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# Questions Parents Ask

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**THE CANADIAN HEARING SOCIETY  
LA SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DE L'OUÏE**



# QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK

As parents, you want to make fully informed decisions that are in your child's best interests and to gather and assimilate correct information about the choices available to your child and to you as a family. This will include meeting Deaf adults who can share their perspectives on life as a Deaf person. They can share what was positive and worthy of note in their education as young children with their families, as teens, as young adults in post secondary education, in the work place, as parents themselves and how they contribute to and enjoy society. They can also share the challenges they have faced as a Deaf child, adolescent and adult.

Here we will respond to seven frequently asked questions by parents of young Deaf children to introduce you to the issues as you journey to make your informed choices for your young child.

## **1. What is American Sign Language (ASL)? If ASL doesn't use speech, how is it a language? Do Deaf children need a speech model for language development?**

Sign language is a language of its own with its own vocabulary, grammar and social rules of use. Dr. William Stokoe (1960) was the first researcher to identify sign languages as separate languages with grammar independent of spoken languages. There are many sign languages in the world. In North America, the sign languages used by Deaf individuals are American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des Signes Quebecoise (LSQ).

Spoken languages such as English and French depend on the order of words to show nouns, verbs, etc., in sentences. They depend on the use of a linear, auditory stream of sound. In contrast, sign languages such as ASL and LSQ depend on a visual stream of spatial relationships, based on handshapes, how the palm of the hands face, location of the hands, movements and signals on the face (eye gaze, eyebrows and mouth movements) and body (head shift, body movement) (Gibson and Small, 1996).

The significance of any language is its role in understanding others and expressing oneself fully. "With the help of one's first language one can conduct complicated mental operations: take several factors into consideration at the same time, solve problems, store new information, determine the relationship between different pieces of information and so on." (Anderssen, page 90, 1994). With a full language one can express deep emotion, humour, needs and wishes as well as complex ideas without bound. The complexity and subtleties of any language allow for this full expression.

What does this mean for Deaf children? ASL and LSQ are capable of achieving all these roles of language without restriction. Because ASL and LSQ are visual languages, they can be acquired naturally and with ease by Deaf children and afford the possibility of full linguistic expression and comprehension without constraint or delay. With ASL and LSQ there is no language delay and linguistic complexity is fully achieved. Deaf children exposed to signed languages from birth such as ASL and LSQ, acquire these languages on identical time frames as hearing children acquiring spoken languages. From birth through age 3 years and beyond, speaking and signing children demonstrate identical stages of language development. These stages are as follows:

consonant-vowel productions	(4–6 months)
syllabic babbling (repeating the same syllable or hand shape)	(7–10 months)
variegated babbling (repeating varied syllables or hand shapes)	(10–12 months)
jargon babbling (continuous varied syllables or hand shapes)	(12 months and beyond)
first word stage	(11–14 months)
two word stage	(16–22 months)
grammatical and vocabulary development beyond the two word stage (Petitto, 2000)	

Manual babbling is differentiated from other excitatory manual gestures as it is produced more slowly and is not accompanied by excitatory leg movements. Vocal babbling of hearing infants is similarly produced without accompanying leg movements and more slowly than excitatory vocalizations. There is no modification, loss or delay with reaching any linguistic milestones in ASL or LSQ that are observed in spoken languages such as English or French (Charron and Petitto, 1987, Petitto and Marentette, 1990; 1991). This is supported by the work of many other researchers (e.g., Bellugi and Klima, 1982; Meier, 1991).

While it was previously believed that early language acquisition was neurologically determined by the maturation of the speech mechanisms, the manual babbling and subsequent language development of babies exposed to sign languages shows that speech readiness per se does not influence language development (Petitto, 2001). Instead infants are born with a sensitivity to the temporal patterns inherent in natural languages whether they are spoken or signed. Natural acquisition of a language comes from natural interaction between a child who begins these rhythmic patterns of a language and an adult who then builds on the child's pre-linguistic play.

Hearing parents and professionals often overlook the early sign language babbling of Deaf babies at a few months of age (Petitto and Marentette, 1991). However, Petitto's (2001) discovery points to the importance of well trained native users of ASL working with hearing parents who can identify this early sign language babbling, encourage its development in Deaf babies and model how parents and siblings can play with their young Deaf infants using ASL. Israelite and Ewoldt, (1992) have shown that Deaf children of hearing parents have potential to learn native sign language easily and naturally when given the exposure to it.

Ahlgren (1994) reported on the results of a study of the natural transfer of knowledge of Swedish Sign Language and Deaf culture from Deaf parents to hearing parents who were paired with each other. Cited by Gibson, Small and Mason (1997), Ahlgren's positive results (1994) led the Swedish Parliament to pass a law (proposition 1980/81: 100, supplement 12) stating that Deaf children must be educated in a way that fosters both Swedish Sign language and Swedish with an emphasis on literacy (Mahshie, 1995).

This program was expanded throughout Finland (Takala et al, 2000) resulting in families with Deaf children learning sign language, increased communication within the families, increased language in the children as well as contacts and friendships with Deaf adults established and among the children (Takala et al, 2000).

Approximately 90 percent of Deaf children have hearing parents. As mentioned in a medical journal article by Steven Barnett, M.D., "the experiences of Deaf children with hearing parents is quite different from children in most other minority groups. Communication between Deaf children and hearing family members is often quite limited ... such as being excluded from family dinner table conversations that are not being signed" (Barnett,1999). "Many Deaf children are unable to acquire the naturally occurring spoken language of their homes because they don't hear it and they are not exposed to sign language. This prevents them from fully participating in family member interactions that are crucial to their linguistic, cognitive and social development. They do not develop a strong linguistic base with which to express themselves"(Erting and Pfau,1999). Generally, this group of Deaf children enters school linguistically, cognitively and experientially well behind their hearing peers who have had the benefit of acquiring native language competence within their home environments (Griffith, Johnson and Dastoli, 1985). Exposure to sign language in the home reverses this effect as we see from the results reported by Ahlgren (1994) Mahshie (1995), Takala (2000) and Gibson, Small and Mason (1997). Deaf children with hearing parents exposed to sign language at an early age do achieve linguistic competence and milestones comparable to their hearing counterparts (Petitto, 2001).

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## 2. What is simcom? Should we use it with our Deaf child?

Simcom stands for "simultaneous communication" and uses signs and voice at the same time. Simcom has also been referred to as Sign Supported Speech (SSS), the Combined method, Pidgin Signed English and Total Communication (a combination of spoken English, signs used in English order, fingerspelling, visual aids, speech reading and writing) (Gibson, Small, and Mason, 1997). Simcom has also used artificial sign systems such as Seeing Essential English, (SEE1) and Signing Exact English, (SEE2) together with spoken English to try to present spoken language visually on the hands in an attempt to make it more accessible to the Deaf child or adult. It was thought that it would benefit both Deaf and hearing people in a conversation since both the spoken language and signs would be used. Therefore, both Deaf and hearing conversation partners could be comfortable using it. These artificial systems did not evolve through natural use in the community as did ASL and LSQ and all other languages. These systems were designed to represent spoken language and break down words into their component parts. For example "butterfly" would be broken down into "butter" and "fly". When shown on the hands it therefore changes the meaning of the word and is confusing for a young child or adult.

Simcom involves a variety of artificially invented sign-based codes that are not as efficient as natural languages. Simcom is a hybrid of two languages. It combines parts of spoken language structure and a part of signed language structure and so does not possess the full grammar of either of the two languages from which it is derived (Marmor and Pettito, 1979).

Any form of Simcom distorts both English and American Sign Language (ASL) as languages. Imagine trying to speak French and Italian simultaneously. Every language has its own grammatical structure, words evolve through use, and social rules develop for the use of this language. People do not typically attempt to say the same word in two languages at the same time as it is not physically possible. However, we naturally think we can combine a spoken language such as English with a manual language such as ASL since one is articulated primarily in the mouth and the other is articulated primarily on the hands. Much research has found that the integrity of both languages is lost when people do combine spoken English and ASL. When using Simcom, people produce signs in the order of the spoken language that necessarily eliminates use of ASL structure. Many signs are deleted and the spoken English used in Simcom does not follow the natural intonation patterns of English. Trying to combine American Sign Language with spoken English is like watching a written language performed in the air without any periods, commas, dashes or semi-colons, and without any clues about what is important. Most of the signs are performed with the same intensity (Hansen 1975) and the signed grammar that is naturally efficient and clear is missing.

Swisher (1984) examined the simultaneous communication of hearing mothers with their Deaf children. Six mothers who had been using simultaneous communication for at least two years were videotaped in their homes with their children who were between 4 and 6 years old. It was found that the mothers deleted an average of 40.5 percent of the signs from their utterances when they spoke while they signed. The young children in this study did not have any complete language fully accessible to them. The spoken language was still beyond their hearing reach and the sign systems used in Simcom were erratic and did not reflect the full grammar of any language.

In *Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in Deaf Education*, Johnson, Liddell and Erting (1989), demonstrated how adults using Simcom misarticulate signs in Simcom to the point where the signs often mean something else. The signs do not match the spoken words, and many signs were eliminated in an idiosyncratic way. Furthermore, adults in these situations "*generally believe that because they are signing, the children have access to the information put out in their speech*" (Johnson, Liddell and Erting, pp.7).

Johnson, Liddell and Erting site Paul (1988:3) in concluding that "*since the 1970's, most deaf students have been educated in Total Communication programs in which some form of signing and speech is used simultaneously for communication and instructional purposes. Despite improvement in the development of tests, early amplification, and the implementation of early intervention or preschool programs, most students are still functionally illiterate upon graduation from high school*" (p.2).

Although individuals intuitively think that Simcom can be helpful for Deaf children and their families because it encompasses both sign and spoken language, research does not support this.

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### **3. What are the effects of a sign language on learning another language and on the development of a spoken language?**

New research on the biological foundations of language show increased cognitive development and increased language with increased neurological activity in the language area of the brain regardless of modality (Petitto, 2001). This new evidence teaches us that the learning of a language is what is crucial rather than the learning of a spoken language per se. Petitto (2000; 2001) studied both hearing and Deaf bilingual children who were learning both spoken English and ASL, as well as spoken French and LSQ. She found no negative spoken language effects for both deaf and hearing children using ASL and LSQ on their spoken English and French. These results support the earlier neurological studies reported by Sacks (1989). Furthermore, Garcia, (1999) describes and reports positive results from ASL programs designed specifically for hearing children to facilitate their spoken English development.

Another body of research demonstrates that Deaf children with Deaf parents grow up with exposure to sign language and Deaf culture naturally in their home. They enter preschool programs ready to participate in the regular curriculum. Their knowledge and mastery of ASL serves as the conduit for learning to read and write English (Dragow, 1993; Mahshie, 1995) and they tend to achieve better academically than their Deaf counterparts with hearing parents. Israelite and Ewoldt cite numerous studies of deaf children of deaf parents outperforming deaf children with hearing parents in linguistic, academic and social achievement (1992, pp. 6–15). There is much evidence that their performance is equal to that of their hearing peers (Israelite and Ewoldt, 1992, pp. 16–23). There was no evidence that the acquisition of a sign language will interfere with your child's ability to learn speech. There are Deaf children of Deaf parents who can speak. We cannot stress enough that speech development is not equivalent to language acquisition.

Mahshie reports that when Deaf children increase their awareness of both a sign language and spoken language this can contribute to their emerging speech development in some children (1995, p. 32). As they increase their grasp of the meanings in the languages this can bring increased meaning to the task of developing their speech production and speech reading. Hansen (1980), echoes her comments.

As parents, you will have to decide if you want deep, meaningful communication with your child using a language that is comfortable and natural for him or her. This ease of communication is the key to your child flourishing in so many areas just as hearing children flourish from natural early exposure to a spoken language. Your Deaf child's ease with American Sign Language will not hamper their ability to develop a spoken language but can open the doors to increased world knowledge, ease of communication, expression of deep emotion and abstract thought and complex linguistic expression.

“Given that a sign language such as ASL is visual, if you use it with your child, you would give your child opportunities to be comfortable, be him or herself, to communicate freely and fully. Your baby can see, can touch, can get up and explore. He or she will learn language naturally. This is not to say your child will not be able to speak as well. What we do know is this... sign language as early as possible...from infancy through high school age, or the moment the child becomes Deaf . . . there is a culture with other deaf people . . . as you learn about it, your family will lead a rich full life”. (Priesler, 1990).

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#### **4. I have heard that my child will not go past a Grade 3 literacy level because he or she is Deaf. Is this true?**

In general, literacy levels of Deaf children in North America are significantly lower than literacy levels of hearing children. Deaf children with Deaf parents have outperformed Deaf children with hearing parents in academic achievement, literacy and social development (Israelite and Ewoldt, 1992). Yet, 90% of Deaf children have hearing parents. It is reassuring that in contrast to the findings in North America, literacy and overall academic levels of Deaf high school students in Sweden and Denmark, where sign language is mandated from early childhood, are on par with the literacy and academic levels of their hearing peers (Deaf Education Policies in Denmark, 1996, Svartholm, 1996) In North America this has not been so. Parents and siblings of Deaf children in North America have not had the sign language support they receive in Sweden and Denmark to be able to share literature with each other in sign language. Family literacy in American Sign Language (ASL) and English in North America is far below the family literacy in Swedish Sign Language and Danish Sign Language in Sweden and Denmark respectively where Deaf children's literacy is on par with their hearing peers. The results from the Deaf children raised in the Scandinavian countries provide much insight and hope for children and parents in North America (McClarey, 1995).

English text is a second language for Deaf children. While it is visually accessible, it is based on spoken English which is a verbal language based on sound. Spoken language is not fully accessible to Deaf children. American Sign Language however is fully accessible to Deaf children and can provide full linguistic competence, full access to knowledge and full exchange of deep emotions and complex ideas.

American Sign Language (ASL) literature refers to stories, legends, poems, riddles, humour and other genres told in ASL that have been passed down from one generation to another by culturally Deaf people. It arises from the thoughts, emotions and experiences of culturally Deaf people (Byrne, 1996). Since ASL is an unwritten language, ASL literature is of the "oral literature" tradition (Bahan, 1991), told through the air rather than written down. It is recorded on videotape, CD Rom, DVD, on film, and on the Internet.

Deaf literature refers to written stories, poems, songs, non-fiction and other genres, which include Deaf characters, Deaf culture, Deaf identity and Deaf experience written by Deaf people (Jacobowitz, 1998). The significance of Deaf literature to Deaf children is that they see themselves in what they read and can identify with it. The significance of Deaf literature to hearing children is that they learn about Deaf experience from Deaf people. This can reduce stereotypes, misinformation, and enrich hearing children's learning experience.

In 1993, the Ontario Ministry of education and training supported a bilingual policy in the three provincial schools for deaf children. That same year, the provincial government passed Bill 4 recognizing ASL and LSQ as languages of instruction for Deaf children in Ontario (Gibson, Small and Mason, 1997). School programs in Ontario now recognize the value of ASL and LSQ and how children's knowledge gained in these languages can be transferred to their literacy development in English and French respectively (Cummins and Danesi, 1990).

Cummins has demonstrated through much research with bilingual hearing children that cognitive development and academic knowledge gained in one language transfers positively when children are learning a second language (Cummins and Swain, 1986). The theory that has emerged from these findings is called the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Model and explains why children who have high literacy levels in their first language tend to also have high literacy levels in the second language to which they are exposed. Related to Deaf children it makes sense that if they have full access to world knowledge through a visual language like ASL or LSQ this can positively influence their literacy development in written English or French as they have already acquired the background knowledge needed to make inferences and to make sense of what they read in different subject areas in the second language.

This Common Underlying Proficiency Model of bilingual acquisition has been consistently supported by the findings of Collier (1992), Bialystok (1991), Garcia (1994), Genesee (1994) and others. Collier's review of the research demonstrates that academic skills, literacy development, conceptual formation, subject knowledge and learning strategies gained in acquiring their first language all transfer to the second language (Collier, 1995). Young children from a variety of linguistic backgrounds who have had schooling in their first native language reach age and grade level norms comparable to their native English speaking peers more quickly than children who have not had instruction in their first native language. In examining large sets of data across varied research sites, Collier (1995) found that the amount of formal schooling in the first language had the most significant effect on their performance in the second language, including literacy levels. This was true regardless of country of origin, socio-economic status and other student variables.

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## 5. What is literacy in American Sign Language and English?

There are many different perspectives on the definition of literacy. The definitions we cite have much current research to support them. As you examine our definitions of literacy think of how you, your family and your community can encourage literacy for your child.

We have included the three literacy levels as defined by Freire and Macedo (1987). Their framework is crucial in helping us to identify which literacy level we are encouraging with our Deaf children. Do we have the means to communicate with them using the language sophistication and cognitive concepts befitting a high level of literacy? What is our role in ensuring that critical literacy is being achieved? How can we expand the literary resources in our community and in our homes?

Literacy simply means "to be literate"; "to be educated or cultured" (Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature, 1995). Literacy is "having or showing extensive knowledge, experience or culture" (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary).

In 1965, UNESCO adopted the view that rather than an end in itself, literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing man [or woman] for a social, civic and economic role that goes far beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing. (Literacy, Gateway to Fulfillment, special issue of UNESCO Courier, June 1980 cited in the Oxford Companion to the English Language, 1992).

Freire and Macedo (1987) have provided an important framework for looking at literacy in our children. They identified three levels of literacy cited in McLaren, (1988):

- a.) Functional literacy is the technical mastery of particular skills necessary to decode simple texts such as street signs and instructions.
- b.) Cultural literacy involves familiarity with particular linguistic traditions or bodies of information. It includes acquiring knowledge of selected works of literature and historical information necessary to participate in the political and cultural life of a people.
- c.) Critical literacy is the ability to decode the ideologies embedded in texts and media such as television and film in order to reveal their selective interests and perspectives. It entails the ability to analyze and challenge unjust characteristics of a society so that a more equitable and democratic society can be created.

Literacy in both ASL and English involves true mastery of all three levels so that children:

- can decode in both ASL and written English
- can understand and appreciate the cultural significance of the literature they are exposed to in ASL and written English and
- can analyze, critique and respond to the values inherent in the literature they see and read in both ASL and English.

Deaf children gain ownership over literature when they see themselves in it, as in Deaf heritage literature that is written in English and has Deaf characters and experiences in it. It is empowering literature (Small, 2000). Children also gain ownership as they gain technical mastery of the literature as with a language they are comfortable in. Therefore, ASL literacy can provide positive experience and a foundation for English literacy and Deaf heritage literature can provide motivation and excitement for children's English literacy development.

How do we evaluate whether literature is positively empowering for our children? There is a good kit to help you get started. The *Freckles and Popper* videotape series (CCSD, 2000) and written parent guide (Small, 2000) shows different genres of children's ASL literature, how to share English literature using ASL, and how to identify and discuss empowering literature. This would be a good starting point to get you on the road to other ASL literature, deaf heritage literature and empowering literature for your young Deaf child. An acquaintance with Deaf characters in stories is one way for your child to identify with and make sense of his or her world. As she/he dwells in and wonders about the lives of the characters in the stories and how the stories were created, he or she will come to know himself or herself and the world, how to find his or her place in it and exercise control in it. It is a means of helping your child to extend his or her own life experiences, becoming more adventurous in the literature he or she is exposed to in ASL and in written English and in his or her life!

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## 6. What is bilingual bicultural Deaf education and what should I look for in a bilingual education program?

*“Bilingual bicultural Deaf education recognizes both the native sign language of the Deaf community and the majority language/s of the country in which the student resides. It also fosters Deaf culture and appreciation of the many cultures comprising the broader society” (Gibson, Small & Mason, 1997).*

*“Bilingual Bicultural education is first and foremost an empowering education”. “An empowering education teaches Deaf students to develop the confidence necessary to exercise their basic rights, accept their responsibilities, to advocate and to learn to participate in the decision making process.” (Malkowski, 1995).*

Bilingual bicultural programs for Deaf children should reflect an empowering educational environment both in their teaching and in the structure of the program. An empowering educational environment is one where Deaf and hearing staff model for the children:

- respect for one another
- collaboration in decision making and
- advocacy for the rights of Deaf children and adults within and outside of school

While there are many different models of how bilingual bicultural education could be implemented, all of them must have at its basis, a structure that reflects Deaf empowerment. This necessitates a model that incorporates the school environment, the residence, the home, the Deaf community and the hearing community. Together they create an enriching bilingual bicultural experience to encourage Deaf children to take active roles in their communities and eventually as empowered citizens in society. Here are some aspects of the program you can look for:

### The School Environment

- Deaf and hearing teachers would be using natural, fully accessible language with Deaf students; American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des Signes Québécoise (LSQ), for conversation and instruction throughout the day, whether they teach in the same classroom or in different classrooms.
- ASL would be recognized as the language of conversation, of instruction for all subjects and as a language that requires instruction of its own linguistics, its own literature (ASL poetry, stories, drama, tales and legends by Deaf people in ASL) as well as Deaf literature (by Deaf people in written English about Deaf experience).
- ASL literature would not occupy the margins of the curriculum. It would be integral to the program.

- The school environment would also provide much written English through printed materials in texts, computers, on blackboards, the visual PA system, through notes and TTYs. English literature would also play a key role and would be shared in print and through printed stories told in ASL.
- Deaf and hearing teachers would collaborate with one another whether they teach in the same classroom or in different classrooms. The system would be structured to encourage collaboration among all Deaf and hearing staff. This means that both Deaf and hearing people have a role in developing and promoting the cultural needs of the children.
- Deaf culture would not only be part of the curriculum from preschool through high school, it would be reflected in how decisions were made and in the school environment beyond the classrooms (such as in the hallways, lunchroom, and playgrounds) as well as in the residence and at home.
- Appreciation of other cultures that make up our society would also be highlighted, respected and nurtured in the school for mutual respect to develop among children whose families reflect the rich cultural diversity of our society.
- Staff would demonstrate an understanding of first and second language acquisition principles that they apply to their instruction in the classroom.
- Staff are knowledgeable about Deaf issues, Deaf history and Deaf culture. These become an integral part of the children's education and are integrated throughout the curriculum. Some examples include Deaf historical figures and events, prominent Deaf individuals and groups such as Deaf clubs, Deaf Olympics and the World Federation of the Deaf, knowledge of Deaf rights and Deaf experience.
- The school environment would be equipped with flashing lights for doorbells and alarm systems and with TTY's and flashing lights so that all phones provide equal access for Deaf and hearing people on campus, including classrooms, board rooms and offices. This provides access on the campus and an important model for children and adults regarding how to ensure full access in the community and at home as well.
- The bilingual bicultural school environment would also ensure availability of full time interpreters for meetings with staff, parents, students and visitors.
- Extra curricular activities are a vital component of school life and learning. Students love participating in Deaf sports teams, playing against each other in the schools with Deaf students as well as with hearing teams as well. These sports teams must be promoted. In the past, Deaf high school teams have played against hearing high school teams. Deaf teams have won championship games such as in football and other sports.

- Bilingual bicultural education is about providing a fully accessible environment for your child so that he or she feels central in his or her environment and has no barriers. A fully accessible language is needed for any child to acquire world knowledge. In his or her learning environment your child has the right to learn free of barriers. The right to learn spoken language must also be respected and would be provided in addition to the child's right to learn new information without barriers in the classroom. Spoken language would not take precedence over the need to ensure a fully accessible learning environment for all subjects (including ASL literature, written English, geography, math, etc.) for all children in the classroom. If a child or family wants to develop the child's spoken language skills it is their right to do so. Time and place would be set aside for spoken language development for children who wish to develop those skills. It would be provided in a way that does not interfere with classroom curriculum and full accessibility for all students. The classroom focus is on the learning of world knowledge for all students.

## Home or Residence

- Families can take advantage of many services in the community that support the bilingual nurturance of your child's development. In the province of Ontario, Deaf ASL Language and Literacy Consultants are available for parents of deaf and heard of hearing children for two years from the time of discovery. These consultants provide free ASL instruction, advice on ASL storytelling, sharing books using ASL, interaction with your child, the Deaf community and resources for you and your child. As your child grows older, you can continue to take ASL classes available through the Canadian Hearing Society and through some agencies that provide Deaf services. A qualified Deaf ASL instructor/ consultant may be hired by the family for personal instruction. Some provincial schools resource departments offer sign language classes as well. When a family from another country immigrates to Canada, the federal government subsidizes English as a second language instruction classes for both children and adults. They have a right to have English language instruction available to them and to communicate in Canada with depth and ease. Similarly, parents of a Deaf child whose most accessible language is ASL, have a right to communicate with depth and ease with their child. ASL classes ought to be subsidized for these families. Families can contact their local clubs to consider subsidizing ASL classes.
- Families can also hire a Deaf baby-sitter to provide a good language model for their child at a young age and to be a natural role model for the child and family. Families must be sure to check out references as is true for any baby-sitting situation.
- Visual technology in the home or residence is a key component for full access and full participation in home life. Visual technology to be installed includes TV caption decoders, TTY's, flashing lights for the doorbell and phone ringing. These are available through the Assistive Device Plan. Every five years they pay up to 75 percent for a TTY for a Deaf individual.

- Families are encouraged and are always welcome to participate in Deaf community activities. Examples are sports events, parties, ASL storytelling nights, summer camp, Deaf festivals such as Mayfest in Ontario and the many other Deaf community events.
- Families and residence are key in providing a literature rich home environment. Access to much ASL storytelling is critical and can be achieved by borrowing ASL storytelling videotapes from the provincial resource services library, and perhaps your local library and purchasing ASL videotapes from the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf book store and by going frequently to Deaf community events.
- Providing much visual written English is critical such as can be found through the use of TV caption decoders, TTY, written notes explaining where you are going or just notes for fun!
- Open communication at home using American Sign Language is so vital in your child being and feeling central in your family's life and in your family being central in his or her life. This barrier free visual language is the key to you ongoing nurturing growing and deepening relationship with your child throughout your lives.

## Deaf Community

- Bilingual bicultural education necessarily involves the Deaf community since they are the backbone of support for Deaf children and their families. The Deaf community uses ASL and so it naturally provides a free flow of communication for Deaf children and a wonderful natural way for families to grow in their use of ASL and understanding of Deaf people. Families are always welcome and form part of the Deaf community.
- The Deaf community runs organizations such as Sports Associations, Cultural Associations and Deaf Associations. Community events are organized throughout the year including Deaf sports, ASL storytelling, community celebrations, etc.
- The community advocates for the rights of Deaf people and celebrates Deaf culture, ASL as a language and its literature. The Deaf community is a vital resource for any bilingual bicultural school for Deaf students, for Deaf children and for their families.

## Hearing Community

- Local libraries can establish ASL centres with ASL storytelling videotapes, Deaf authors, Deaf publications (such as Silent News, DeafNation) and information about Deaf issues of concern and interest (such as cochlear implants) including a Deaf perspective.
- Libraries can arrange ASL storytelling time with interpreters so that hearing as well as Deaf children can enjoy ASL stories at the library.
- Libraries can be equipped with Deaf Heritage Kits available through the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf.
- Local city halls can be contacted to establish a separate fund to pay for interpreting costs for recreational classes such as cooking and quilting and for any special events such as parties or special guests. A contact person should be appointed to book an interpreter when needed in the community for these public activities or events.
- Deaf presenters can be contacted through Deaf community organizations to provide information on Deaf culture, the Deaf community, ASL literature and many other topics.

## Conclusion

The examples cited here are by no means exhaustive. They provide some indication of the many ways in which the school, home or residence, Deaf and hearing communities can provide accessible and enriching environments for every Deaf child. In so doing, Deaf children can enrich these environments with their full and active participation.

Bilingual bicultural education is about the learning of two languages and two cultures. It is about Deaf children appreciating who they are, feeling accepted for who they are and appreciating others. It is about developing their abilities to the fullest and becoming empowered to express them without bounds. Through an empowering bilingual bicultural education, Deaf children can meet the world with the wholeness of who they are.

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## 7. How do I choose a program for my child?

As a Deaf child, your child is a minority in our society. Your child is fortunate in that he or she has you to advocate and to teach him or her to advocate for himself or herself, as he or she gets older. Your child is also fortunate because, by virtue of being Deaf he or she and you can naturally be enriched by both American Sign Language and English, by the ways of Deaf people as well as the ways of hearing people. Your child can feel proud of who he or she is and what he or she has to offer our diverse society. Renowned bilingual educator and researcher, Jim Cummins, highlights an empowering education as the key factor in success for minority language children. Cummins and Danesi have outlined the necessary components for an empowering education for minority students in Canada. In *Denial of Voice: The Suppression of Deaf Children's Language in Canadian Schools* (Cummins and Danesi, 1990, p. 87), a framework is provided which can help guide you to find an empowering and inclusive educational program for your child. The framework identifies four areas for examination of the educational setting:

- Cultural/linguistic incorporation
- Community participation
- Interactive pedagogy and
- Advocacy oriented evaluation

In keeping with this framework, examine whether the setting you are considering, incorporates a visual language that is fully accessible and natural to your child. Does it include Deaf cultural experience, Deaf history, ASL and ASL literature as well as English literature, English texts, the multi-cultural experience of Canadian society and Canadian and world history?

Does the program encourage the participation of Deaf community members to share their history, literature and experience as well as your participation as parents? Does it legitimize both the Deaf community and you as parents to join together in school-wide events and to share your experiences with each other?

Does the school program encourage interactive, experiential learning and critical thinking in all areas of the curriculum?

Is the goal of assessments to advocate for the rights of your child and his/her educational needs rather than to label his/her possible weaknesses?

Anderson et al (1999) discuss the unique contributions of Deaf teachers and the importance of leadership development. Each Deaf child benefits significantly from access to Deaf role models and opportunities for their own leadership development. Deaf teachers can provide active support in a school or community environment. They can offer parent education from a Deaf perspective. A Deaf adult can be someone that your child emulates.

Renowned psycholinguist, Harlan Lane (1992) presents an educational checklist identifying the properties of successful programs for minority students developed by the Danish sociolinguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, one of the world's leading authorities on bilingual education. Check through this list adapted specifically for Deaf children and see how the programs you are considering for your child would fare.

1. The linguistic goal is two languages, i.e., ASL and written English or LSQ and written French. Is this promoted in the school you are considering?
2. The social goal is positive for the class as a whole and does not keep the Deaf child in a powerless subordinate position. Does the school have high expectations of your child's potential and future success?
3. Choice exists for learning different languages e.g. your school offers language courses such as Spanish or French. In Canada LSQ (Langue des Signes Quebecoise) as well as ASL may be offered or an exchange program with a bilingual school for Deaf students in another country, such as Sweden or Denmark may be a possibility.
4. The teachers are bilingual, well trained, are familiar with Deaf issues and have a positive connection with the Deaf community and parents.
5. Are bilingual materials available in your school? e.g., *Deaf Heritage in Canada* by Clifton Carbin (1996) offering a rich history of Canadian Deaf heritage, and a variety of ASL literature on videotapes.
6. Cultural content of the materials is appropriate for your child. e.g., ASL literature, Deaf literature, Deaf World News, etc.
7. The teachers are supportive rather than authoritarian. Can they communicate fluently with your child? Can the teacher explain things in depth so that discussion can take place?
8. Would your child be allowed to use ASL with pride?
9. Do the students have high self-confidence and do they know they have a good chance to succeed? Is this reinforced with high expectations of students?
10. Would your child's linguistic development in his or her first language be promoted? Do students learn language registers, different language art forms, etc?
11. Is there cognitively demanding subject matter?
12. Is there adequate exposure to the majority language (written English) and discussion of it in peer group contexts? It is essential that this is not only limited exposure.

13. Exposure to the majority language is at an appropriate level and of appropriate interest for the students' linguistic and cognitive proficiency. The material must be appropriately challenging.
14. Are students exposed to the majority language in formal contexts (e.g., an interpreted lecture) to learn the discourse structure of English presentation versus ASL presentation?
15. Are students exposed to Deaf cultural and literary events, Deaf arts presentations, Deaf sports events, etc?

You want your Deaf child to have the best education possible, to have all doors open to him or her, and to be able to explore all of life's possibilities. While you have no doubt met many professionals, you have probably met few, if any, Deaf adults whose perspectives have been shaped by years of firsthand experience. Certainly, you have more questions and over time you will have different questions. There are no definitive answers one person can have for you. We encourage you to feel comfortable approaching many Deaf professional adults as you move along your journey with your child.

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## GLOSSARY

### **Speech:**

- any aspect of oral communication involving vocal tract movements for sound production

### **Language:**

- a system of relatively arbitrary symbols and grammatical signals that change across time and that members of a community share and use to interact with each other, to communicate their ideas, emotions and intentions and to transmit their culture from generation to generation

### **American Sign Language (ASL):**

- a system of relatively arbitrary symbols and grammatical signals that change across time and that members of the Deaf community in Canada and the U.S. share and use to interact with each other, to communicate their ideas, emotions and intentions and to transmit their culture from generation to generation. ASL is a distinct language and is very different from written or spoken English. Signs for objects and concepts are rarely “finger-spelled” letters, but rather consist of rule governed hand shapes and arm movements for words arranged in space. Facial expression, eye gaze, head movements and body posture are also key to impart meaning in ASL. ASL has its own vocabulary, grammar, and its own social rules of use just as all languages do. ASL has its own way of organizing ideas in space, its own history and literature that reflects the unique heritage of Deaf people.

### **ASL Literature and ASL Non-fiction Texts:**

- “American Sign Language (ASL) Literature refers to stories, legends, poems, riddles, humor and other genres told in ASL that have been passed down from one generation to another by culturally Deaf people. It arises from the thoughts, emotions and experiences of culturally Deaf people” (Byrne, 1996)
- ASL non fiction texts refer to literature based on factual information, presented in ASL. Information is structured according to ASL discourse and so deaf children can follow it naturally and easily.
- Since ASL is an unwritten language, ASL literature and ASL non-fiction texts are of the "oral literature" tradition (Bahan, 1991), told through the air rather than written down. It is recorded on videotape, CD Rom, on film, or on the Internet.

### **Artificial Sign Systems:**

- devised by a small group of people to try to represent a spoken language on the hands. Unlike signed languages, artificial sign systems have not evolved through the natural use of a community of users over time and are not efficient as natural languages are. Sign systems do not have their own grammars and distort the meaning of words as words are broken down into parts.

**Bilingual Bicultural Deaf Education:**

- “Bilingual bicultural Deaf education recognizes both the native sign language of the Deaf community and the majority language/s of the country in which the student resides. It also fosters Deaf culture and appreciation of the many cultures comprising the broader society” (Gibson, Small & Mason, 1997). “Bilingual Bicultural education is first and foremost an empowering education.” “An empowering education teaches Deaf students to develop the confidence necessary to exercise their basic rights, accept their responsibilities, to advocate and to learn to participate in the decision making process.” (Malkowski, 1995)

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