Deaf culture and Auslan (Australian Sign Language)

What language does the Australian Deaf community use?

Deaf people throughout the world use different sign languages, just as hearing people use different spoken languages depending on their country of origin.

Auslan is a unique language used in the Australian Deaf community and is not the same as English. It has its own distinct grammar and sentence structure, cannot be spoken and has no written form.

Meaning is conveyed by signs which are made using precise hand shapes, facial expressions and body movements that convey information. Finger spelling is used where no sign exists, for example to spell the name of a place or person.

A Deaf person may have problems understanding English, whether spoken or written, because English is often a second language for many Deaf people.

Signed English is very different from Auslan. Signed English is a manual representation of English, word for word. It is not a unique language but more like a ‘sign code’. The signs used are often artificial and are not a part of the sign vocabulary of the Deaf community.

If you are working with a Deaf person, always take the time to learn which communication techniques work best for them each time you interact with them. Be open-minded, flexible and use all available avenues to enhance communication.

What are the values and behaviours in Deaf culture?

The Deaf community has its own unique culture and is more similar to a culturally and linguistically diverse group than a disability group.

They also have their own values that include:

- placing importance on what school they attended—this affects their communication styles and provides a background for shared history
- placing importance on Deaf events such as Deaf sports, festivals and parties.

The Deaf community also demonstrate particular behaviours such as:

- referring to people who are not Deaf as ‘hearing’
- gaining a Deaf person’s attention by visual or tactile means, for example flicking the light switch, stamping on the floor or tapping them on the upper arm
- nodding as a means of acknowledging you are talking to them, not necessarily agreeing with or affirming what is said
- using visual alerts, for example flashing lights or vibrating alarms
- accessing captioned popular media (for example movies and television) and training materials
- pointing at a person they are talking about if they are present—which is not considered rude in the Deaf community
- using ‘name signs’ to describe a particular person, such as a descriptive sign of that person’s feature (for example hooked nose or curly hair), habits (for example hand on hip or twiddling a moustache), an initialised sign (for example ‘K.L.’ or ‘P.B.’), or a combination of all of these
- approaching each person individually to say goodbye rather than a general ‘goodbye everyone’ which not everyone may see—often called the ‘long goodbye’ in Deaf culture.

For more information

For more information about Deaf culture and Auslan, visit www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/mentalhealth/damh.asp.