



National Institute on Deafness and  
Other Communication Disorders

Research to improve the lives of people with communication disorders

## American Sign Language

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A young boy signs "I love you."

### **What is American Sign Language?**

American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, complex language that employs signs made by moving the hands combined with facial expressions and postures of the body. It is the primary language of many North Americans who are deaf and is one of several

communication options used by people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

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### **Is sign language the same in other countries?**

No one form of sign language is universal. Different sign languages are used in different countries or regions. For example, British Sign Language (BSL) is a different language from ASL, and Americans who know ASL may not understand BSL.

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### **Where did ASL originate?**

The exact beginnings of ASL are not clear, but some suggest that it arose more than 200 years ago from the intermixing of local sign languages and French Sign Language (LSF, or Langue des Signes Française). Today's ASL includes some elements of LSF plus the original local sign languages, which over the years have melded and changed into a rich, complex, and mature language. Modern ASL and modern LSF are distinct languages and, while they still contain some similar signs, can no longer be understood by each other's users.

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### **How does ASL compare with spoken language?**

In spoken language, words are produced by using the mouth and voice to make sounds. But for people who are deaf (particularly those who are profoundly deaf), the sounds of speech are often not heard, and only a fraction of speech sounds can be seen on the lips. Sign languages are based on the idea that vision is the most useful tool a deaf person has to communicate and receive information.

ASL is a language completely separate and distinct from English. It contains all the fundamental features of language—it has its own rules for pronunciation, word order, and complex grammar. While every language has ways of signaling different functions, such as asking a question rather than making a statement, languages differ in how this is done. For example, English speakers ask a question by raising the pitch of their voice; ASL users ask a question by raising their eyebrows, widening their eyes, and tilting their bodies forward.

Just as with other languages, specific ways of expressing ideas in ASL vary as much as ASL users do. In addition to individual differences in expression, ASL has regional accents and dialects. Just as certain

English words are spoken differently in different parts of the country, ASL has regional variations in the rhythm of signing, form, and pronunciation. Ethnicity and age are a few more factors that affect ASL usage and contribute to its variety.

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### **How do most children learn ASL?**

Parents are often the source of a child's early acquisition of language, but for children who are deaf, additional people may be models for language acquisition. A deaf child born to parents who are deaf and who already use ASL will begin to acquire ASL as naturally as a hearing child picks up spoken language from hearing parents. However, for a deaf child with hearing parents who have no prior experience with ASL, language may be acquired differently. In fact, nine out of 10 children who are born deaf are born to parents who hear. Some hearing parents choose to introduce sign language to their deaf children. Hearing parents who choose to learn sign language often learn it along with their child. Surprisingly, children who are deaf can learn to sign quite fluently from their parents, even when their parents might not be perfectly fluent themselves.

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### **Why emphasize early language learning?**

Parents should introduce a child who is deaf or hard-of-hearing to language as soon as possible. The earlier any child is exposed to and begins to acquire language, the better that child's communication skills will become. Research suggests that the first few years of life are the most crucial to a child's development of language skills, and even the early months of life can be important for establishing successful communication. Thanks to screening programs in place at almost all hospitals in the United States and its territories, newborn babies are tested for hearing before they leave the hospital. If a baby has hearing loss, this screening gives parents an opportunity to learn about communication options. Parents can then start their child's language learning process during this important early stage of development. For more information, see the NIDCD fact sheet [Communication Considerations for Parents of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children](#).

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### **What research is being done on ASL and other sign languages?**

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication

Disorders (NIDCD) supports research looking at whether children with cochlear implants become bilingual in spoken language and sign language in the same way that (or in different ways from how) hearing children become bilingual in both languages. This research will tell us more about how language development in children with cochlear implants might differ between hearing and nonhearing families and could offer important insights to help guide educational decisions and parent counseling.

An NIDCD-funded researcher is studying Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), a sign language used over the past 75 years by both hearing and nonhearing people in an isolated Bedouin village in Israel. Because it was developed among a small group of people with little to no outside influence and no direct linguistic input, ABSL offers researchers the opportunity to document a new language as it develops and evolves. It can also be used to model the essential elements and organization of natural language.

Another NIDCD-funded research team is also looking at sign language systems that develop in isolation. The research team is learning more about how grammar is built and expanded in situations where there is little linguistic input. In one setting they are observing “home sign” systems used by deaf children who live in isolation. In another, they are studying a family sign language that has been used and handed down over several generations on a remote fishing island.

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### **Where can I get more information?**

The NIDCD maintains a directory of organizations that provide information on the normal and disordered processes of hearing, balance, taste, smell, voice, speech, and language. Please see the list of organizations at [www.nidcd.nih.gov/directory](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/directory).

Use the following keywords to help you search for organizations that can answer questions and provide printed or electronic information on American Sign Language:

- [American Sign Language](#)
- [Deaf culture](#)
- [Cued speech](#)

For more information, additional addresses and phone numbers, or a printed list of organizations, contact:

**NIDCD Information Clearinghouse** 1 Communication  
Avenue Bethesda, MD 20892-3456 Toll-free Voice: (800) 241-  
1044 Toll-free TTY: (800) 241-1055 Fax: (301) 770-8977 E-mail:  
[nidcdinfo@nidcd.nih.gov](mailto:nidcdinfo@nidcd.nih.gov)

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