Manual Communication Systems
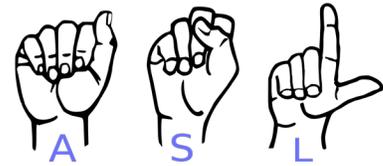
The term "sign language" has become a generic term that many people use in reference to all forms of visual languages, otherwise known as manual communication systems.

This information sheet is intended to provide an explanation of the various manual communication systems that are used. It is not the intent to recommend one communication system over another, as every person has individual communication needs.

Deciding which manual system to learn and use can be a difficult decision. However, there is a large core vocabulary which is the same or similar in all sign languages. Choosing a manual communication system as a primary language does not mean that a child cannot learn to speak. For many people with communication disorders, the use of a manual communication system facilitates communication and reduces frustration. Regardless of which system of communication is chosen, all require consistent use and exposure and a strong commitment from the child's caregivers.

American Sign Language (ASL)

- ASL is a visual language with its own syntax and grammar.
- The language of the Deaf community.
- It is not written or spoken, but it can be translated like other languages.
- ASL signs are different depending on the meaning of the word and the context of the message (e.g., turn the light on vs. heavy or light).
- ASL uses finger-spelling regularly.

Manually Coded English (MCE)

- A generic term that includes all the sign systems devised to match the elements of spoken English (e.g., Signing Exact English, Signed English).
- MCE is based on signs drawn from ASL, but MCE uses English word order.
- Markers (hand signs) are used to shows plurals, inflections, articles, prefixes, tenses, word endings and conjunctions.
- MCE uses one sign regardless of the meaning (e.g., fish (noun vs verb).
- It can be signed while speaking.

Examples of MCE:

Signing Exact English (SEE):

- utilizes a basis of ASL signs with an additional 74 "markers" to denote plurals, etc.; and
- requires more signing time than ASL because of the markers.

Signed English:

- has fewer markers than SEE and uses the 14 most common markers for prefixes and suffixes (e.g., past tense "-ed", adverb "-ly", comparative/superlative "-er/-est", agent "-er", plural "-s", present tense "-ing", etc…).

Contact Sign or Contact Language Variety

- It uses ASL in English word order.
- Contact sign/language variety preserves the integrity of ASL while integrating some of English syntax.
- It was called Pidgin Signed English (PSE) in the 1970's & 80's; not called that in the literature anymore.

Augmentative Communication Systems

Sign Assist:

- is not a complete language or a communication system;
- is used with those who use oral speech and hearing to communicate;
- is an organized way to provide supplementary visual cues and support to a spoken message; and
- is not intended to replace other visual strategies such as pictures, objects, text and body language.

Cued Speech:

- is a visual support system which uses hand-shapes to differentiate between similar speech sounds. (e.g., /k/ & /g/);
- makes all the sounds of spoken language different from one another; and
- is intended to supplement oral language learning.

For more information on augmentative communication systems, view the following ACSLPA information sheet, Augmentative and Alternative Comunication (AAC).

April 2014
Revised July 2018

AC SLP A

Alberta College of
Speech-Language Pathologists
and Audiologists

Hear. Speak. Connect.