

# Resources for Working with Youth with Special Needs

## Deaf/Hearing Impaired

In the United States, there are about 28,000,000 deaf individuals with hearing impairments ranging from mild to severe deafness.

A person who is deaf is unable to recognize sound. Hearing loss can be anywhere from mild (i.e., when the person only has difficulty hearing faint or distant speech) to severe (i.e., when the person only can feel vibrations).

### Help For Leaders

- Spend time with the person to find out his or her strengths and weaknesses, as well as their parents and teachers to gather clues for working effectively with the individual.
- Smile! Use positive body language and a gentle touch to signal your acceptance.
- Speak directly to the person who is deaf by maintaining eye contact throughout the conversation, even in the presence of an interpreter. Remember that the interpreter's function is to communicate, not think or answer for the person who is deaf.
- It is important for the person who is deaf to see your face. Be sure that it is well lighted and you do not cover your mouth or turn away in the middle of a sentence. Try to arrange your group so that everyone is visible.
- Enunciate clearly. It is not necessary to exaggerate or shout.
- Watch the person who is deaf carefully for facial expressions and body language to help you determine the success of your communication. A nod does not always indicate understanding any more than a lack of response indicates belligerence.
- When planning a meeting, visual aids are helpful. If you are showing a film, provide the member with a written agenda or outline for clear understanding.
- A designated notetaker during a discussion or presentation would also benefit the person who is hearing impaired. This allows him or her the opportunity to review what was said and to pick up on some points that may have been missed during the meeting.
- An individual who is deaf may have speech that is difficult, at first, to understand; however, once accustomed to it, you should be able to understand. If you are having trouble understanding, don't hesitate to ask them to repeat. Never say "It's not important" or "never mind." This may be interpreted as he or she is not important.
- Do not expect children with hearing impairment, to sit still for long periods. They use sight, touch, and smell to relate to people and things around them.

- Wearing a hearing aid does not necessarily indicate that the person can hear normally or understand the spoken word. The hearing aid may be for amplification of sound and not necessarily for clarifying the reception of the sound.
- Use patience, acceptance and understanding.

## Ways to Communicate with People Who Are Deaf

There are several ways for you and a person who is deaf to communicate. They include:

- **Pad and Pencil.** This is a fairly simple way of communicating. However, remember that for many people who are deaf, English is a second language (sign language being first), just as French or Spanish might be for an individual who can hear.
- **Lip Reading.** This is a difficult skill. Only about 30 to 40 percent of the English language is even visible on the lips. For example, watch yourself in the mirror as you say the words "bump" and "pump." These words look the same on your lips but have very different meanings. Never assume that the person you are speaking to can lip read.
- **Fingerspelling.** This is a manual form of communication (done with the hand). The hand and fingers spell out letters of the alphabet to form words. Children love to learn this type of skill and learn it easily. You may find that many members of your club already know fingerspelling.
- **Sign Language.** This is the language that people who are deaf perform with the hands. A combination of hand movements and positions are used to express thoughts and phrases. If there is no sign for a thought, fingerspelling is used to spell it out. There are several different sign languages. The most prevalent are American Sign Language (ASL or AMESLAN) and Signed English (SIGLIGH). Learning to sign would be a great project for your 4-H club.

## Resources

Sarkees-Wircenski, M., and Scott, J. L. (1995). *Vocational special needs*. Homewood, IL: American Technical Publishers, Inc.

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