

The Power of “AND” in Deaf Education

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Children need rich accessible language experiences early. Pursuing only spoken language development leaves children at risk of language deprivation. Sign language ensures a strong language foundation and supports development of the whole child. Families and educators can use this tip sheet to navigate conflicting information about language acquisition.

Families and educators often receive mixed messages about language acquisition from multiple sources, such as medical professionals, service providers, other families, and various organizations, which may lead them to ask important questions:

- "Will my child learn spoken language?"
- "Will learning sign language hurt spoken language development?"
- "Can hearing parents successfully support sign language development?"
- "Should we focus on one language first before introducing another?"

What Research Shows

Spoken Language Outcomes

Deaf and hard of hearing children can and do develop spoken language skills, but spoken language-only approaches are risky.

Sign Language Access

Deaf and hard of hearing children with hearing parents can successfully acquire sign language. When strong language access is provided early and consistently, they can develop sign language skills similar to children with Deaf parents.

Sign Language + Spoken Language

Learning sign language does not hurt spoken language development. Early access to rich language experiences, including sign language, provides a strong foundation that can support healthy development. For families who wish to use spoken language, using it AND sign language helps to ensure children have the language access they need to grow.



These resources were developed through a collaborative partnership between the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center and the Deaf Center at Boston University. The content reflects a shared commitment to advancing language access, Deaf education, and language-rich learning environments for deaf and hard of hearing children.