

Communication and Language Options

As a parent, it is never too early to begin thinking about how you can help your child build a solid language foundation. This is even more important for a child who is deaf/hard of hearing because children who are deaf/hard of hearing are more likely to have language delays. When a child's hearing loss is identified soon after birth, families and professionals can make sure the child gets intervention services at a very early age. This will help the child build communication and language skills using his or her best abilities.

The difference between language and communication

Language: Languages are used to help people communicate. Languages are made up of words and rules (grammar) that tell how these words are used. Words can be spoken, signed or written and thus languages can be spoken, signed or written. Examples of spoken languages include English, Spanish and French. Examples of signed languages include American Sign Language, British Sign Language and Italian Sign Language.

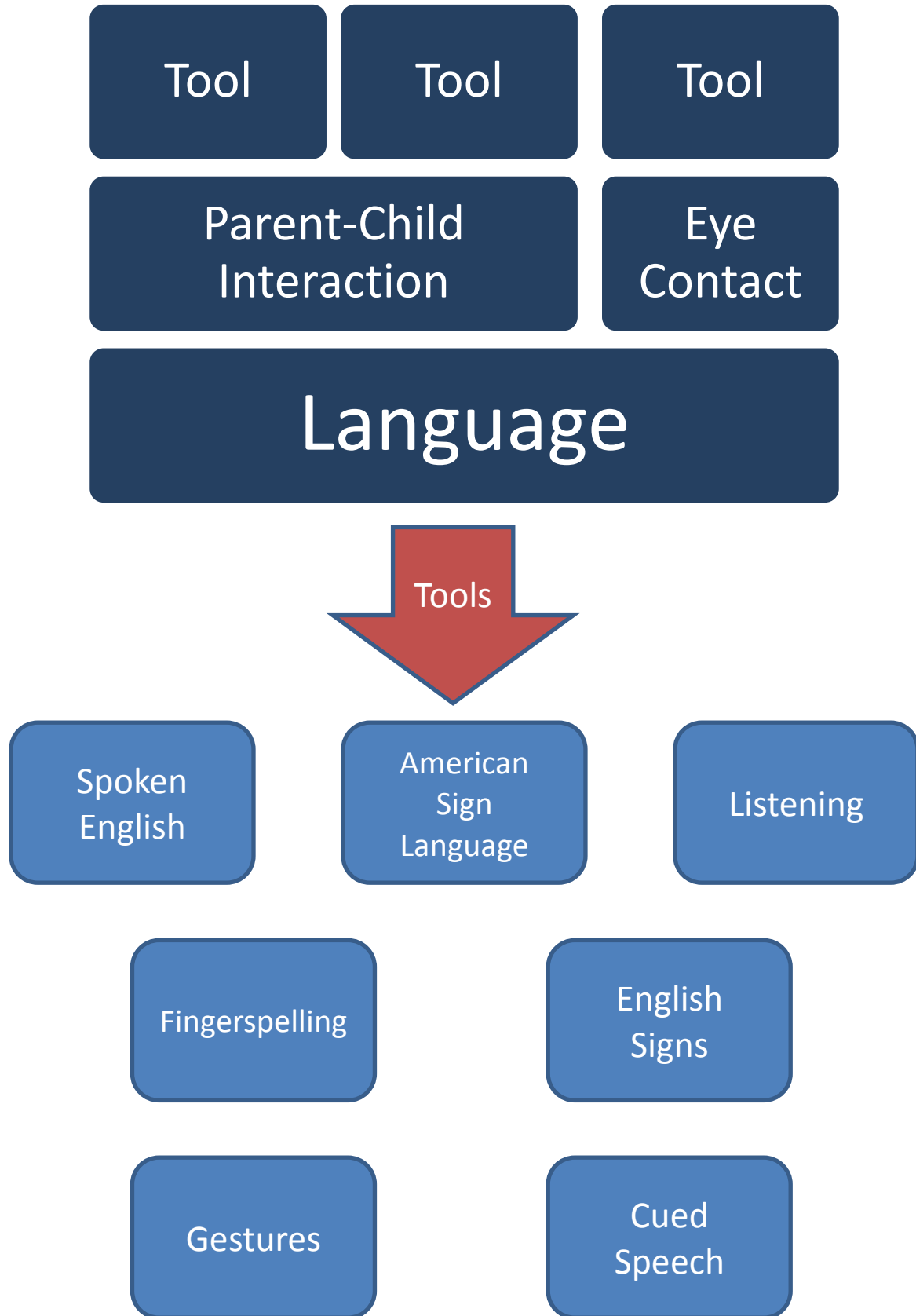
Communication: Communication is about sharing ideas, facts, thoughts, and other important information. Language can be used to share this information either by speaking or signing.

Building language(s) with communication tools

Imagine language as the foundation of a house. A family can use communication strategies (or tools) to build onto the language foundation. When families begin communication, it is so important to establish eye contact and parent-child interactions. Both of these are the next steps to developing a strong bond and a strong communication system.

Once you have those in place, it is important to select the tools that support your child in developing a language. For each child who is deaf/hard of hearing, the combination of tools will be different. It is important that you investigate each of these tools so that you can pick the ones that will be most supportive for your family. These can change at any time, and some of the tools that you pick in the beginning may not end up being the best tools for your child. Work with your early intervention team so they can help you determine if the tools you have chosen are working for you child and for you.

Here is a picture to help you imagine how you will be building your child's language. Remember, the tools you pick are individual for your child and family.



Tools that support language

Here is an introduction to some possible languages and communication tools that you can use to build the languages. There are more communication tools that you will discover in other sections of this resource guide, but these are the most common.

American Sign Language (ASL)

Signs: Signs in ASL are created using handshapes, facial expressions, body posture and movement. Some examples are:

Fingerspelling: Fingerspelling began as a part of ASL. Fingerspelling spells words by forming each letter using the hands and fingers. Very young children do not need to know how a word is spelled to understand fingerspelling. Instead they learn fingerspelled words by the shape and movement of the hand.

Spoken English

Spoken words: Spoken words are formed using the vocal cords (voice) and mouth and are made of speech sounds such as vowel and consonant sounds.

Listening: Using the child's residual hearing and the benefit of amplification to help them access spoken languages through listening.

English Sign Systems

Note: English sign systems use visual methods to express the spoken English language. Coding systems are not a language of their own

Manually Coded English (MCE): Manually Coded English, or MCE, is made up of signs (hand shapes and hand motions) that represent English words. You might have heard of Morse code. Morse code is a system of dots and dashes that can be tapped out to form English words and phrases. MCE is a code for the English language. Many of the signs in MCE are borrowed from ASL. However, the grammar, word order, and sentence structure used in MCE are those of the English language. MCE does not use the grammar, word order, and sentence structure of ASL.

Signing Exact English (SEE): Signing Exact English (SEE) is a sign language system that represents literal English. It is a tool to make visible everything that is not heard. SEE includes many signs that are taken from ASL; however, the sentence structure, the idioms, the verb endings, etc. are taken from English. In essence, SEE is a visual form of English.

Conceptually Accurate Signed English (CASE): Conceptually Accurate Signed English, or CASE, is sometimes used by people who are deaf or hard of hearing to communicate with one another. Sometimes it is called PSE, or Pidgin Sign English. CASE is a mix of English and ASL. CASE is not a language. It is a form of communication that varies depending on the experience and preferences of the people using it.

Other communication tools:

Cued Speech: Cued speech, or cueing, can help people who are deaf or hard of hearing understand speech. Cued speech is not a language or a representation of a language. Instead, it is a system of hand signals used by the speaker to help the listener tell the difference between certain speech sounds. Some speech sounds are hard to tell apart using speech reading alone. (One example is the difference between the sound of “b” and the sound of “p”). Cued speech consists of eight hand shapes representing consonant sounds. These are placed at four locations near the mouth to represent vowel sounds. Cued speech must be used in combination with speech reading.

Natural gestures: Natural gestures are body movements and facial expressions that you often use to help others understand your message. For instance, if you want to hold a child, you can simply stretch your arms towards the child. Or, when you put your index finger over your mouth and nose you are telling someone to be quiet. These are examples of natural gestures.

The critical period for language development

It is extremely important to remember that children have a “critical period” for learning language. This is true no matter which communication strategies and communication tools you choose to help your child learn language. Children learn language best during early childhood. It is more difficult to learn a language later in life. This is true for sign languages, like ASL, and for spoken languages, like English.