

Communication Options: Speech? Sign? Both? What is Best for my Child?

Making a Decision

One of the most important decisions facing a family with a child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing is choosing a **communication method** (also called a **communication mode**). Recently a parent told us she was terrified of making this “critical, life-long decision.” This parent also wanted to know what the current research says about the best method of communication for children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.



Decisions about communication modes are not irreversible. We encourage families to remain open-minded and flexible. The needs of your child, and your family, change over time. Some families start with speech and sign language and later change to using only sign language as their child’s strengths and preferences become more obvious. Other families start with speech only, and then add sign language when they realize their child is not making enough progress. Still others decide to use speech only, and stay with that decision over time.

No one method has been scientifically proven to be best for all children.

Remember the Alberta Hands & Voices mantra: **whatever choice is best for your child makes that the right choice.**

As you think about how your family communicates now with your child and how you would like to communicate with him or her in the future, the best way to decide is to:

- be open to all communication modes
- ask questions

- talk to adults who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
- talk to other families with children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing; meet their children
- talk to professionals who know your child
- discuss, read, and obtain as much information as you can about the various methods

What Current Research Does and Does Not Tell Us

If you looked through scientific journals to try to determine what is the best communication method, you might soon find yourself feeling very confused. You would likely see the same number of research articles supporting an auditory/oral or auditory/verbal method as you would articles that support the use of sign language.

Some people may tell you that **their** method (American Sign Language (ASL), cued, oral, Signed Exact English (SEE), speech) is **best**. You should keep in mind that no **one** method has been scientifically proven to be best for all children. Your job is to discover, over time, the best method of communication for your child and family.

What research **does** tell us is that good early communication is related to the development of positive self-esteem and to later language-learning activities. Research consistently shows that early language stimulation **in any mode** during a child's first two or three years of life is important, **as is parent involvement**.

Adapted from:

[-Colorado Resource Guide, Colorado Hands & Voices, 2011](#)
[My Turn to Learn: A Communication Guide for Parents](#)

Speech and Language are Two Different Things

Most people communicate through spoken language, so there may be an assumption that these two things – speech and language – are the same, but there are differences.

Speech is the ability to make certain sounds with the mouth and voice. Language includes words and grammatical rules for building words, as well as rules for putting words together into sentences.

Language is meaningful. When a baby is babbling, it is an example of speech sounds without language; there is no meaning. When we read and write we are using language, but not speech. Using signed language is another example of language that happens without speech. The signs connect to ideas or thoughts and help people to understand the world and other people.

The ability to have thoughts and ideas is connected to language. Children can develop ideas and thoughts through spoken language and/or sign language. Language, whether it is oral or signed, allows us to connect with others.

Adapted from:

[-Educators' Resource Guide, Manitoba Education, 2009](#)

Deciding how to communicate with your child is a personal decision that only you and your family can make. Most parents want their child to develop age-appropriate communication and vocabulary skills. Thinking about the outcomes you want for your child will help you decide how you want to teach your child to communicate. Other factors to consider when exploring communication options include:

- Will the communication mode enable all your family members to communicate with your child?
- Do you feel comfortable with the amount of information you have received about all the modes/methods of communication? Have you

talked to a variety of people and heard a variety of perspectives on each choice?

- Is the communication mode in the best interest of your child? Does it allow your child to have influence over his environment, discuss his feelings and concerns, and participate in the world of imagination and abstract thought?
- Does the communication enhance your relationships with each other as a family? It should promote enjoyable, meaningful communication among all family members and enable your child to feel part of your family and know what is going on.
- Has the information you have received about communication choices been delivered to you in an unbiased manner? Are you looking at your choice of communication in terms of what will be best for your child and family, and not what someone has promised you about a certain method?

Adapted from:

[-Colorado Resource Guide, Colorado Hands & Voices, 2011](#)



How do you figure out the road you need to take to help your child achieve the outcomes you want for him? You need to gather all the information and then make a decision that you feel is best for now. This decision can always change as your child grows and shows you what works best for him. A **decision guide** is provided for you in the next section to help you find a starting point in the decision-making process, identify and explore your needs, and plan your next steps.

Communication options include hearing and speech, sign language, or a combination of modes and methods. Definitions are provided for you below. For more information and resources on communication options, refer to Hands and Voices Communication Considerations A – Z™ online at www.handsandvoices.org/ or in paper format as *The Book of Choice* available for purchase (one copy is available from the Alberta Hands & Voices Lending

Library). *The Book of Choice* also includes contributions from many parents and children about their personal experiences with communication and the decision process. You can also contact Alberta Hands & Voices for additional articles or books from their lending library.

Definitions (ordered alphabetically)

American Sign Language (ASL)

American Sign Language (ASL) is a fully developed, autonomous, natural language with distinct grammar, syntax, and art forms. Sign language can perform the same range of functions as a spoken language. “Listeners” use their eyes instead of their ears to process linguistic information. “Speakers” use their hands, arms, eyes, face, head, and body. These movements and shapes function as the “word” and “intonation” of the language. If parents are not Deaf, ASL training is necessary in order for the family to become proficient in the language.

Auditory-Oral (AO)

This method of teaching spoken language stresses the use of amplified residual hearing, speech and oral language development. Additionally, it places emphasis on speechreading (also known as lip-reading) and visual clues from the face or body of the speaker. Tactile methods may also be used to encourage the child to “feel” the sounds of speech through various techniques. Parents need to be highly involved with their child’s teacher and/or therapists to carry over training activities to the home and create an optimal “oral” learning environment.

Auditory-Verbal (AV)

This approach to teaching spoken communication concentrates on the development of listening (auditory) and speaking (verbal) skills. It emphasizes teaching the child to use his amplified residual hearing from listening devices (like hearing aids or cochlear implants) to the fullest extent possible. A high

degree of parent involvement is necessary as parents learn methods to integrate listening and language throughout daily routines. May include, but does not emphasize: natural gestures and speechreading.

Cued Speech

This system is designed to clarify speechreading by using simple hand movements (cues) around the face to indicate the exact pronunciation of any spoken word. Since many spoken words look exactly alike on the mouth (e.g., pan, man), cues allow the child to see the difference between them. Cued speech can be learned through classes taught by trained teachers or therapists. A significant amount of time must be spent using and practicing cues to become proficient.

Simultaneous Communication

Simultaneous communication occurs when a person uses sign language and spoken English at the same time. The signs used may be an exact match to the spoken message (**Signed Exact English (SEE)**). Or, a person may sign some, but not all, of the words in the spoken message (**Pidgin Signed English**). The words that are signed and the words that are spoken occur simultaneously. Parents must consistently sign while they speak to their child.

Total Communication (TC)

The term Total Communication was first defined as a philosophy, which included use of all modes of communication (i.e., speech, sign language, auditory training, speechreading and finger spelling). Today the term Total Communication is commonly interpreted as **Simultaneous Communication** (signing while talking). This philosophy led to the formation of manual systems (e.g., Signing Exact English or Signed English) that attempt to represent spoken English.

Adapted from:

[-Colorado Resource Guide, Colorado Hands & Voices, 2011](#)