



## Chapter 7

# Choosing and learning a language

When a child is comfortable using the basic communication skills described in Chapter 4, she is ready to learn a language. A child who is deaf or cannot hear well can first learn a sign language (see Chapter 8) or a spoken language (see Chapter 9). Whichever language a child learns, it must meet her abilities and needs.

The language she learns first will depend on many things such as how much she can hear, which language she prefers, her natural abilities and the resources available in her community. It can also depend on how her parents react to her deafness. Knowing deaf people in the community may help parents be able to accept their child's deafness and also find ways to help her learn a language.

In places where there are few resources for deaf children, parents might feel that they have no choice about which kind of language their child can learn. But if you put your child's needs and abilities first, you will make the best decisions you can.



It is not always easy to know  
what is best for a child...  
but you must try.

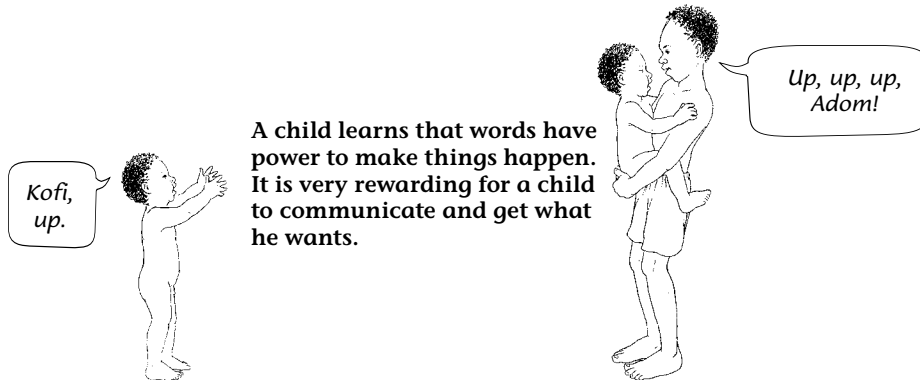
## Learning language early is important

The best years for learning language are from birth to age 7. Usually a child learns most language between 2 and 4 years old. If a child does not learn language by the time he is about 7 or 8 years old, it will be more difficult for the child to learn it later. If a deaf child does not learn a spoken or a signed language, it will also be difficult for him to fully develop thinking skills. That is why learning language is so important.

## HOW CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGE

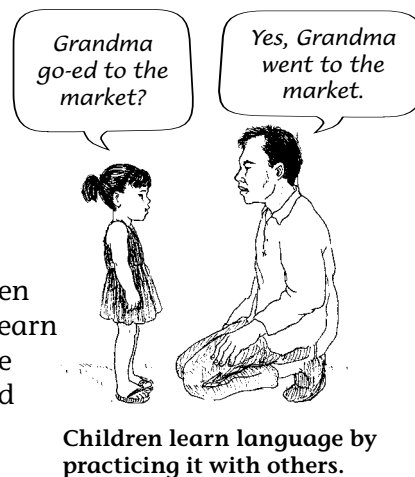
Languages use symbols such as sounds, writing, or signs that allow people to communicate with each other. Reading, writing, speaking, and signing are all ways of using language.

The first step a child takes to learn language will be to learn the names for people and the words for things he sees every day—words like “mama,” “cat,” or “baby.” But often, the first words he will say are to make something happen—words like “milk,” “no,” or “up.”



Children first learn single words. Then they learn the rules for using words together. As they use language with other people, over time they learn the rules of language.

Children learn language by listening and seeing the language around them and practicing what they hear and see. Children develop their mental abilities when they learn more words and use them according to the language's rules. They make mistakes, and then begin to communicate successfully.



## LANGUAGE AND THINKING DEVELOP TOGETHER

Language allows us to communicate with others. It also allows us to communicate with ourselves. The language a child learns when he is young gives him the tools to develop his thinking—the language he uses to talk to himself. So even how we think depends on how much language we know and can use.



*Daniel is deaf. He can communicate a little through gestures, expressions on his face, and through signs his family made up. This is what Daniel can tell his mother about his day:*



*But if Daniel and his family shared a language, they could communicate much more. And Daniel's ability to think and plan would be stronger.*

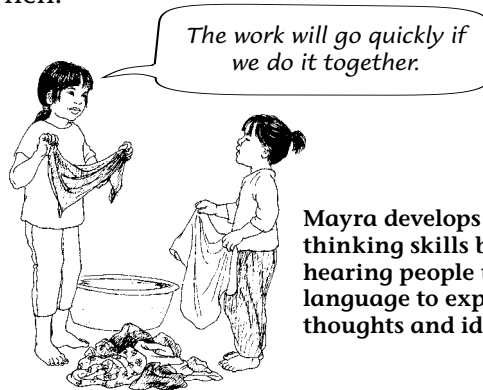
*Today I went fishing, but I only caught little ones, about this long. I had to throw them back. Maybe tomorrow I will go fishing near the bridge.*



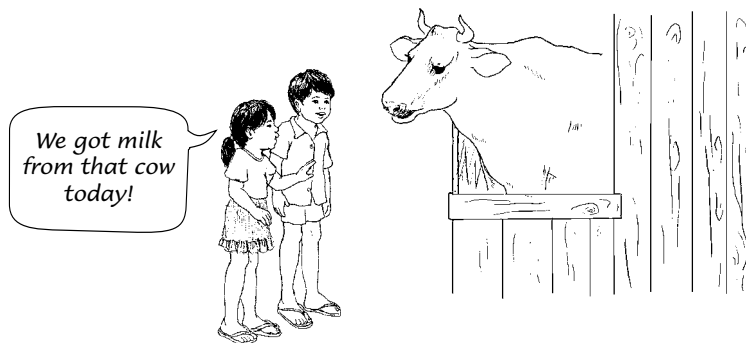
The more children are able to learn a language—whether they speak or sign—the more they can understand their world, express themselves, think, hope, plan, and communicate with the people around them.

Children develop their thinking when:

- they see or hear people using words or signs to exchange information.
- they use language to describe what they see, hear, and touch.
- they use language to express what they experience.
- they use language to make connections between things.



Mayra develops her thinking skills by hearing people use language to express thoughts and ideas.



### Children develop thinking skills step-by-step

Please give me the big ball.



small ball, big ball



A young child first learns simple thinking skills by playing. For example, she learns the words “small” and “big.” Then she uses those words to understand that there is a “small” ball, and a “big” ball.

Then, when a child understands how to compare “small” and “big,” she can begin to think about other things that are small or big. She learns the idea of “size.”



## BASIC THINKING SKILLS AND LANGUAGE

As they learn language, children organize their thoughts and make connections between different ideas:

- how an object, person, or event causes something else to happen.



*If I find wood for the fire, then Mama can cook dinner.*

- how to solve problems.



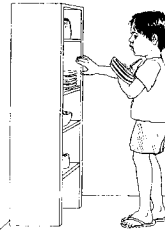
*I can reach the ball if I use a stick.*

- how to order things one after another.



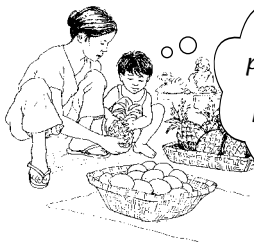
*First I add the egg. Then I mix in flour to make the dough sticky.*

- how to count.



*Papa is working tonight, so we need only 4 plates.*

- how to identify categories of objects—to learn that one word can mean different things, and several words can mean the same thing.



*This is a pineapple, that is a mango. Both are kinds of fruit.*

- how to describe what a person is feeling and why she is feeling that way.



*Mama is worried because Magda is so sick.*

It is important that learning language becomes a part of the life of a child who is deaf or cannot hear well. Parents, community workers, and teachers must encourage children to learn and to use a language to express themselves, to communicate with others, and to develop their mental abilities.

## Sign language and spoken language

The 2 kinds of language a child who is deaf or cannot hear well can learn are:

- **sign language**, when she uses her hands to communicate with the signs used by the deaf community in the region or country where she lives.
- **spoken language**, when she uses her voice and lip reading to communicate in the spoken language in that region or country.

Some children who can hear a little will be able to speak and read lips. Other children communicate best by making signs with their hands. You may want to begin with one language and teach your child other ways to communicate as he gets older.

### For example:

Many people start with gestures and signs with a young child, especially if they are not sure if the child can hear speech sounds. Then, as the child gets older and understands some signs, they may try teaching her to read lips and to talk.



Other people start with speaking and lip reading if they know their child can hear some sounds, or if he became deaf after he learned to talk. When a child is not learning a spoken language after a period of time, it may mean that a sign language is better suited for this child.



The language your child uses may depend on:

- how much or how little he can hear.
- which language he prefers.
- how you react to his deafness.
- when he began to have difficulty hearing.
- the resources available in your family or community.

## Using sign language

Sign language is used by deaf people throughout a community. It is a language that uses hand shapes, body movements, gestures, and expressions on the face to communicate experiences, thoughts, needs, and feelings. A sign language includes common gestures as well as thousands of signs that deaf people have developed over time.

*I want to be a teacher like you when I grow up!*

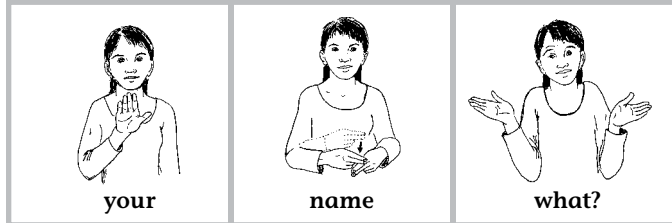


*You would make a great teacher, Teresa.*

Sign languages are real languages which have an organized grammar and structure just like spoken languages do. People use them to ask complicated questions, describe things around them, and discuss relationships, ideas, and beliefs. People use sign language to discuss how things affect each other, or refer to the past or the future. People who use a complete sign language can communicate everything that a hearing person can communicate using spoken words.

One way a sign language may be different from the local spoken language is that the order of signs in a sentence is often different from the order of spoken words.

For example, the question “What is your name?” would look like this in American Sign Language:



Deaf people in nearly all countries, all over the world, have created their own complete sign languages. Like spoken languages, complete sign languages differ from region to region and country to country.

Australia

Spain

Thailand

Here, for example, are the signs for “mother” in 3 different countries:



Even though they are different, each sign language is a full and natural way for deaf people to communicate.

## BENEFITS OF USING SIGN LANGUAGE

- Young children learn sign language very easily when they are exposed to it. With practice, older children and teenagers are able to learn and use sign language without too much trouble.
- A child who uses sign language can communicate with anyone who knows the same sign language—just as fully as a hearing child who uses a spoken language. He will get to know other people who are deaf, and learn that deaf people are an important part of the community.
- It may be easier for a child who knows sign language to learn to read and write the language of her community. The more languages a person has, the easier it is to learn another language.
- Unlike spoken languages, different sign languages are more easily understood by people around the world. It is easier for a signing child from China to communicate with a signing child from Nicaragua than it is for hearing people from those countries to communicate.



## DIFFICULTIES WITH USING SIGN LANGUAGE

- A child who uses sign language cannot communicate with people who do not know sign language. To be able to communicate with your child, family members, friends, and others in the community must also learn sign language.
- While children learn to sign easily, adults have to study a lot to learn a complete sign language.
- If a family lives in a community where there are no people who use sign language, it may be very difficult to find a sign language teacher, or other people to use a sign language with.





## Using spoken language

People who can hear communicate by talking, and hearing others talk, in their local language. It is natural for families to want their deaf child to understand their words and to talk to them using a spoken (oral) language.

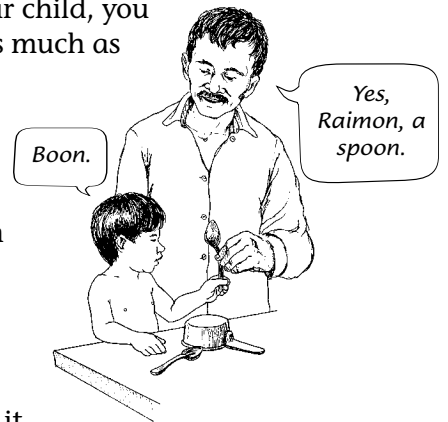
To learn a spoken language, a child who cannot hear well will need to:

- listen with his remaining hearing so that he can learn to understand spoken words. It may be helpful for him to use a hearing aid.
- watch a person's lips when she is talking and guess the words she is saying (lip-reading).
- practice speaking words so that others will understand him better.

Remember, if you use spoken language with your child, you and your family will have to talk to your child as much as you can.

Be patient. Your child will take longer to learn language than children who can hear well. You will need to make your child use words even when it is easier to do things for him or give him things without waiting for him to ask you.

Your child will speak differently. Most deaf children talk differently than a child who can hear. It is natural to feel embarrassed at first by the way your child speaks. Once you get used to it, you can explain this to other people.



This child is wearing hearing aids in a body harness.

Different communities have different ideas about how deaf children should learn to communicate. A pre-school in southern India tries to teach young children who cannot hear well to speak, read, write, and listen.

They try to prepare deaf children to attend regular schools at the age of 5. Because the school wants children not to be ashamed of being deaf, they insist that children wear body-harness hearing aids (see page 219). Besides making sounds louder, this sort of hearing aid helps everyone see and accept that these children are different.

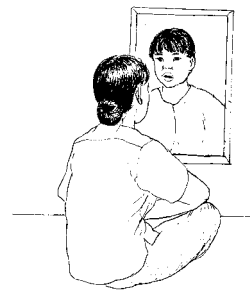
## BENEFITS OF USING SPOKEN LANGUAGE

- A child who communicates like other people in the community will have many more people who understand him.
- A child who uses a spoken language will be more ready for a school if that school does not use sign language.
- A child using spoken language may find it easier to read, because the language he speaks and the written language are similar.



## DIFFICULTIES WITH USING SPOKEN LANGUAGE

- Spoken communication usually works well only for a child who has some hearing (enough to hear the differences between many words) or for a child who became deaf after he had learned to speak.
- A child may find it difficult to read lips, because many sounds look the same on the lips or cannot be seen on the lips. For example, the words “baby,” “maybe,” and “pay me” all look the same. You can see this yourself in a mirror.
- A child who has difficulty hearing speech sounds will find it very difficult to speak clearly, because he cannot hear himself talk. His speech may not be understood by anyone but his family.
- Young children may not sit still for long lessons to teach language.
- Because so much effort goes into learning to talk and learning to understand what other people are saying, a child may miss learning more about the world.



the words “baby,” “maybe,” and “pay me” all look the same on the lips.

## Things to think about

Because each family—and each child—has different needs and abilities, there is no single method that is always right for everyone. The important thing is to work well with the resources you have. The next few pages give some information and ask some questions that can help you get the best results with your child.

### SIGN LANGUAGE

#### may succeed if:

- your family is able and willing to learn and use sign language.
- there are people or books that can teach sign language to your child and your family.
- there is a deaf school in your area that teaches sign language to students.

#### is more likely to succeed if:

- your family is patient and everyone works hard to learn and use sign language.
- there are people who can teach a complete local sign language to your child and your family.



### SPOKEN LANGUAGE

#### may succeed if:

- your child can hear some speech sounds (see Chapter 5, “What can your child hear?”).
- your child learned to speak and understand words before he lost his hearing.
- your child finds it easy to read lips (some children are better at it than others).

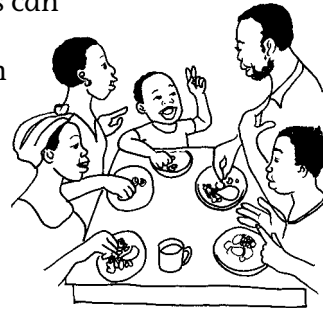
#### is more likely to succeed if:

- your child has a hearing aid that he uses almost all the time.
- your child gets professional help at a clinic or pre-school program for deaf children.



### How many people will your child be able to communicate with?

It is important for children who cannot hear well to communicate with many other people. A child who uses home signs can communicate with only the people in his home. A child who uses a more complete sign or spoken language will be able to communicate with more people. A child who can also read and write the local spoken language will be able to communicate with many more people.



**Make sure everyone signs whenever a child who uses sign language is present.**

Whether you use a spoken or sign language, it is very important that the whole family use it together. This way your child can communicate with everyone in the family. He will also feel included in the family and can learn about the world from their conversations.

People without hearing problems can learn sign language if they want to. The story on page 150 tells how people in a town in Brazil learned to communicate with deaf children.

### What if your child's first language is not your language?

Using the same language helps communication. But often the sign language used by deaf children to develop their minds and learn about the world is not the language used by their families. Many parents and deaf children who use different languages find it difficult to communicate with each other. They may not feel close to each other and become frustrated because it is so hard to understand each other. Deaf children may feel left out in the family home.

Sign language may be best for the child but less convenient for the family. Or it may draw attention to a child who communicates in a different way. But with the support of their communities, parents of deaf children can help their children learn the language that is right for them.

*I feel so happy now that I can use sign language with Amadou.*

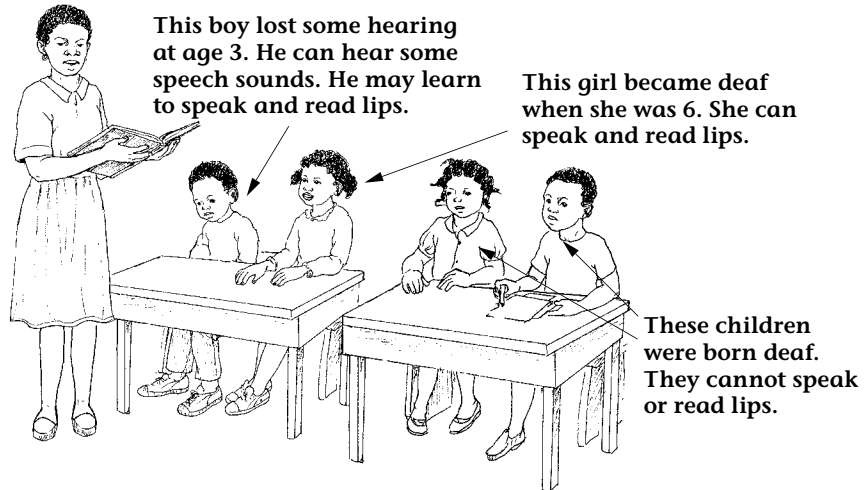


*And we can help his cousins learn to sign, too.*

### When did your child begin to have difficulty hearing?

If your child became deaf after he learned to speak, he may still be able to read people’s lips and improve his speech. He can continue to develop his language even after he loses his hearing. But if your child is born completely deaf or cannot hear speech sounds, it will be very difficult or impossible for him to learn to read lips or to speak.

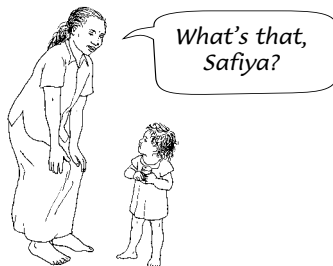
Children who learned to talk before they lost their hearing can speak better than children who were born deaf.



### How much can your child hear?

The more speech sounds (talking) a child can hear, the more he can use his hearing to understand words or parts of words, to read lips, and perhaps to learn to speak. Children who cannot hear speech sounds will have difficulty learning these skills or may never learn them.

This child can hear speech sounds. She might learn to read lips and to speak.



This child cannot hear any sounds at all. It will be very difficult or impossible for her to read lips or to speak.



### Will your child use a hearing aid?

A hearing aid may help your child understand words. But hearing aids do not help all children. Sometimes health professionals may suggest that your child use a hearing aid. Try to get opinions from other parents with children who wear hearing aids, and remember that each child's hearing is different. If you think you want to buy hearing aids for your child, read pages 219 to 224 to help you decide.

The people who sell hearing aids may give you some information about them. But they are not always the best people to ask for advice. They may be more interested in selling their products than about finding out what is right for your child. Sometimes the clinic or the hearing aid store may allow the child to use the hearing aid for a few days or weeks before deciding to buy it.



**A hearing aid may help your child. But it may not. Do not let anyone pressure you into buying something or make you feel guilty if you do not.**

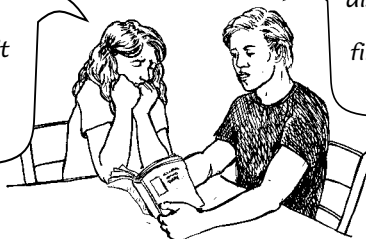
### How will I know if my child is learning?

It will take time to know if a child is learning a language. After you have worked with a language for several months or more, evaluate how your child is doing. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does my child understand more than she did before?
- Is my child using speech or sign more often than before?
- Does she seem interested in learning to communicate? Or is she getting more and more frustrated?
- Does my child have any behavior problems that may be caused by frustration with not knowing a language, or with not knowing it enough to understand and express herself?
- Do I enjoy communicating with my child, or is it always a frustrating experience?
- Can we communicate easily enough so that I am able to talk with my child about what is happening?
- Does my child communicate well with other people?
- Can my child understand the information that her brothers and sisters understand?

Parents are often told they must choose one language to communicate with their child and keep using it, no matter how much or how little their child is learning. Sometimes health workers encourage this, because they think one method is right and the others are wrong. But no method is perfect.

*I just want Leila to learn to talk. But I get so mad at her sometimes when I don't know what she wants. And she gets mad at me too.*



*Let's not get discouraged. We can work together to find some new ways to help her.*

If your child is not learning and is getting very frustrated, then try another approach. Each family must make their own decision based on their child's hearing and their situation.

## Who knows what is best for your child?

Many people have strong opinions about what language to use with deaf children. In many countries, using spoken language (oral communication) with deaf children has been the rule for many years. Sometimes, medical and education professionals tell you that all deaf children can learn to speak. This is not true, even though they may introduce you to a child who is deaf and who speaks perfectly.

Sometimes professionals tell you what they themselves were taught many years ago. They may tell you that you must use spoken language with your child or you are not being responsible. This is not true. You know your child and family situation better than they do.

*All children can learn to talk if you spend enough time practicing with them.*



*But I already spend all the time I can with Marta—and she still does not respond when I speak to her. And my other children and my sick mother need me too.*

*Maybe sign language would work better...*

## Use the language that works for your child

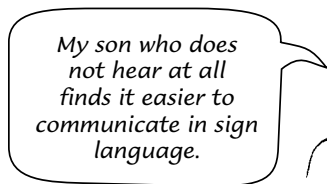
Your child needs to express himself and understand others. A child needs to know more than to say “mama” or “papa.” He needs to develop the ability to listen, to understand what is said, and to respond and communicate with others as easily fully as possible.



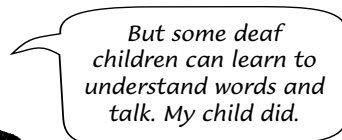
*My grandson uses over 500 words now!*

Parents and caregivers can help a child learn language in a way that makes it possible for him to absorb it. If you find that sign language does not work for your child, think about helping him learn a spoken language. Or if he does not seem to understand spoken language, try to help him learn sign language. Once children know and use one language well, it will be easier for them to learn another language.

Talking to parents whose children have learned a language—a sign language or a spoken language, or both—will help other parents who are trying to teach their children a language.



*My son who does not hear at all finds it easier to communicate in sign language.*



*But some deaf children can learn to understand words and talk. My child did.*

Even if they cannot hear words, deaf children can still learn to use written language. A child who is deaf learns how words look, rather than how they might sound. They see the relationships between symbols. (This is also how the written Chinese language works.) Deaf children who learn to use a language early—a spoken or a signed language—can learn to read and write well. It will help if they also meet deaf adults who can read.



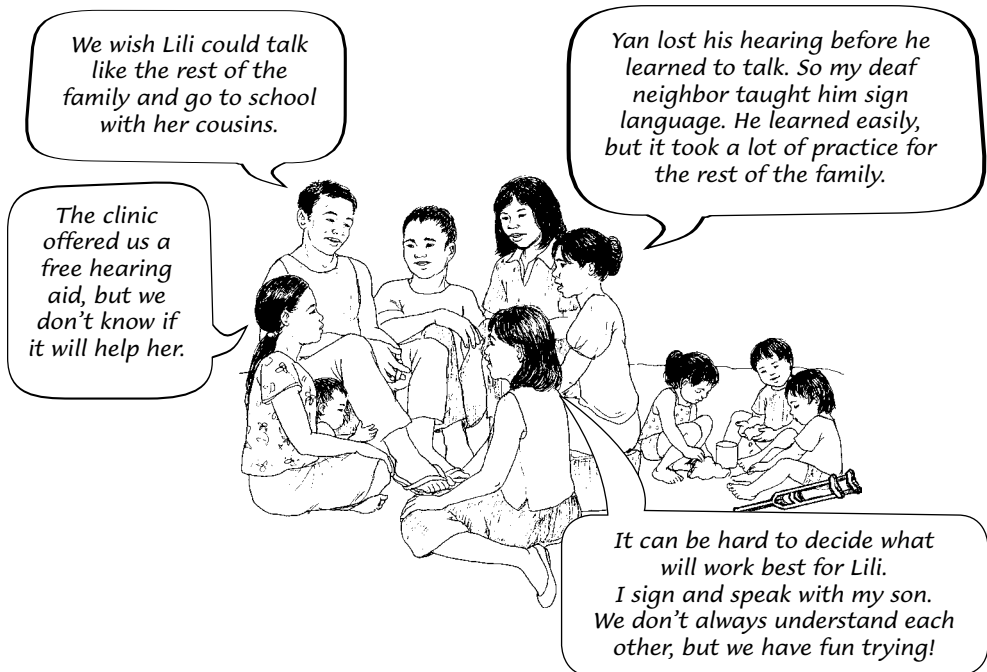
Sometimes deaf people do not learn to communicate when they are children. Although it is much better for young children to learn communication, older children and even adults can learn to communicate. Chapters 8 and 9 describe methods you can use to teach a language to children who are deaf or cannot hear well.

- To help a child learn a sign language, see Chapter 8.
- To help a child learn a spoken language, see Chapter 9.



## Resources that can help

How children who are deaf or cannot hear well learn a language will depend on the child, the resources available, the families and caregivers, and their communities. But it will be easier for parents and caregivers to help children learn a language if they get support from each other, from community organizations, from schools for the deaf, or from other organizations.

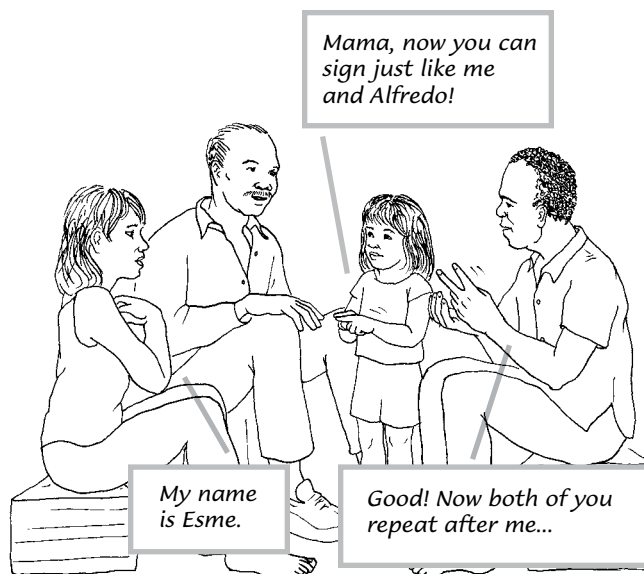


Resources in the community can include:

- a deaf community, deaf clubs, or someone who can teach your child and your family sign language.
- community-based rehabilitation programs, parents' groups, and other community-based groups.
- teachers in local schools, older deaf children, or others who are willing to try to teach your deaf child.
- a school that can teach deaf children.
- books and videos about issues of importance to deaf people, experience of life as a deaf person, and stories about successful deaf people.
- web pages and other Internet resources that you can find using a computer at a library, school, or internet cafe.

Learning to sign will also help your child get to know other people who are deaf. She will learn that deaf people are an important part of the community.

If there are deaf adults in your community, ask them to spend time with your family and to teach you all to sign.



If there are no deaf people in your area, try to contact your country's Association of the Deaf, or a school for deaf children. Try to get books to help you learn to sign. If this is not possible, continue to use local signs and gestures, and create more signs of your own.

The important thing is that you communicate as much as possible with your child. Most of all, children need people to love them, encourage them, and give them direction. This will help language become a part of children's lives.

**Your child should know that your love and approval do not depend on his ability to speak or sign.**

