



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

Tips for Improving the Accuracy of Signed Communication

by Maurice Belote

Every sign in signed communication—whether the sign comes from American Sign Language, Signing Exact English (SEE), or another sign language/system—is made up of four parameters. By understanding these parameters and being aware of them when signing, accuracy of signing can be increased dramatically. The four parameters of signs are:

Hand shape the shape of the hand or hands when signing a word/concept

Palm orientation the direction that the palm or palms face when signing a word/concept

Location the location of the hand or hands when signing a word/concept

Movement the movement the hand or hands make when signing a word/concept

For example, consider the most commonly used sign for “TOILET”: the letter “T” shaken in front of the shoulder. The parameters of this sign are as follows: 1) Hand shape: the hand shape is the fingerspelled letter “T”; 2) Palm orientation: the palm faces away from the body, towards the person you are signing; 3) Location: the location is front of the shoulder on the same side of the body as the hand that is signing, i.e., if your right hand is making the “T” shape, the hand is in front of the right shoulder; and 4) Movement: the “T” hand shape shakes gently side to-side.

Consider how different this sign is if you just change one of the four parameters. Try signing “TOILET” with one parameter wrong, e.g., shake the “T” hand shape in front of the forehead instead of in front of the shoulder or change the hand shape to the letter “L” instead of the letter “T”, and it will be clear to see how difficult it would be for others to understand the sign with just one of the four parameters incorrect.

When using tactile or visual signed communication, pay close attention to each of these four parameters as you make each sign. If the sign dictionary you use doesn’t clearly indicate each of these parameters through a written description and/or drawing, ask someone who might be able to help. Deaf/hard of hearing teachers are a great resource for improving sign language accuracy. Sign language instructional videos and websites with moving graphics might also be helpful.

There are other features of signed communication that are also important, such as facial expressions and intensity of signs. But if you remember these four parameters and make sure that each of the four parameters are accurate when using a sign with a child who is deafblind, your signed communication will be much more accurate, the child’s level of confusion will decrease, and their comprehension is likely to increase.