

# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## American Sign Language

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American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual language expressed by the shape, placement, and movement of the hands, as well as facial expressions and body movements. It is predominately used in the United States and parts of Canada. Like spoken languages, ASL contains specific rules about the fundamental features of language, including pronunciation and grammar. When signing with others, it is important to know that ASL contains regional accents and dialects. Some common variations include the rhythm of signing and differences in signs used.

When a person doesn't know the sign for a word, they may use fingerspelling in which each letter corresponds to a distinct handshape. It is more important to sign clearly, even if you have to do it at a slower pace. The focus of the communication is to get your message across and to be understood. If you are asked to repeat yourself when signing, it is a signal that you should slow down and try to sign as clearly as possible.



### Importance of Early Language

Parents are often the source of a child's early acquisition of language and should expose a deaf or hard-of-hearing child to language as soon as possible. During the first few years of a child's life, it is important to establish a successful means of communication and begin the development of language skills. The earlier a child is exposed to language, the better that child's language, cognitive, and social development will become.



a	b	c	d	e	f	g			
palm is always forward except where noted		palm forward thumb bent out		thumb also often lower (like a claw)		palm in			
h	i	j	k	l	m				
	palm in								
n	o	p	q	r	s				
	palm faces opposite side of body	index finger points out		like p but points down and unseen fingers curled in					
t	u	v	w	x	y	z			
				palm forward thumb can be over fingers whole palm can be slanted to side away from body					
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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(cont.)

A deaf child born to parents who are deaf and already use ASL will begin to acquire ASL as naturally as a hearing child picks up spoken language from hearing parents. Nine out of ten children who are born deaf are born to parents who hear. Some hearing parents choose to learn sign language while introducing it to their deaf child. These children also learn sign language through deaf peers.



Thanks to newborn hearing screening programs in hospitals in the United States, babies are tested before they leave the hospital. If a baby has hearing loss, parents are provided an opportunity to learn more about communication options.



## Learning American Sign Language

Everyone learns sign language at their own speed. It can take a year or more to learn and feel comfortable using individual signs for basic communication. However, learning American Sign Language takes more time and practice.



Sign language classes are available when learning ASL. You can also find many online resources and apps to assist with learning sign language.

To expand your knowledge of ASL, try practicing your signs with others who know ASL and can teach new words. People who know ASL typically:



- Exhibit patience when showing new signers how to sign
- Will demonstrate the correct way to sign something
- Adjust their rate of signing for understanding
- Are willing to repeat words or statements

Once you are able to communicate efficiently and effectively, you may choose to be an ASL teacher as well as an ASL interpreter.

Resources:

- “American Sign Language” (2019) Retrieved 6-13-19 from <https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/>
- “American Sign Language” (2019) Retrieved 6-13-19 from <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/american-sign-language>

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