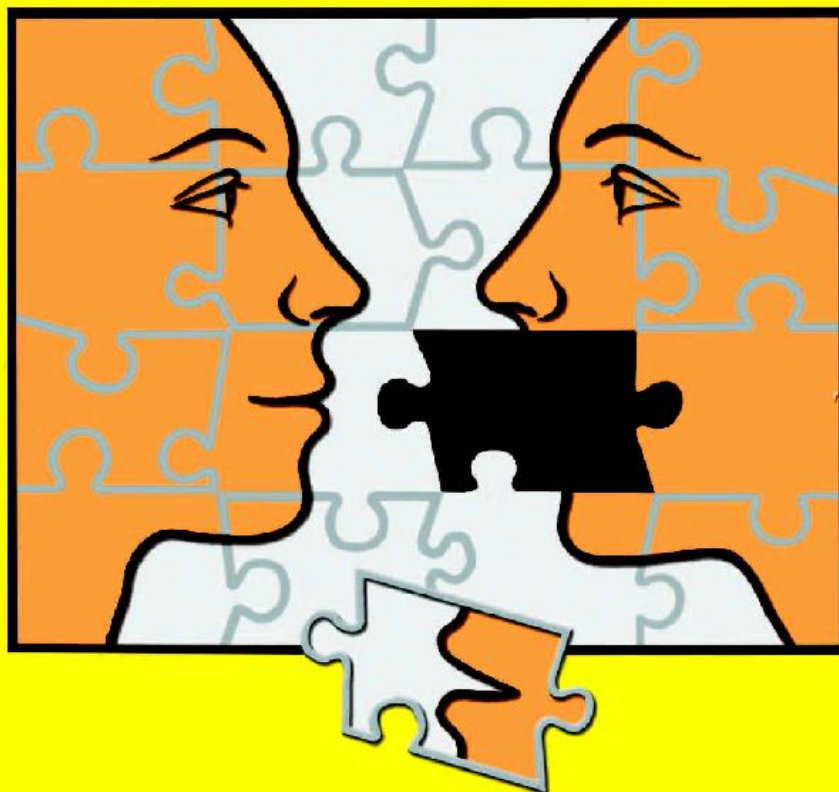


*Focus on...*

# Let Your Hands Do The Talking

Using signing systems for  
communication



COMMUNICATION MATTERS

## Introduction



Most of us use body language – facial expression, gesture, and so on. Sometimes this is totally unconscious and goes along with our speech to reinforce what we are saying. Sometimes our body language will reveal things we don't want other people to know, for example, that we are depressed, lying or embarrassed.



Whenever we are in situations where it is hard for us to speak, such as in a noisy pub or in a country where we do not speak the language, we rely more on our body language to get our message across. We tend to gesture more with our face and hands to explain what we mean.

For some people, body language and gestures are central to their communication rather than just accompanying their speech. These non-verbal methods of communication might be the only way they can express themselves.

## Symbol & Signing Systems

If we can speak then our words act as symbols for what we are meaning. For example, if someone says, *"I've just bought a new car"*, you have a picture in your head of a shining new car – something you sit in, something which usually has four wheels, something made of metal and something which is expensive to keep! You also know what the other person means by *"bought"* – they may have handed over a wad of notes, but more likely they have handed over a cheque or have arranged payment indirectly through some finance arrangement.



People who are unable to use words in the traditional sense because they are not able to speak need some other symbol system available to them to get their message across. There are a number of different symbol systems around to help people communicate – these symbol systems are part of what is called 'augmentative and alternative communication', or AAC for short. Some of these symbol systems are pictorial (these are explained in more detail in the leaflet *Focus on...Using Symbols for Communication*). Other symbol systems are based on manual signs or gestures.

This leaflet gives an overview of the main manual signing systems currently in use in the UK.

## What signing systems are used?

There are many signing systems, including British Sign Language (BSL), which are used almost exclusively by the deaf community. Here are some of the more frequently used signing and gesture systems used in the UK with people with complex communication needs as part of an AAC system:

**Amer-Ind:** a code based on the hand shapes used by native Americans to cross language barriers. It is used by adults who have lost their speech and people with learning disabilities, and is more 'guessable' than signs from sign languages used by the deaf community. It does not follow the word order of any spoken language, and uses 'keywords' only. (Refer to Contact 1)

**British Sign Language (BSL):** the natural native language of deaf people in the UK, used very widely across deaf communities and as the basis for many other sign systems (e.g. Makaton and Signalong). This sign language is an alternative to spoken English and has its own word order and grammar, a huge vocabulary, and the potential for creating more words as needed, like any natural spoken language. (Refer to Contacts 2 & 5)

**Finger Spelling / Manual Alphabet:** uses hand positions to represent letters. People in the deaf community use the two-handed form. One-handed versions are used by and with people who are both deaf and partially sighted. This system may be used by people with hemiplegia (one-sided paralysis). (Refer to Contacts 2 & 5)

**Makaton Signs:** a basic vocabulary based on the signs of BSL. Makaton is meant to be used at the same time as spoken English. This vocabulary was originally designed to be used with people with learning disabilities to help them to understand spoken language and to allow a basic form of self-expression, but is now used with a wide range of people with complex communication needs. (Refer to Contact 3)

**Paget Gorman Signed Speech:** used to help to teach English language and literacy to children who are deaf. This system is also used with children who have a specific language disorder and is used at the same time as spoken English. Every component of spoken language is signed following the exact word order of the spoken form. (Refer to Contact 4)

**Signalong:** like Makaton, Signalong is based on BSL. Signing is used at the same time as spoken English, and follows English word order. (Refer to Contact 6)

**Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)** is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to supplement the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired.

AAC may include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology currently available. AAC can be a way to help someone understand, as well as a means of expression.

## **What are the Pros and Cons of using a signing system?**

Signing, like speaking, is an unaided form of communication in that it does not need the communicator to use another object or piece of equipment to get their message across. It can therefore be a very spontaneous and immediate form of communication. Of all the forms of AAC, it is the most like speech – you are not having to communicate via an aid. The main difficulty with signing and gesture systems is that everybody has to learn the system. If the person who uses AAC tries to communicate through signs and gestures to people who do not know the system then they are not likely to be very successful because their communication partners possibly will not understand them. For someone to learn to communicate by signing and to value it as a method of communication, everybody in their environment needs to sign for at least part of the time.

## **Why use gesture and sign if the person is not deaf?**

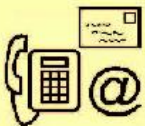
Signs and gestures provide a visual reinforcement to what is being said. Some people with severe speech difficulties also have problems understanding and remembering what is said to them. Signing and gesturing, as well as speaking, can provide the individual with additional clues which can help them to understand what is being said.

When signing is used as part of an AAC system, it is really important to remember to speak as well as to sign. Many people who use signing as part of their total communication system can hear at least some of what is said to them. Signing is used to help them to understand what is being said, rather than to replace speech. When someone with unclear speech uses signs along with their speech, it can really help other people to understand what they are saying. Signing can have benefits for both communication partners in a conversation.



## Useful Resources

1. **Amer-Ind Gestural Code:** Based on Universal American Indian Hand Talk; Reference: Skelly, M. et al 1974: 'American Indian sign (Amer-Ind) as a facilitator of verbalization in the oral apraxic', *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 39, 445-456
2. **British Deaf Association Website:** [www.bda.org.uk](http://www.bda.org.uk)
3. **The Makaton Charity,** Manor House, 46 London Road, Blackwater, Camberley, Surrey GU17 0AA Tel: 01276 606760  
Email: [info@makaton.org](mailto:info@makaton.org) Website: [www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org)
4. **Paget Gorman Society,** 2 Dowlands Bungalows, Dowlands Lane, Smallfield, Surrey RH6 9SD Tel: 0134 284 2308 Website: [www.pgss.org](http://www.pgss.org)
5. **RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People),** 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL Tel: 0808 808 0123 Textphone: 0808 808 9000  
Fax: 020 7296 8199 Email: [informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk)  
Website: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)
6. **The Signalong Group,** Stratford House, Waterside Court, Neptune Close, Rochester, Kent ME2 4NZ Tel: 0845 450 8422  
Email: [info@signalong.org.uk](mailto:info@signalong.org.uk) Website: [www.signalong.org.uk](http://www.signalong.org.uk)



## Further Information

Please contact *Communication Matters* for more information on this topic or to obtain other leaflets in the *Focus on...* series.

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## **Other topics in the 'Focus on...' series**

*First Steps*

*What is AAC?*

*What can I say?*

*Using Symbols for Communication*

*Speaking with Someone who uses AAC*

*Accessing Communication Aids and Computers*

*Communicating with Patients who have Speech/Language Difficulties*

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