

## Teaching students in VET who have a hearing loss: Understanding the impact of deafness

### There are many variations of deafness, but are there any common experiences among people with a hearing loss?

One common factor with deafness is the way it impedes access to information and communication. Another is the fact that deafness is invisible. These two factors create an environment where deafness and deaf people may be misunderstood by others.

Most people with a normal level of hearing are unaware of the amount of information they absorb. This happens unconsciously and effortlessly as we go about our day-to-day lives. We overhear conversations in public, catch snippets of information from a radio or TV in the background and so forth. While we may not be aware of it, we know a great deal because of our capacity to tune in and out of the cacophony of information that happens around us each day.

A person with significant deafness misses out on most or all of this bombardment of information. That may sound like a good thing, but the reality for a person with a hearing loss is that at least some of the time, crucial information is also being missed. For someone with early life deafness, these gaps can create significant barriers, especially when undertaking a course of study.

### What does early life deafness mean?

It means that a person has had a hearing loss either since birth or they have experienced a hearing loss before 4 years of age. A related term is *pre-lingually* deaf, which means a person's deafness occurred before the development of language.

### What difference does this make?

It makes a big difference. A child with a hearing loss is usually born to hearing parents. This is the case for approximately 90% of deaf or hard of hearing children. One of the major impacts of early life deafness is the way the hearing loss affects how the child learns language and discovers the world around them. For a hearing child, this happens effortlessly in an unconscious and unstructured way by listening to and copying the language they hear around them.

A child with a significant hearing loss with hearing parents will need to be more consciously supported in their language acquisition, as well other aspects of the world around them. For example, some things make noise while others do not. For some children, developing native-like fluency in spoken or written English can be a significant challenge.

This may be very different where a child is born deaf to parents who are also deaf and use Auslan (Australian Sign Language). In this situation the child will be immersed in an environment that understands the communication needs of the child and can respond accordingly. In this type of environment, a deaf child will learn a signed language as their first language, the same way as hearing children learn a spoken language.

### What are the long-term implications of early life deafness?

Early life deafness can have a number of effects. This will vary from person to person, and it is important to remember that no two people will be the same.

One of the most common issues relates to English literacy. Without easy, day-to-day access to spoken English, developing English literacy is an enormous challenge. For many deaf people it's a life-long challenge and few achieve native-like fluency. While many people do achieve sufficient literacy skills to successfully interact in the world, some people are unable to gain literacy skills beyond early primary school level.

It is important to remember that this is not a reflection of the deaf person's intelligence or ability to learn. Rather, it is an indication of how difficult a task it is to learn the written form of a language when a person has little or no access to its spoken form.

### Where can I find more information for teachers about deaf and hard of hearing students?

The deafConnectEd website has further information about supporting deaf and hard of hearing students in the VET sector including multimedia resources at:  
[www.deafconnected.com.au/resources](http://www.deafconnected.com.au/resources)

Alternatively, contact us to discuss your needs. We provide a state-wide service to support the VET sector and to enhance the participation and learning experience of deaf students. We are happy to answer questions by telephone or email or we can visit your institute to provide coaching and advice to teaching staff in your department.

## More Information

For the latest news and information about the services and support offered by deafConnectEd, visit our website at:  
[www.deafconnected.com.au](http://www.deafconnected.com.au)

Our website includes information and resources about:

- deafness and hearing loss
- the education needs of students who are deaf and hard of hearing
- support services for students, including Auslan interpreters and notetakers
- learning Auslan
- research and links to publications

deafConnectEd is located at:

Cook House  
597 St Kilda Road (Corner of High Street)  
Melbourne VIC 3004  
Australia

**Phone:** 03 9269 8306  
**Fax:** 03 9269 8669  
**SMS only:** 0427 429 968