

Deaf Culture

Deaf Culture - how does one define it? Where do we find Deaf Culture? Who decides that this is a culture? What constitutes Deaf Culture? These are questions we are commonly asked.

Deaf Culture is the heart of the Deaf community everywhere in the world. Language and culture are inseparable. They are intertwined and passed down through generations of Deaf people. The Deaf community is not based on geographic proximity like Chinatown or the Italian District for example. The Deaf community is comprised of culturally Deaf people in the core of the community who use a sign language such as American Sign Language or Langue des Signes Quebecois and appreciate their heritage, history, literature, and culture.

The Deaf community is also comprised of other individuals who use the language and have an attitude that makes them an accepted part of the community though they may not be in the core of the community. It exists because of the need to get together, the need to relax and enjoy everything while being together. Deaf culture exists because Deaf people who are educated at residential Deaf schools or mainstreamed schools develop their own Deaf network once they graduate, to keep in touch with everyone. Most of them go on to take on leadership positions in the Deaf community, organize Deaf sports, community events, etc. and become the core of the Deaf community. They ensure that their language and heritage are passed to other peers and to the next generation. They also form links with parents and siblings of Deaf children to strengthen and enlarge the community circle for Deaf children.

Language and culture are interrelated. Sign language is central to any Deaf person, child or adult for their intellectual, social, linguistic and emotional growth but to truly internalize the language, they must have the culture that is embedded in the language. Every linguistic and cultural group has its own way of seeing and expressing how they see and interpret the world and interact in it.

Culture consists of language, values, traditions, norms and identity. Deaf culture meets all five sociological criteria for defining a culture.

Language refers to the native visual cultural language of Deaf people, with its own syntax (grammar or form), semantics (vocabulary or content) and pragmatics (social rules of use). It is highly valued by the Deaf community because it's visually accessible.

Values in the Deaf community include the importance of clear communication for all both in terms of expression and comprehension. Deaf residential schools and Deaf clubs are important because of the natural social interaction they offer. Preserving American Sign Language (ASL) literature, heritage, Deaf literature and art are other examples of what we value. (ASL and LSQ [Langue Des Signes Quebecois] are both valued by Deaf Canadians).

Traditions include the stories kept alive through Deaf generations, Deaf experiences and expected participation in Deaf cultural events. Norms refer to rules of behaviour in the Deaf community. All cultures have their own set of behaviours that are deemed acceptable. For Deaf people, it includes getting someone's attention appropriately, using direct eye contact and correct use of shoulder tapping.

Norms of behavior often cause cross-cultural conflicts between Deaf and hearing people when the individuals are unaware of how their norms may be affecting their interactions and perceptions of each other's intents.

Identity is one of the key components of the whole person. Accepting that one is Deaf and is proud of his/her culture and heritage and a contributing member of that society is key to being a member of the cultural group.

Deaf students who are mainstreamed miss out on the feeling of belonging that individuals from the Deaf culture associate with their residential schools and their experience is very different from those who attend residential school. Mainstreamed students often are singled out in many respects. Although they have access to interpreters, note takers and other special assistive devices, they still may be loners, especially in a mainstream environment where there are few other students with hearing losses.

The question most often asked is where mainstreamed students who are now adults fit in Deaf Culture? While residential schools are at the root of the Deaf community, Deaf people who were mainstreamed can still be part of the Deaf community and share in its culture. This is not to say that the transition from a mainstreamed upbringing to an adult life in the Deaf community is always easy. Many people who were mainstreamed say that they feel caught between the hearing and Deaf worlds while fully belonging to neither. It is important for Deaf adults from diverse backgrounds to recognize and accept their differences, while maintaining respect for Deaf language and culture. This way the Deaf community can be a welcoming place for many people, where there is room for growth and identity development.

Residential Deaf schools are at the root of the Deaf community. They are at the root of maintaining and expanding cultural development when Deaf students finish school. Mainstreamed adults can enjoy the same opportunity. They are part of the Deaf community and so share in its culture.

Deaf Culture more than makes up the difference, for lack of the Deaf school in adult life. It is just a way of life, an independent life, including the ability to make decisions, to be free to go where we want to go, free to visit friends who share common ground. It is really a very comfortable life. It is not a lonely or isolated life. When active in the Deaf community, we become contributing members of both Deaf and hearing society. It makes life full and meaningful for all!