

Module 4: Launching Language and Communication Through Sign

Section: Sign as the Primary Language



Activity 4.3: Educating Families About American Sign Language (ASL)

A. Guide families in understanding that ASL:

- is a complete and complex natural language;
- is a manual, visual, and spatial language;
- has its own syntax and grammar and is based on five parameters: 1) handshape, 2) palm orientation, 3) location, 4) movement, and 5) facial expressions; and
- is officially recognized as a language, is used in North America, and is often taught as a foreign language in schools.

B. Share evidence about the benefits of using ASL. Include points such as:

- If a child cannot fully access spoken language through listening, then ASL is a language he or she can fully access visually.
- ASL provides the opportunity for a child who is deaf or hard of hearing to establish strong early language foundations, avoid language delay, and develop linguistic, cognitive, and social emotional skills in a timely way.
- The window of opportunity for facilitating language development is similar for both ASL and spoken English. It is important not to delay promoting language acquisition in ASL until a child is older and is already language deprived or delayed but to promote it at an early age when young children typically learn language.

See supporting reference list from the Clerc Center webcast: [Maximizing Language Acquisition: ASL and Spoken English](#) and [VL2 Reference List: Dispelling Myths of Language Acquisition](#).

C. Share considerations related to the documented experiences of **deaf children of deaf parents** who use ASL, including:

- the positive language, literacy, and academic outcomes of children growing up with accessible communication in the home through ASL;
- the various strategies and insights used by deaf families to support visual language acquisition (e.g., directing and managing visual attention, modifying interactive styles to match the visual needs of deaf infants); and
- how ASL does not hinder spoken language development for deaf children of deaf parents who have access to spoken language (when they are provided opportunities to access and use spoken language).

For supporting evidence on this topic: [Early Intervention Network, Factor 3](#).

D. Dispel a common misconception that hearing families cannot effectively learn and use signed language to facilitate their child's language development:

- Discuss the evidence indicating that when provided with support, hearing families can effectively learn ASL to promote their child's language acquisition in a timely manner. (See evidence from [Early Intervention Network; Factor 3](#).)
- Encourage families in understanding that they do not have to become fluent in ASL overnight to be able to facilitate their child's access to language visually.
- Discuss the varied ways that hearing families can learn ASL. (See Activity 4.5.)

Other Resources:

- [Advantages of Early Visual Language](#)
 - [VL2 Reference List](#)
 - [Language Production & Perceptions: What Every Parent of a Deaf Child Should Know About Sign Language](#)
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Developed with [Stacy Abrams](#)