

# Deaf Culture

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All cultures, including Deaf Culture have four components: language, behaviors, values and traditions. For deaf culture, vision plays a significant role in each of the four components. Deaf people rely strongly on their vision to communicate and gather information.

## Language

### American Sign Language (ASL) is:

- The preferred language of the deaf community
- A visual gestural language
- A language with its own syntax and grammatical structure

### American Sign Language is not:

- Signs in English word order
- An auditory or written language
- A universal language

Historically, ASL has been passed from one generation to the next in schools for the deaf. Even when ASL was not allowed in the classroom, deaf staff and peers discreetly used their cherished language to communicate. ASL has also been preserved through church and other social gatherings.

## Behaviors

### Making eye contact:

- Essential for effective communication
- Important because deaf people read the nuances of facial expressions and body language for additional information

### Getting a deaf person's attention:

- Hand waving is most common
- Tapping the shoulder or arm is acceptable
- Flickering lights on and off is also common
- Sending vibrations by pounding on a table or stamping on a wooden floor is done occasionally
- Using a third person to relay attention is sometimes used in a crowded room

### Meeting others:

- Greetings often include hugs instead of handshakes
- Conversations tend to include elaboration about lives and daily occurrences
- Conversations may include straight-forward opinions (frankness)
- There is an interest in other people's connection with the deaf community. They may ask if you are deaf or hard of hearing, if you have any deaf relatives or where you attended school (i.e., school for the deaf - residential school or mainstreamed -public school).



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**

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## Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division

651-431-2351 (V) • 888-206-6501 (TTY) • 651-431-7417 FAX • [www.dhhsd.org](http://www.dhhsd.org)

## Values

The following are highly valued and vital aspects of everyday living by the deaf community. Notice the value comparisons between people who are deaf and people who can hear.

### People who are deaf

- ASL
- Eyes (rely on vision)
- Hands/Signs
- TTY/Light Signals
- Flashing Lights
- Fax/Caller ID
- Residential/Mainstream Programs
- Deaf Clubs
- Interpreters
- Closed Captioning/Realtime Captioning

### People who can hear

- Spoken Language
- Ears (rely on hearing)
- Mouth/Speech
- Telephone/Ringing
- Sound
- Voice Mail
- Private/Public Schools
- Civic Organizations
- Speakers
- Dialogue

## Traditions

The traditions of the deaf community are a reflection of their cultural values. It is understandable that many of their traditions are based on the face-to-face gathering of Deaf people, because communication—the lifeblood of any culture—only happens visually in this community. The traditions materialize in the strong family-like ties and lifelong camaraderie that develops between individuals. Some examples include their strong devotion to residential schools for the deaf, community deaf clubs, churches, and local, regional and national deaf sporting events.

Traveling great distances to participate in or enjoy Deaf softball games, golf tournaments and bowling leagues is common practice. Deaf alumni eagerly return for their residential school's homecoming where banquets and entertainment events are filled with Deaf Folklore and ASL poetry, songs and joke-telling. Family milestone events for their classmates are attended as if the classmates were biological brothers or sisters.

Deaf-focused organizations such as the National Association of the Deaf and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf enjoy widespread participation. This is because they provide a social gathering opportunity, a mechanism for participation in the political and economic decision-making trends affecting deaf citizens and a means for grooming new leaders to carry on deaf community traditions.

*This information is available in other forms to people with disabilities by calling 651-431-2351 voice, 888-206-6501 TTY; for speech-to-speech telephone re-voice services, call 1-877-627-3848.*