

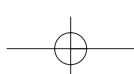
Part Two:
Understanding Deaf Culture



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The Deaf Community

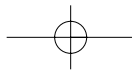
A community is a wide network of people who share a culture that is based on a long tradition of common experience. What particularly makes the Deaf community distinct is their strong sense of identity as being a Deaf person, and a shared use of a common language - sign language. In our country, this is New Zealand Sign Language (*or N.Z.S.L. see next page also*). However, the Deaf community is not static. With the introduction of advanced technological aids (hearing aids and cochlear implants) some members of the Deaf community are able to speak, listen and interact using spoken language, and still identify themselves as being Deaf.

The New Zealand Deaf community includes a strong network of social, sporting, religious and political organisations all over the country. Most members were born deaf or became deaf early in life. There are also some hearing members, including friends, family members and those who work with Deaf people, such as interpreters and community workers.

The Deaf community is often very social and hosts activities which revolve around key events such as the New Zealand Deaf Games (held Labour Weekend every year), Deaflympics (every four years in a different country) or other national and international gatherings of Deaf political and cultural organisations.



To find out about your local Deaf community, the Deaf Association of New Zealand has a full list of organisations at www.deaf.co.nz or check the phone book under 'Deaf Association' or 'Deaf Society'.



New Zealand Sign Language (N.Z.S.L.)

N.Z.S.L. is a visual socio-cultural language with its own grammatical structure. It is a complete language capable of communicating a full range of ideas. It uses a variety of hand movements which make optimal use of space about the body. The signs that are used show meaning through hand shape, orientation, movement and location. Accompanying these signs are facial expressions, lip patterns and a system of body postures which are essential elements of the language. N.Z.S.L. is one of New Zealand's community languages, and a comprehensive dictionary was published in 1998. N.Z.S.L. is taught in universities and adult education classes. (see also *N.Z.S.L. for Starters* page 58)



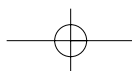
You don't always have to know N.Z.S.L. to have a conversation with a signing Deaf person. Many have some lip-reading skills, so face them and speak clearly - without slowing down or distorting your speech. Another option is to use a pen and paper, or if you don't have any, write/draw in the air.

In New Zealand - In 2003, the Government signalled its intention to introduce a bill to recognise N.Z.S.L. as one of the three official languages of New Zealand, after English and Maori. The Maori Deaf community has also developed Maori signs with a number of signs appropriate to Maori language and culture.

Internationally - Most countries have their own sign language, so when Deaf people from different countries gather for conferences and sporting events they communicate through a specially devised 'International Sign' system, similar in purpose to Esperanto. Years of experience trying to communicate with those who don't understand sign language, makes most deaf people very inventive, flexible and imaginative communicators. So it is comparatively easy for them to work out the fundamentals of each other's sign languages and learn to communicate with each other much more rapidly than most hearing people would in similar circumstances.

"A Teacher of the Deaf started working with Niue Junior and introduced him to using New Zealand Sign Language, and right away he responded. From that time on, his understanding developed and it changed the way he learned. He started to play with other children. And this was the first time he started responding positively to other adults outside of the family. I wish I had met the people who introduced us to sign language much earlier on." (see *Niue Junior's story* on page 72)

"Because both Ben and I are Deaf, we have been very heavily involved in the Deaf community. Many of our family members are deaf, our friends are deaf and we are very comfortable about it... It is important for all deaf children to be flexible within both the Deaf community and the hearing community ... Now Ben is able to move happily among Deaf and hearing people, his partner is hearing." (see *Ben's story* on page 91)



Deaf Identity

Children usually associate themselves with members of the Deaf community either through personal and family choice, or because they recognise a commonality with it. However, children who have no previous links may also be attracted to the Deaf community, particularly as they get older and start searching for a sense of self identity. When this happens, parents can sometimes find it unsettling:

- *"But why, after all those years that we and the teachers put into helping our deaf child to speak, hear and get along in the hearing world, do they end up spending so much of their time with other Deaf people? Does that mean we failed or that they can't survive out there in the hearing world?"*
- *"Will I be judged or get a hard time about the choices we have made for our child?"*
- *"Will I lose my child to a culture that I'm not a part of?"*

There are many opportunities for parents of young deaf children to meet with Deaf adults and other Deaf children. With genuine communication and acceptance, living with Deaf and hearing cultures can be an enriching experience. Most parents who avail themselves of such opportunities can find this community a vital resource in bringing up their children and discovering more ways to enjoy them.

It is not always obvious how much time Deaf people spend interacting with hearing people, such as at work, studying and training, conducting the business of everyday life, and being with their families. In New Zealand Deaf adults work in most professions:

Authors/Poets/Journalists	Accountants	Brewers	Carpenters
Computer programmers	Doctors	Draught persons	Educators
Engineers	Entrepreneurs	Farmers	Graphic artists
Joiners	Lab. technicians	Nurses and Midwives	Maintenance workers
Managers	Mechanics	Ministers	Office workers
Postal employees	Printers	Psychologists	Social workers
Teachers	Tennis Coaches	Arborists	University Lecturers

For many, the confidence and knowledge to do this effectively comes from their participation in the Deaf community. This gives them a feeling of group 'belonging', the opportunity to meet and become friends with a wide variety of people with whom they have no communication difficulties. This sense that you are part of a group is important to everyone, and we all gravitate towards people who reinforce these feelings in us.

"Last year a Deaf support person started working with our family. I felt great confidence working with the Deaf support person. This is because she is Deaf, and someone who knows how Niue Junior feels about being Deaf and being different to other people in our family." (see *Niue Junior's story on page 72*)

"Rachel's Deaf culture is very important to her. I used to say to her, "Do you mind being deaf?" and she'd say, "No". And I'd say, "Don't you wish you could hear?" and she would say, "Maybe half, but being Deaf is me." Naturally, she has good self esteem and she has friends that all follow the same culture." (see *Rachel W.'s story on page 87*)

Dynamics of Deafness

A Deaf person usually perceives the world through their eyes rather than their ears, so the culture has evolved behaviours and values that reflect this.

There are effective ways for Deaf people to gain each other's attention, take turns in conversations, 'interrupt' appropriately, and introduce newcomers to the conversation. Many arrange their living environments for ease of visibility, such as putting chairs around round tables rather than square, strong indoor lighting, having plain walls rather than ones with patterned (distracting) wallpaper, and having electronic equipment such as Teletext TV or fax machine installed.

Deaf people may avoid 'visual noise' in restaurants or gathering in places where flashing or flickering lights are distracting. In their homes, flashing lights indicate doorbells or phones ringing, babies crying, or alarm clocks going off. To experience flashing lights can be irritating, much the same as constant meaningless noise irritates those who can hear. Visual noise can also be people or traffic moving.

Correcting Assumptions about the Deaf Community

ASSUMPTION	CORRECTION
Deaf people are unhappy about their deafness.	Deaf people are rarely unhappy about being deaf, though they may feel frustrated by discrimination and obstruction.
Sign Language should be discarded in favour of speech wherever possible.	N.Z.S.L. is an officially recognised community language. Those who use it are proud of their language and usually wish to promote its use and acceptance, not discard it.
Deaf people are dependent on others, and need assistance with everyday tasks.	The vast majority of Deaf people go about their daily lives with minimal assistance from others. They hold down jobs, bring up families and participate in the community - and yes, they can drive!
Those working with Deaf people do so from charitable motives.	Teachers, interpreters and welfare workers are usually professionals whose career choices are affected by the same mixture of motivations and experiences as everyone else.
Deaf people cannot hear or speak at all.	There is a significant variation in what Deaf people can hear, with or without hearing aids or cochlear implants. A Deaf person's vocal cords are the same as a hearing person's.
All Deaf people can lip-read.	Lip-reading is an inexact process which depends heavily on knowledge of the language being lip-read. Only 30-40% of words can be lip-read clearly.
The lack of speech indicates a lack of intelligence.	Absence of speech bears no relationship to absence of intelligence.
Deaf Adults always have deaf children	Only approximately 10% of deaf children have Deaf parents.