

IDENTITY

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Introduction

This section explains identity development and issues faced by students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Students feel welcome and develop a sense of belonging when the teacher provides opportunities for interacting, sharing personal information, and building connections with others. The teacher can help students feel comfortable in the classroom by establishing effective communication.

“The importance of building self-esteem in children who are deaf/hh is directly related to mental health, success in school, and ultimately success in life.”

(Janet DesGeorges, mother of a child who is Deaf)

Identity Development

Identity, or the representation of the self, is developed over time. Many factors contribute to the way students develop their identities: two important ones are their feelings and the feedback they receive from others. Communication (language) is also key in identity development. As students grow, they learn what it means to be DHH in the world around them.

The process of developing their DHH identity is complex and will vary from student to student. Identities emerge as students interpret similarities and differences between themselves and others. An important factor is how students believe these similarities and differences are viewed by significant people in their lives (e.g., parents, siblings, teachers, classmates). When students interact with and observe the people around them, they receive direct and indirect information about what it means to be DHH.

Types of Identity

Students may have many different identities, depending on the feedback about themselves that they have received from others (Glickman; Frasu). Some students may identify with the hearing culture, some with the hard of hearing, and some with the Deaf culture. A sense of identity and belonging may be based on the student's ability to communicate in a common language and to share values, beliefs, customs, and so on.

The characteristics and ways of communicating associated with the different identities are outlined in the following table.

IDENTITY	CHARACTERISTICS	COMMUNICATION
Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ relates to world as a hearing person■ may use hearing aids/cochlear implants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ typically uses speech and listening to communicate
Hard of Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ identifies as part of a unique group (hard of hearing), rather than hearing or Deaf■ may also assume either a hearing or Deaf identity, depending on the listening situation/communication partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ typically uses speech and listening■ may use American Sign Language (ASL) in addition to speech/listening■ may use sign supported speech
Deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ identifies as part of a unique cultural group (Deaf Culture) with its own language (ASL), history, traditions, norms, arts, values, and so on	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ communicates primarily in ASL

The term *hearing impaired* "is not acceptable in referring to people with a hearing loss. Hearing impairment is a medical condition . . . It also fails to recognize the differences between the Deaf/Hard of hearing communities." (Canadian Association of the Deaf, terminology deafness.asp)



Unsure what to call a student who is Deaf or hard of hearing? Ask the student what they prefer!

“It is culture that usually gives people their sense of identity, whether at an individual or group level.”
(Fitzgerald 59)



Language is the power to understand culture.

Some students have a fluid identity and assume either a hearing, hard of hearing, or Deaf identity, depending on the listening situation/communication partner. Other students may struggle to establish their identity. They may have difficulty fitting in with the hearing world due to communication challenges. They may miss incidental conversation and not understand sound-based concepts. Alternatively, they may have difficulty fitting in with the Deaf world. They may have limited ASL skills and little or no understanding of Deaf culture. Educators need to support students in developing communication skills and a healthy self-concept.

Students determine their identity as hard of hearing or Deaf individuals. When referring to these students, person-first language is preferred (e.g., students who are DHH), as it identifies the student first and the exceptionality second. If the student has a cultural and linguistic identity, saying “Deaf student” is acceptable because it recognizes the unique characteristics and culture of the Deaf.

Deaf Culture

Students who identify themselves as culturally and linguistically Deaf may be involved in the Deaf community.

The Deaf community is made up of people who are DHH. Belonging to the Deaf community does not require a specific amount of hearing loss—it requires a way of knowing and experiencing the world as being Deaf.

Deaf culture is the heart of the Deaf community. Language (ASL) is at the core of Deaf culture. The following illustration outlines some of the key components of Deaf culture:

Marlee Matlin, Deaf actor/author, won an Academy Award for her leading role in *Children of a Lesser Good* and has written an autobiography and children's books.

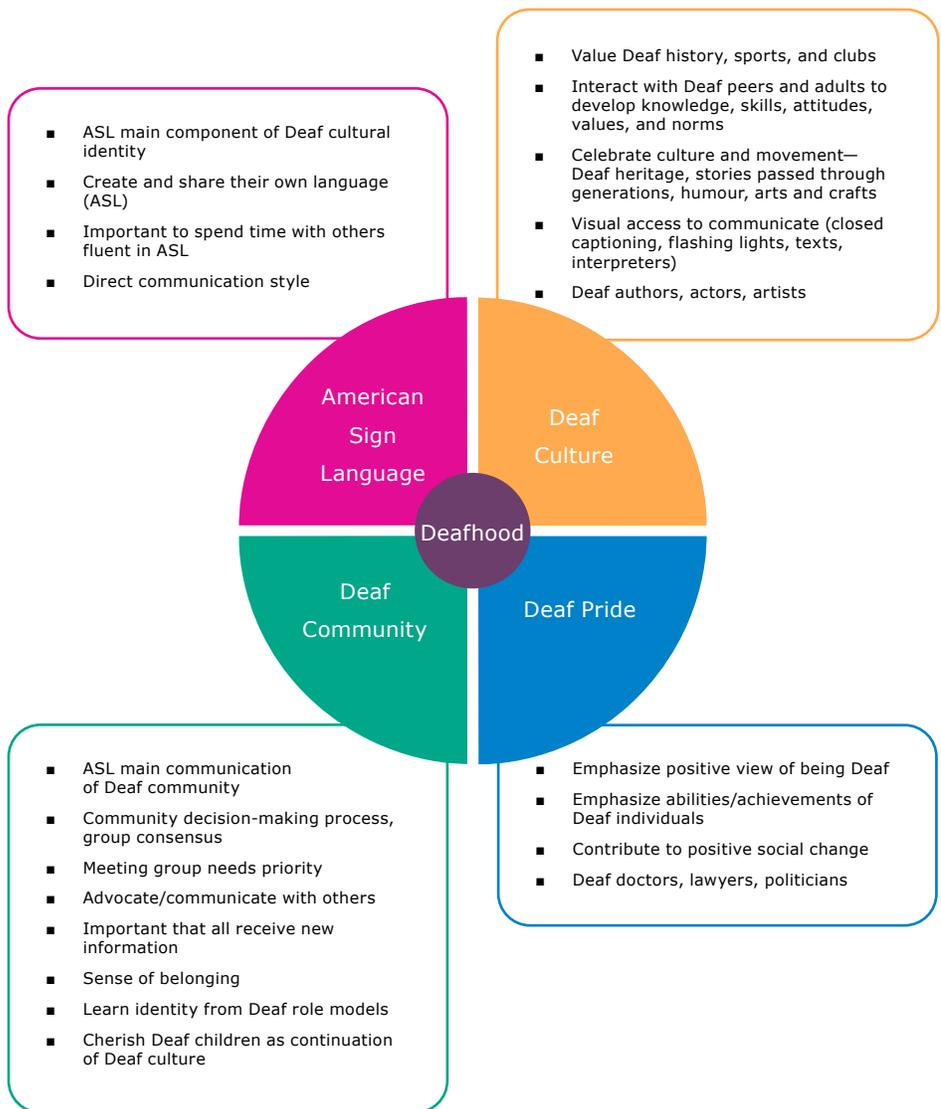
Tom Humphries coined the word *audism* in 1975 to mean an attitude or belief that people who hear and speak or have good English language skills are superior. This applies whether the person who hears and speaks is Deaf or hearing.

Deafhood

is a sense of self-acceptance as a Deaf person and as belonging to the Deaf community.

Figure 9

Deaf Culture



There are some commonalities that identify, in part, Deaf culture:

- communication—eyes, hands, email, texting, video phones, lights for doorbells and alarms, and so on
- language—American Sign Language
- Deaf history, folklore
- Deaf community—social groups, athletic teams, faith groups, service organizations
- Deaf Way—common behaviours, such as sharing information, problem solving, community consultation



Low self-esteem may become an issue. For some students, exposure to Deaf culture and direct remediation or teaching in areas of weakness may prove helpful.

Self-Esteem

Students with varying levels of hearing loss may experience feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. Often this may be due to a lack of communication access in various situations:

- students who are hard of hearing in a hearing environment who may not hear and/or understand all of the conversation
- students who are Deaf and use ASL in a hearing environment with no ASL interpretation provided
- a hearing individual who does not sign in a Deaf signing environment

The following illustration represents how a lack of communication access may lead to isolation:

Figure 10 **The Loneliness of a Deaf Child**



Source: Niemann, Sandy, Devorah Greenstein, and Darlena David. "Chapter 1: Hearing Difficulties and Communication—Why Communication Is Important." *Helping Children Who Are Deaf: Family and Community Support for Children Who Do Not Hear Well*. Illus. Heidi Broner. Berkeley, CA: The Hesperian Health Guides, 2014. 1. http://en.hesperian.org/hhg/Helping_Children_Who_Are_Deaf:Why_communication_is_important. Reproduced with permission.

Communication access and an inclusive environment are vital for students to feel connected and to build their identity and self-esteem.

It is important to be sensitive to issues around self-esteem and to develop healthy self-esteem and self-advocacy skills in students. Specific suggestions in each of these areas are provided on the following pages.

Supporting the Development of a Healthy Self-Esteem

All students face situations where they have to deal with other peoples' beliefs and behaviours. The following ideas can support students in developing a healthy self-esteem:

Instead of	Try This
talking in front of a signing (ASL) student	ensure that an interpreter/notetaker is available for all classroom conversations and activities
telling a student "I'll tell you later" or "It's not important" if they have missed information or have been left out of a joke or a side conversation	ensure that the student understands the interaction in the moment it happens
whispering (putting your hand or other object in front of your mouth to prevent the student from seeing what you are saying)	leave the room or find a different location to have a private conversation
speaking to the interpreter rather than directly to the student (e.g., asking the interpreter to "tell him" or "tell her" something, or asking the interpreter why the student was late or absent)	communicate directly with the student and maintain eye contact (the communication is with the student—the interpreter is providing the visual translation)

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is closely related to identity, self-esteem, and independence. Effective self-advocates are passionate and persuasive, knowledgeable and resilient, empowered and able to make informed choices that will affect their destiny.

A variety of resources and checklists regarding student self-advocacy skills are available online. Please contact your TDHH, ASL consultant, or AV therapist for further information.

Here is one example:

- Laurent Clerc Center National Deaf Education Center, *Transition Skills Guidelines* (information on student communication, thinking skills, life planning, and emotional intelligence): <http://clerccenter2.gallaudet.edu/products/?id=216>.

Ideas for Students to Become Self-Advocates

- Be self-aware.
- Be assertive.
- Be knowledgeable regarding the history and culture of people who are DHH in Canada and worldwide.
- Understand own hearing loss and communication needs.
- Understand own rights within society and the law.
- Be knowledgeable regarding technology and assistive devices (e.g., hearing aids, wireless audio systems, Bluetooth streamers, video conferencing, texting).
- Understand the difference between ASL and English-based sign systems.
- Understand the roles of and provide feedback to service providers (e.g., interpreters, computerized notetakers, audiologists).
- Request appropriate access services (e.g., ASL-English interpreter, computerized notetaker, peer notetaker, audio system).
- Have frequent opportunities to discuss access issues with others who have shared the same experience.
- Have frequent contact with role models who are DHH, including adults in positions of leadership and influence.
- Connect with local organizations for the DHH, and have access to relevant publications.
- Have frequent opportunities to affect the environment, make decisions, and experience leadership—at home, at school, with peers, in the workplace, and so on.
- Know the system (e.g., family, school, work, municipal, provincial, and federal networks) and appropriate avenues to effect change.
- Be a self-advocate—make own needs known to others.
- Identify barriers to access and equality.

Ask, if you don't understand.

Supporting Parents of Students Who Are DHH

Counselling supports children and families in the development of self-confidence, self-worth, self-advocacy, risk taking, perspective, and sense of humour. (Edwards)



Seek out other families!

Ninety-two percent of children with permanent hearing loss are born to two hearing parents. (Mitchell and Karchmer)

The identification of a hearing loss in a child can be a time of stress and worry for a family. Feelings of grief, loss, fear, and denial are not uncommon.

Families will need both information and emotional support. These needs are ongoing and will change over time as, for example, families choose communication strategies, make transitions, and deal with changing technology.

If the child is to develop a healthy identity and self-concept, it is important that the parents move from grieving to acceptance. Parents may ask the classroom teacher for advice and support. The school team can provide information that supports the development of the whole student and helps parents understand the importance of having a strong language foundation. Language gives students the building blocks for social interaction and is the key to identity development. If a student learns language and meets developmental benchmarks for language at the same rate as their hearing peers, it is likely that they will develop on track in other areas of development as well.