



Respecting the Deaf Community

Introduction:

While issues of communication may be the root of many behavior problems for students with hearing loss, it is important for teachers to look critically at the specific behaviors of the child. This includes racial and cultural differences (African American, Native American, Immigrant students in particular). Some behaviors are not an attempt at gaining attention, a manifestation of lack of understanding, or oppositional in any way. Instead, they emerge from the cultural differences between the Deaf and hearing communities. Deafness has a unique culture with its own social norms. Depending on the student's level of involvement in the Deaf community, some of the behaviors you see may be reflections of these social norms. This is especially true of students whose native language is American Sign Language (ASL), one of the key characteristics of a member of the Deaf community. Listed below are some social norms among the Deaf, as well as suggestions for interactions, as discussed by Humphrey and Alcorn (2001):

1. The hands are extremely important for communication in the Deaf community. NEVER touch or hold the hands of a Deaf student who uses ASL to communicate. This is the equivalent of placing your hand over the mouth of a speaking child;
2. Prolonged, sustained eye-contact is a key to communication among the Deaf. It is considered rude (not to mention difficult for those with hearing impairment) to carry on a conversation while doing something else. Averting eye-contact communicates disinterest or boredom. Be aware that this kind of frequent and sustained eye contact may feel uncomfortable to the teacher and mainstream students, but the Deaf student is acting within the norms of his or her own culture;
3. Connecting to the group is an important social norm among the Deaf. Activities in the Deaf community often start twenty to forty minutes after the given starting time to allow all members the chance for a brief social interchange with everyone. This applies to leave-taking as well. In the classroom, this may affect a Deaf student's ability to make the

adjustment from home to school each morning, transitions throughout the day, and leaving school to go home at the end of the day. Make sure the Deaf student is aware of the daily schedule and knows when to expect transitions.

4. Because of its highly visible nature, ASL is a very public language. There is no way to “whisper” in sign language, anyone present who knows ASL will understand what is being said. Thus, ideas about privacy are different in the Deaf community. Deaf individuals may tend to ask personal questions and share personal information readily. Very few topics are considered inappropriate for discussion. Understand that a Deaf student who engages in these behaviors is not trying to be rude but is communicating in an acceptable manner.
5. While the visible display of emotions is frequently discouraged in mainstream hearing culture of the United States, it is a critical component for communication among the Deaf. Because Deaf individuals usually cannot communicate emotions through tone of voice or volume, there may be a perception of strong emotions or easy agitation because of a more intense physical display of feelings. This is important both in interpreting the physical communication of a Deaf child *and* in considering your own body language and expressive communication.
6. Because the culture is based on visual rather than auditory signals, attention-getting in the Deaf community is also highly visual and tactile. A Deaf student may physically tap another person or use arm-waving as a means of getting the attention of a person or group of people. This behavior may be interpreted as being pushy or aggressive. Be sure to teach Deaf students directly how to seek attention, both from you and from other students in the classroom. Establish a method for acknowledging the students' request for attention and letting them know when you will be available to help.

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