



## Deaf Culture vs. Medicalization

### The issue

What is Deaf Culture? What is "the medicalization of deafness"?

### CAD's position

Deaf Culture is a healthy sociological community of Deaf people. "The medicalization of deafness" is the treatment of deafness as a defect that must be fixed at any cost. The two approaches cannot be compatible.

A culture is generally considered distinct when it has its own unique language, values, behavioural norms, arts, educational institutions, political and social structures, organizations, and "peripherals" (such as ethnic clothing, rituals, or special/unusual possessions).

By this measure, Deaf people have a unique culture which is indicated by the capital-D "Deaf" term. Some elements of this Deaf Culture include:

- use of Sign language as the person's first language;
- Deaf schools, including Gallaudet University;
- Deaf theatre, poetry, jokes, writings, paintings, etc.;
- magazines, journals, books, videos/films and television programming by and about Deaf people and devoted to Deaf interests and concerns;
- organized groups in virtually every community, as well as national organizations in roughly 125 countries;
- a particular social and political structure;
- values based upon schools attended, skill in Sign language, involvement in the local Deaf community, attitudes towards Deaf interests, etc.;
- "peripherals" such as TTYs, caption decoders, flashing alarms, and so on.

Within the Deaf culture, deafness itself is a non-issue. A person's status within the culture depends not upon his/her amount of hearing loss but upon his/her attitude towards the elements of the Deaf culture, involvement in the local Deaf community, and skill in Sign language.

This brings the Deaf Culture into deep conflict with the way hearing society views deafness. Hearing society tends to consider deafness as a medical deficiency which must be "fixed" in order to restore the person to his/her "rightful place" in hearing society.

This attitude encourages the perpetuation of what is called "the medicalization of deafness". Devices such as hearing-aids and cochlear implants, the imposition of oral training and speech-language therapy, and the promotion of English/French-based sign systems are all part of this approach to deafness as an unacceptable sickness.

The Canadian Association of the Deaf does not support a blanket condemnation of all elements of medicalization for all people who have some degree of hearing loss. We acknowledge that hearing-aids assist some people who are hard of hearing, cochlear implants assist some late-deafened adults, and oral training may be of benefit to some post-lingually deafened people.

We believe strongly, however, in the validity and importance of the Deaf culture and its elements. For pre-lingually deaf children in particular, Sign language is the best way for them to acquire the first-language skills needed to learn English or French later in life. Oralism is a failed method for such children and youth. Sign systems are perversions of true Sign language, invented by hearing people in an effort to force English/French verbal language structures upon natural visual language structures. True Sign languages are genuine, self-sufficient languages, and the only languages learned naturally and easily by the deaf child

### Deaf Issues

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languages learned naturally and easily by the deaf child.

The Deaf schools are where the Deaf culture, language and values are learned. They are where organizations and life-long friendships are born. Closing the schools and placing Deaf youth in regular schools deprives them of their socio-cultural identity and their language.

The Canadian Association of the Deaf encourages hearing society to cease looking upon people who are deaf as being inferior or deformed creatures in need of medical cures. Deafness is only a horrible calamity if hearing people make it so. Culturally Deaf people have a clear sense of identity and a tremendous feeling of belonging to a community. They should be recognized and celebrated as a socio-cultural minority.

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