

# DEAF COMMUNITY

Deaf people feel positive  
about being Deaf.



*Deaf people see being Deaf as a difference, not a disability.  
– Being Deaf is a way of life.*

The Deaf community is quite unique, with its own language, values, rules for behaviour and traditions. Deaf people see themselves as a distinct group within a country and their first language is sign language - in New Zealand it's New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL).

Deaf identify with other Deaf people because of shared experiences – communication barriers, issues, different needs and goals. As a group of people who respond to things visually, Deaf customs include various forms of artistic expression, such as signed poetry, story-telling and visual arts.

Because Deaf people use visual communication, rather than verbal, the following points may help:

- Deaf people ask for attention by waving, stamping, touching or tapping one another, or switching lights on and off
- In conversation, eye contact is very important and people need sufficient personal space for arm movements
- Deaf people can't interrupt conversations the way hearing people can. They need to see what is being said, so they can only pay attention to one person at a time. Deaf people wait until the person who is signing stops, before the next person signs
- Dim light makes it hard to see facial expressions and NZSL
- At meetings sit in a semi-circle, so everyone can see each other

## What is the difference between Deaf and deaf?

The word Deaf (spelt with a capital “D”) denotes a unique community. The use of sign language as one’s first language is the principle characteristic of people who identify with this community.

With a small “d”, deaf refers to hearing loss – eg “he is deaf”. The majority of people with hearing loss do not use sign language, as they generally become deaf late in life or are born with mild hearing loss. They most likely speak fluently and understand spoken language (possibly with the help of a hearing aid or surgery) and, for the most part, are integrated into hearing society.

Many of these people have special communication, health and mental health needs that are different from people within the general population, but these needs are also different from Deaf people’s.

## Deaf culture develops through:

- Sharing a common language - NZSL
- Sharing visual learning styles and life experiences
- Having friends and contacts within the Deaf community
- Attending Deaf schools and belonging to Deaf societies or clubs
- Sharing experiences of being part of a minority group

## People who are Deaf:

- See being Deaf as a difference not a disability
- Are proud to be Deaf
- Use NZSL
- Communicate visually
- Associate with other Deaf people/are involved in the Deaf community
- Come from all walks of life - new immigrants, Deaf blind, young, elderly, Maori Deaf (who make up 40% of the community) and Deaf with additional disabilities. All are united through their shared experience of seeing the world.

## Deaf Clubs

Deaf clubs operate throughout the country, providing a place where Deaf people can pursue common interests. To find a Deaf club near you please visit [www.deaf.org.nz](http://www.deaf.org.nz) or your local Deaf Aotearoa office.

## New Zealand Sign Language

Deaf Aotearoa actively and passionately advocates for the promotion of New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) in government departments, organisations, educational facilities and every day life.

NZSL is the natural language of the Deaf community in New Zealand, so it reflects the country's culture and includes signs for Maori terminology and concepts unique to New Zealand.

As one of the country's official languages, NZSL is used daily by more than 24,000 New Zealanders, and it is the 12th most frequently used language, out of approximately 190 languages, currently used in New Zealand (Census 2006).

Sign language is a combination of hand shapes, facial expressions and body movements. It is not simply signed representations of spoken words.

Each May, Deaf Aotearoa organises and runs a celebration of New Zealand Sign Language - NZSL Week. NZSL Week helps promote the language as well as raise awareness about the Deaf community and the issues/challenges its members face each day.

NZSL Week is a chance for the Deaf community to stand proud as Deaf, and promote their language and culture. It is a chance to break down barriers, fears and misconceptions, and allows Deaf New Zealanders to 'put their hands up' - a chance to be 'heard'.

*For more information about Deaf Aotearoa and the services it provides please visit [www.deaf.org.nz](http://www.deaf.org.nz)*

*For more information about learning NZSL please visit [www.nzsign.co.nz](http://www.nzsign.co.nz)*