signing and the other person looks away, breaking eye contact
- When two people are signing, it is alright to walk quickly between them (if you cannot go around them)

It is helpful to recognize that NZSL is the first language of many Deaf people. Other languages including written and oral English are their second and assumption should not be made that all Deaf people can speak, write or understand English.

Deaf Aotearoa

Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand is a Deaf-led, not-for-profit organisation formed more than 30 years ago by D/deaf New Zealanders.

The organisation focuses on promoting Awareness of, Access to and Advancement of NZSL – to help strengthen the rights of Deaf people and give them the confidence to be an active part of society.

As the only nationwide provider of services to Deaf people, Deaf Aotearoa provides information on a range of services, including legal advice, education opportunities and employment issues.

Deaf Aotearoa also works with government agencies, businesses and other organisations to provide information and resources on life for Deaf New Zealanders, the Deaf community and NZSL.

Deaf Aotearoa:

- Promotes the advancement of human rights for Deaf people
- Celebrates NZSL
- Works with Dedication, Discipline and Determination to strengthen the rights of Deaf people

As a member of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), Deaf Aotearoa is accountable to the Federation’s principles – promoting the human rights of Deaf people in accordance with the objectives of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

For more information about Deaf Aotearoa and the services it provides please visit www.deaf.org.nz

For more information about learning NZSL please visit www.nzsign.co.nz