



# FACT SHEET

California Deafblind Services  
 San Francisco State University  
 1600 Holloway Avenue  
 San Francisco, CA 94132-4158  
 (415) 405-7558  
 (415) 338-2845 FAX  
[cadeafblind.org](http://cadeafblind.org)

## Tips for Choosing Conceptually Accurate Signs

*By Maurice Belote*

Many children and youth who are deafblind have multi-modal receptive and expressive communication systems that include signed communication as one mode of communication. In many cases, the signs are not used in the context of a language, such as American Sign Language or English, but are used in short key-word phrases. When signing key words only, “Let’s go to the store to buy some ice cream” might be reduced to “go-store-buy-ice cream.”

Conceptually accurate signed English (CASE) is a communication method that draws many signs from American Sign Language but the signs are used in English word order, with the basic grammar and rules of English. The little words that aren’t critical to meaning (words like “the”, “a”, “an”, etc.) are usually omitted when using CASE. Whether signing English or signing key words only, an important feature of CASE is that the signs used are conceptually accurate.

When choosing signs to use with children who are deafblind, it is important to consider whether specific signs are conceptually accurate and not just consider the English words that are paired with the signs in many commonly used sign language dictionaries. The problem is that while most words in English have multiple meanings, each usually has only one entry in a sign language dictionary. Consider the following three examples.

<b>The word you want to sign:</b>	<b>The meaning of the word you want to convey:</b>	<b>Sign you might find for this word in a sign language dictionary:</b>	<b>Conceptually accurate alternative that better conveys your intended meaning:</b>
“cold”	The illness “cold”, as in “Your teacher has a bad cold today.”	Fists shaking in front of chest as if shivering (this sign means cold as in temperature)	The sign for a runny nose (thumb and fingers touch nostrils 2-3 times as if wiping your nose”)
“like”	Same or similar, as in “Our classroom smells like a bakery this morning.”	Middle finger and thumb come together in front of chest (this sign means to like something, as in “I like ice cream”)	The sign for “same” (index fingers, palms facing down, tap together in front of chest).

<p>“turn”</p>	<p>To change, as in “The red and yellow paint will turn orange when mixed.”</p>	<p>One palm moving around the upright index finger of the other hand (this sign means to turn as in a direction, like “turn right at the next corner)</p>	<p>The sign for “become” (palms touch, one above the other, and then twist so alternate palm is on top)</p>
---------------	---	---	---

Remember that as you reach for a dictionary to learn a new sign, the concept you want to convey is more important than the English word that is linked to that sign in a dictionary. It may seem like a complicated concept at first, but it will make a lot more sense over time. In addition, you’ll find your communication is much clear and more likely to be understood by the individual who is deafblind.

Tips to remember:

- Choosing conceptually correct signs may make sense for many children, but not all. If the goal is to teach a child Standard English, another sign system will probably be used.
- Because children who are deafblind have missing, reduced, or distorted sensory input, concept development is an important part of children's educational programs. Choosing conceptually accurate signs will help to support overall concept development.
- When choosing a sign to introduce to an individual who is deafblind, think about the meaning of what you want to communicate and not just the English word associated with that meaning. Except for sign systems that are based on Standard English such as SEE signs, there is not an exact correspondence between signs and the words we use in English.
- If you are pairing signed communication and speech, it's okay to pair the conceptually accurate sign with the more commonly used spoken word. For example, if you are communicating about someone having a bad cold, you can say the word "cold" but use the sign that looks like the action of wiping your nose.