



Research Brief

Deaf Culture as an Asset in Preparation for Postsecondary Education and Employment

Individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) are a part of a complex cultural and linguistic community. Aspects of Deaf culture are protective factors and potential assets for individuals as they transition from secondary to postsecondary options. This is particularly important given the deleterious effects of internalized audism on resilience.⁷ However, existing structures that prepare students for postsecondary outcomes do not always incorporate Deaf culture as a resource. This research brief provides an overview of Deaf culture and its potential as a source of resiliency for DHH individuals as they prepare for postsecondary education and employment opportunities.

Deaf culture encompasses several factors, including:

- **Reliance on sight**, with some evidence of greater visual acuity and sensitivity²² and communicating via visual languages (i.e., American Sign Language).¹⁶
- **The shared experience of oppression**, negative attitudes, historical prejudices, and reduced or non-existent accessible services at school or work.¹⁵
- A **culture of solidarity**⁶, in which a group experiences itself as a collectivist whole in the face of oppressive forces. Deaf individuals have a **high regard for role models**, deep connections, and networking.^{4, 13}

Identification with Deaf culture is a protective factor for DHH individuals. A strong sense of identity as a deaf person is an asset that can contribute to an individual's resilience, well-being, and self-esteem.^{3, 7} More specifically:

- **Deaf identity is not static.** Deaf identity is fluid and may evolve over time.¹²
- **Peers are important.** Deaf youth who had more time with their deaf peers in secondary school settings had higher levels of self-esteem and stronger self-worth.^{17, 23} Social experiences and feeling connected to a community is an important factor in persistence towards degree completion and future employment success.^{1, 20}
- **Self-concept and self-esteem.** Youths who used sign language in conjunction with speech reported reduced stigma associated with being DHH than youth who used speech as their sole mode of communication.¹⁰ Young adults who have positive perceptions about being deaf have stronger psychological resilience than those who had negative perceptions about being deaf.⁷

What are some current challenges to incorporating Deaf culture strengths in transition planning?

- **Information gaps.** There can be inadequate information sharing among parents, programs and service providers.¹⁹ Lack of coordination, communication, professional expertise, resources and strategies among different agencies can result in program gaps and service delivery failure.¹⁴
- **Policies and structures.** Many current policies do not incorporate Deaf culture into transition planning.^{14, 15} Some current structures are not designed to adequately accommodate the diverse range of communication modality options utilized by the DHH community.^{14, 15}
- **Professional capacity.** Some professionals display cultural insensitivity.²¹ There are more reported inconsistencies and gaps between transition plans and actual services for DHH individuals compared to hearing peers.³

Deaf culture as a resource:

- **Provide opportunities.** The opportunity to develop a deaf identity through interactions with the deaf community, exposure to Deaf culture, and sign language development can serve as assets.⁸
- **Ensure access to language.** Language accessibility and cultural affiliation available in the home environment plays an important role in self-concept development for deaf individuals.⁹
- **Include parents.** Parental influence has been reported as a positive contributor to DHH students' postsecondary outcome.^{4, 19} More specifically, DHH individuals with deaf parents were reported to have a higher level of self-determination and self-efficacy than those with hearing parents.²²
- **Education context matters.** Individuals who attended schools or programs for deaf students tend to value Deaf culture more than those who attended mainstream schools.²¹
- **Readiness to advocate.** Being prepared to discuss and pursue accommodations also appears to be a significant factor in successful transition outcomes.⁵ The quality of accommodations and services may affect how likely individuals are to complete a program and be prepared for the workforce.⁵

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