

Foundations of BSL: Deaf Awareness

BSL is intrinsically linked to the British Deaf community therefore it's important to be aware of the barriers and difficulties deaf people face. With some small adjustments, you can reduce communication barriers for deaf people. Here's some tips to help you become more deaf aware.



1. Learn some basic British Sign Language (BSL)

Even knowing a few basic signs can make a big difference in bridging communication gaps with the Deaf community. Sign what you know – it helps put conversations in context and shows you're making an effort.



2. Get their attention

When communicating with a Deaf person, always get their attention first. A wave or a gentle tap on the shoulder is acceptable. This is crucial because lipreading can be difficult and knowing where to look helps them understand you better.



3. Check the lighting

Consider the environment for a smoother conversation. Ensure good lighting - turn on lights if needed - and avoid backlighting that casts shadows on your face. Don't stand in front of a window. This helps ensure clear visibility for communication.



4. Reduce background noise

Try to create a clear auditory environment to improve the clarity of a speaker's voice. Reducing background noise reduces the effort required to listen, making communication more comfortable. Turning down the TV or switching background music off helps. You could offer to move somewhere quieter depending on the situation.



5. Don't cover your mouth or mumble

Many Deaf people rely on lipreading to help them understand what is being said. It's important your lip patterns are clear and visible. In a group, remember to keep your face visible to the Deaf person. It's not just the lips that are important though. In BSL, facial expressions are used to help convey meaning and emotion and they help when you're speaking English too.



6. There's no need to shout

Shouting can distort your voice making you harder to understand. It's best to speak clearly in the direction of a Deaf person at a normal volume. Shouting may be perceived as rude and can cause embarrassment.



7. In a group, speak one at a time

Understanding one voice may be a challenge, if people start speaking at the same time it'll be almost impossible. Multiple overlapping voices creates a cacophony of sounds and causes distortion to devices such as hearing aids.



8. Be patient and understanding

If you become frustrated, your facial expression will show it and it isn't fair for anyone involved. Communication may take a little extra time, so be willing to work together to ensure understanding.



9. Re-phrase what you said

Complex and lengthy sentences can be difficult to understand for someone who uses BSL as their primary language. Some words are especially difficult to lipread so try to use plain English where possible.



10. Confirm understanding

Checking in with a Deaf person to ensure they understand shows respect and that you value their time, fostering trust and rapport. For important details like prices, dates, or times, writing them down can prevent confusion.