

pre-college national mission programs

Principles for Reading to Deaf Children

by David R. Schleper

The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.

National Academy of Education Commission on Reading 1985

The ultimate authorities in reading to deaf children are deaf adults. Comparative studies of deaf children with hearing parents and deaf children with deaf parents show the deaf children with deaf parents are superior in academic achievement, reading and writing, and social development (Ewoldt, Hoffmeister, & Israelite, 1992). Hearing parents and teachers can learn from the read aloud strategies used by deaf parents. The following 15 principles have been identified based on research that examined deaf parents and deaf teachers reading to deaf children.

1. Deaf readers translate stories using American Sign Language.
2. Deaf readers keep both languages visible (ASL and English).
3. Deaf readers are not constrained by the text.
4. Deaf readers re-read stories on a storytelling to story reading continuum.
5. Deaf readers follow the child's lead.
6. Deaf readers make what is implied explicit.
7. Deaf readers adjust sign placement to fit the story.
8. Deaf readers adjust signing style to fit the story.
9. Deaf readers connect concepts in the story to the real world.
10. Deaf readers use attention maintenance strategies.
11. Deaf readers use eye gaze to elicit participation.
12. Deaf readers engage in role play to extend concepts.
13. Deaf readers use ASL variations to sign repetitive English phrases.
14. Deaf readers provide a positive and reinforcing environment.
15. Deaf readers expect the child to become literate.

Related Links:

[Shared Reading, Shared Success](#)

© 1996 by David R. Schleper, Pre-College National Mission Programs, Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C. Used by permission.

1. Deaf readers translate stories using American Sign Language.

When it comes to reading stories to deaf children, one of the most prominent dilemmas is whether to sign the stories in ASL or in a manual code developed to represent English. Parents and teachers worry that if they don't sign every word in English word order, the deaf children will not pick up on the English in the text. However, a look at research on how deaf mothers and fathers read to their children makes it clear: they use ASL to read the stories to their children (Lartz & Lestina, 1995; Mather, 1989; Schick & Gale, 1995; Whitesell, 1991). A study by Schick and Gale (1995) noted that children found stories told in ASL more interesting and engaging.



2. Deaf readers keep both languages visible (ASL and English).

Although deaf readers use American Sign Language, they also place great importance on the written English of the text. Deaf parents demonstrate this when they read to their deaf children by keeping the English print visible while they interpret the story in ASL ([Akamatsu & Andrews, 1993](#); [Lartz & Lestina, 1995](#); [Mather, 1989](#); [Schleper, 1995b](#); [Stewart, Bonkowski, & Bennett, 1990](#)). This allows the children to look freely from parent (ASL) to the book (English), making sense of both. In one reading session, a deaf child interrupted his mother to ask, Where does it say that? The mother traced her finger along the part of the story that she had just signed. The child looked from the page to his mom, back to the page again, then looked again to his mother and with a nod signaled that he was ready for her to proceed with the rest of the story. Researchers have observed deaf parents frequently calling attention to text in a story, then signing, then pointing again to the text to help the child connect to both languages. In related research, [Mather \(1989\)](#) observed a deaf and hearing teacher read stories to deaf students in a classroom. One primary difference observed by the two readers, both fluent signers, was that the hearing teacher did not keep the text visible while signing a story to her class, while the deaf teacher did.



3. Deaf readers are not constrained by the text.

[Erting \(1991\)](#) observed a deaf teacher reading the story *Noisy Nora* by Rosemary Wells to a group of preschool children. This, translated from ASL, is what the teacher signed:

Daddy is busy. So, Nora goes over to see Mommy, taps Mommy, and says, Mommy. But Mommy has to pick the baby up and burp the baby. Maybe the baby has to burp. So she is patting him on the back. Nora tries to get Mommy's attention, but Mommy is busy with the baby.

This is what the text on the page said:

Jack needed burping.

Obviously, the deaf reader has elaborated extensively on the text. The other information comes from the illustrations, from what has happened in the story thus far, from the underlying theme of the book, and from the needs of the deaf children who are enjoying the story. The reader helps build the background knowledge necessary to understand the story. This tendency to elaborate on the text has also been observed in deaf mothers ([Andrews & Taylor, 1987](#)). This suggests that when reading to deaf children, parents and teachers need not be obsessively concerned about knowing each and every word within the text, but should place higher priority on conveying the story.



4. Deaf readers re-read stories on a "storytelling" to "story reading" continuum.

Like their hearing counterparts, emerging deaf readers enjoy having the same story read over and over to them. [Trelease \(1995\)](#) explains that this is a natural and necessary part of language development.

"These rereadings coincide with the way children learn. Like their parents, they are most comfortable with the familiar, and when they are relaxed, they are better able to absorb. The repetition improves their vocabulary, sequencing, and memory skills. Research shows that preschoolers often ask as many questions (and sometimes the same questions) after a dozen

readings of the same book, because they are learning language in increments not all at once. Each reading often brings an inch or two of meaning to the story."

According to Schleper (1995a), deaf readers elaborate on the text extensively the first time they read a story, but then each successive reading of the same text has less and less elaboration. The signing comes closer and closer to the actual text. What occurs is a continuum, moving from a great deal of signed elaboration toward a more direct translation of the English text into American Sign Language.

The same process is used by teachers in a process known as shared reading, where the same story is read and re-read in the classroom to help emerging readers learn about stories (Schleper, 1995b). One can logically conclude that deaf readers use less elaboration in subsequent readings of the same text because they have already built the background knowledge the child needs during the initial readings of the story.



5. Deaf readers follow the child's lead.

Deaf readers let children take the lead during read aloud sessions (Ewoldt, 1994; Maxwell, 1984; Van der Lem & Timmerman, 1990). This can be as simple as allowing the deaf child to select the book to be read, permitting the child to turn the pages, and waiting for the child to examine the pictures and text in a book and then look up prior to reading the story.

Following the child's lead also involves adjusting the reading style to fit the child's developmental level. With young children, or children who have had limited exposure to books, this may mean initially focusing on what is happening in the pictures. As children grow older and their attention spans increase, deaf adults tend to read more complete versions of the texts. This can be illustrated by observing a deaf father while reading to his deaf children, a daughter, 3, and a son, 6 (Schleper, 1995a).

The father initially read *Little Red Riding Hood* by William Wegman to his young daughter. This book has lots of text that accompanies photos of dogs dressed up as characters in the story. As the father read the story, his daughter turned the pages. She was clearly interested in the pictures. Following his daughter's lead, the father allowed her lots of time to examine each picture; when she looked back at him, he signed what was happening. During this reading, the father essentially ignored the printed text and instead retold the familiar tale.

In contrast, when he read to his 6-year-old son, the father followed the text, carefully translating into ASL. The son also held the book and turned the pages. The father traced his finger along the text before signing each page, and occasionally paused to allow his son to fill in the next part of text. Because the son was already beginning to read on his own, the father was again following his child's lead.

Although deaf parents consistently follow their children's lead, classroom teachers seem to struggle with this concept. Ewoldt (1994) observed parents and teachers in booksharing sessions over a four-year period and noted that parents were more likely to follow the children's lead, while teachers were more inclined to establish their own agenda and struggle to get children to fit into this agenda.



6. Deaf readers make what is implied explicit. When deaf readers sign a story, they tend to add information to emphasize ideas in a story that are not directly stated in the text, but are clearly implied. For example, when a deaf father read *Little Red Riding Hood* to his daughter, he explained how the wolf donned Red Riding Hood's grandmother's clothing. Then the father added, "He is trying to fool the girl." The text never stated directly the reason behind the action, but the deaf reader wanted to make the reason obvious for his daughter. The addition of information to make the meaning of the story explicit, or to clearly state the main idea or moral of a story, appears to be a

common technique used by deaf readers.

This principle can be further illustrated by examining how deaf readers interpret the story, *The Dancing Fly*, by Joy Cowley. This is a predictable story about a pesky fly that buzzes around a store and annoys a storekeeper, who tries unsuccessfully to swat the fly with a fly swatter. The first couple of lines of the text are: "There was a little fly, and it flew into the store. It danced on the window, and it danced on the door." Schleper observed 10 different deaf readers sign the story. Inevitably, each reader began the story in a similar manner. First he or she introduced the fly, then added a sign for "arrogant" or "big-headed." Although the text never mentions the fly's personality, this characteristic is implied throughout the story through the struggle between the storekeeper and the fly.

Like most of the principles observed with deaf parents and deaf teachers, this technique appears to be intuitive and unconscious on the part of the deaf readers. However, one can surmise that such a practice directly impacts the deaf children's reading achievement. By modeling the comprehension process and reading between the lines, deaf readers are showing how a story has meaning that goes beyond the printed text.



7. Deaf readers adjust sign placement to fit the story.

A common strategy used by deaf adults reading to deaf children is to adjust the placement of signs to maintain interest and variety (Akamatsu & Andrews, 1993; Lartz & Lestina, 1995; Van der Lem & Timmerman, 1990). Occasionally, the reader will place a sign directly on a child, such as making the sign for "cat" directly on the child's face. Other times, the reader will make the sign on the book or an illustration. For example, a deaf parent might use the classifier for a vehicle, place the sign on an illustration of a car, and then move the sign along the picture of the road in a book, as if the car is driving along the street.

In one situation, a father who was reading to his daughter came to the last picture in a book about Little Red Riding Hood. In the picture, Red Riding Hood and her grandmother were eating cake with the woodsman. The father asked, "Are you hungry?" When his daughter nodded, the father mimed taking a piece of cake from the picture and offered it to his daughter. His use of sign placement helped his daughter interact with the story.

At other times, deaf parents make the signs in the usual place. It appears that variation in placement of the signs, from on the child, to on the text, to the regular place, helps deaf children connect to the stories being read.



8. Deaf readers adjust signing style to fit the story.

Critical aspects of speech are tone, intensity, and pitch of voice. Skilled readers to hearing children vary their intonation and volume to give life to the characters in the story. They vary their pitch to illustrate the high pitched voice of the baby bear or the booming voice of the papa bear in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

In a similar way, deaf readers adjust their signing style to bring characters to life. A skilled deaf reader will adopt a more rigid, stilted signing style to portray an uptight person, sign using miniature signs and small signing space to depict someone who is timid, or use big exaggerated signs to show a "loud" character.

Research on deaf parents shows that they use extensive variation in how they make their signs to make the stories interesting for their deaf children (Lartz & Lestina, 1995; Mather, 1989; Stewart, Bonkowski, & Bennett, 1990; Van der Lem & Timmerman, 1990).



9. Deaf readers connect concepts in the story to the real world.

Skillful deaf readers constantly relate experiences of their own to the characters and events in the stories they are reading ([Akamatsu & Andrews, 1993](#); [Andrews & Taylor, 1987](#); [Lartz & Lestina, 1995](#); [Stewart, Bonkowski, & Bennett, 1990](#); [Whitesell, 1991](#)). Deaf readers help children build this skill by regularly making connections between the story and the lives of the children they are reading to. As one deaf mother read a story about a cat which lapped up some milk, she added, "You know, the same as Sparky (their dog) drinks his water." The child laughed and nodded, clearly making the connection of their shared experience.

A father who read *Whales, the Gentle Giants* to his children paused periodically to help them connect the story to their own experiences. The children had chosen the book because it reminded them of the movie *Free Willy*. After the father read a section of the text about a blue whale, he turned to his 3-year-old daughter and asked, "Are whales big or small?" "Big," the girl replied. "Really big!" the father agreed. Then his 6-year-old son walked over to the far wall of the family room to show his sister how big a blue whale really is. "That big," he said.

His father told him that a blue whale is much bigger, but they remained skeptical. Then the father tried to help the children relate the whale's size to objects in their own lives. He said, "It's huge. It's the same as when you see a football field. It's big, right? This whale is bigger!"



10. Deaf readers use attention maintenance strategies.

It is perfectly natural for deaf children to look away or down at the book sometimes while an adult is reading a story. Although this can be frustrating, experienced deaf readers find appropriate ways to respond ([Akamatsu & Andrews, 1993](#); [Andrews & Taylor, 1987](#); [Lartz & Lestina, 1995](#); [Van der Lem & Timmerman, 1990](#)). Usually, deaf readers wait patiently until the child looks up again, then continue to read. Deaf readers also use a variety of strategies to keep their deaf children's attention.

Most commonly, a parent will lightly tap the child on the shoulder or leg to get attention. If the parent is sitting alongside the child, the parent will often gently nudge the child, or shift the book to first draw the child's attention back to the text, and then to the waiting parent. The deaf parent also uses facial expression to maintain attention, and eye contact appears to be central in holding the child's interest. One behavior noticed with hearing parents and teachers, but absent with deaf parents, is grabbing the child by the chin and forcibly pulling the child's face to attention.

While young children sometimes do this with their parents, it is not an acceptable practice to model for the children. Deaf readers also recognize the power of peripheral vision. They note that deaf children pick up a lot even when they are not looking directly at the reader's signs. And, since the deaf reader will often read the same story over and over again, the child will have plenty of opportunities to get any information missed during any one reading.



11. Deaf readers use eye gaze to elicit participation.

Eye contact is clearly an important consideration when reading to deaf children. [Mather \(1989\)](#) researched the importance of eye gaze when reading to deaf children. She found readers used two types of eye gaze during reading sessions individual and group gaze. One deaf teacher used group gaze effectively to involve all of the students in the reading and individual gaze to direct questions or comments to particular children.

Mather noticed that hearing teachers sometimes used inappropriate eye gaze with deaf students, leading to miscommunication during reading sessions. One teacher, for example, commented to her

class, "Some of you don't know this story." Instead of including the whole group, her gaze was focused on just one student. The child being singled out replied defensively, I know! I know! It is clear that eye gaze plays a key role in maintaining attention and eliciting responses during read aloud sessions.



12. Deaf readers engage in role play to extend concepts.

Several researchers point out that deaf readers often act out parts of a story to help clarify meaning (Ewoldt, 1984; Mather, 1989; Rogers, 1989). A deaf teacher who was reading *The Three Little Kittens* to a group of preschool deaf children noticed that the children were not following the story. Quickly, the teacher mimed the kittens tracking mud into the house. Then she brought the children into the role play by becoming the mother cat and scolding the kittens. The children's grins demonstrated their renewed understanding and involvement.

A mother and her 4-year-old deaf son also used role play during a session with the book *Roll Over! A Counting Song* by Merle Peek. This story is about a boy who shares his bed with nine animals. Each time they roll over, one animal falls out of bed. During the booksharing session, the deaf mother and her son were sitting on the bed as the mother read, "Ten in the bed and the little one said, 'Roll over! Roll over!' They all rolled over and one fell out."

When she finished the section, her son stood up and fell dramatically off his bed, landing exactly in the same spot as the monkey in the book. He climbed back into bed, and as his mother went on reading, he continued to role play the animals, each time falling happily out of bed.



13. Deaf readers use ASL variations to sign repetitive English phrases.

Many predictable books for young children have phrases that are repeated over and over again. For example, "He huffed and he puffed and he blew the house in," from *The Three Little Pigs*, or "Fee! Fie! Fo! Fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman!" from *Jack and the Beanstalk*. When deaf readers read these repetitive phrases, they don't always sign them the exact same way. In fact, evidence suggests that deaf readers vary the way they sign repetitive English phrases. In these situations, the children see the English text remain constant in the book, while also being exposed to various ways to sign the concepts.

Sometimes these sign variations are used to maintain interest in the story. For example, in the story *Roll Over! A Counting Song* by Merle Peek, the chant, "Roll over! Roll over!" is repeated 10 times as each character in turn rolls off the bed. When a deaf mother read this book to her son, she pointed to the English text (which was the same each time), but then signed the text in various ways. Sometimes she used a classifier to show the animals rolling together. Other times, she used a different sign for "roll." Sometimes she used other variations.

The variety of ways she used to express the concept seemed to hold her son's interest in the story. Other times the use of sign variations helped to convey increased intensity or "volume," such as when each successive troll crosses over the bridge in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. While the English words remained the same, the deaf adult used different ASL translations each time the English phrase was repeated. Perhaps the readers were subconsciously demonstrating that there is no direct word-to-sign correspondence between English and ASL, and that, in fact, there are multiple ways to convey the English meaning in American Sign Language. In the process, the deaf readers are also developing the children's signed vocabulary, and, one can assume, promoting the children's ability to make meaning from the English text.



14. Deaf readers provide a positive and reinforcing environment.

Reading is supposed to be fun. It is also supposed to involve the construction of meaning through reciprocal interaction between readers and text. Unfortunately, in many classrooms with deaf children, the teacher controls both the interactions and the interpretation of the text. [Ewoldt](#) (1994) observed extensive control on the part of teachers during booksharing. The teachers she observed used a variety of correction responses to children's comments. Those responses ranged from simply telling a child, "You're wrong," to ignoring the child's answer, providing a different answer, changing the meaning of a child's message to fit the teacher's version of the story, or restating the teacher's own interpretation.

In contrast, research with deaf parents shows they provided a positive, interactive environment ([Akamatsu & Andrews](#), 1993; [Andrews & Taylor](#), 1987; [Ewoldt](#), 1994; [Rogers](#), 1989). They did not seek "correct" answers from the children during reading. Rather, they set up a mutually rewarding atmosphere that encouraged the creative interpretation of text. In one reading session ([Schleper](#), 1995a), a deaf father was reading *Little Red Riding Hood* to his daughter. His daughter tapped his knee, then turned back to the previous page and pointed. "Look at the teeth!" she said. "Yeah, the teeth are sharp! Like fangs," the father said, reinforcing the child's observation. "They have blood on them," the daughter pointed out. The father questioned this, pointing to the illustration. "Where?" he asked. They examined the picture together. "Maybe you're right. They do have blood!" the father said.

Instead of ignoring his daughter, or telling her she was wrong, the father let her make her point. His positive, reinforcing response helped make booksharing enjoyable. And when the read aloud sessions are enjoyable, it is more likely that the child will retain fond, positive associations with books and reading.



15. Deaf readers expect the child to become literate.

A final principle that seems to underlie the read aloud sessions between deaf adults and deaf children is the positive belief in the children's abilities. [Whitesell](#) (1991) observed a deaf teacher with a reputation for producing good, enthusiastic readers, hoping to determine which of her teaching strategies and practices seemed most critical. After observing for an extended period of time, Whitesell discovered the key: "The teacher expected them to become literate."

Most deaf parents do not read to their children in order to teach them English or to instruct them in the reading process. They want to share their own love of books. While they may expect some academic benefit for the children, that is clearly secondary. When [Schleper](#) (1995a) asked deaf parents if they thought their children would become literate in English, they all replied, "Of course!" There was never any doubt.



References

See [A Look at the Research](#) for an in-depth examination of the references below.

Akamatsu, C.T., & Andrews, J.F. (1993). It takes two to be literate: Literacy interactions between parent and child. *Sign Language Studies*, 81, 333-360.

Andrews, J.F., & Taylor, N.E. (1987). From sign to print: A case study of picture book reading between mother and child. *Sign Language Studies*, 56, 261-274.

Erting, L. (1991). Unpublished paper. Washington, DC: Kendall Demonstration Elementary School.

Ewoldt, C. (1994). Booksharing: Teachers and parents reading to deaf children. In A.D. Flurkey and R.J. Meyers, Eds., *Under the whole language umbrella: Many cultures, many voices*, pp. 331-342. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Ewoldt, C., Hoffmeister, R., & Israelite, N. (1992). *Bilingual/bicultural education for deaf and hard of hearing students: A review of the literature on the effects of native sign language on minority language acquisition*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.

Lartz, M.N., & Lestina, L.J. (1995). Strategies deaf mothers use when reading to their young deaf or hard of hearing children. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 140 (4), 358-362.

Mather, S.A. (1989). Visually oriented teaching strategies with deaf preschool children. In C. Lucas, Ed., *The sociolinguistics of the deaf community*, pp. 165-187. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Maxwell, M. (1984). A deaf child's natural development of literacy. *Sign Language Studies*, 44, 191-224.

Rogers, D. (1989, Sept.-Oct.). Show me bedtime reading. *Perspectives for Teachers of the Hearing Impaired*, 8 (1).

Schick, B. & Gale, E. (1995). Preschool deaf and hard of hearing students interactions during ASL and English storytelling. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 140 (4), 363-370.

Schleper, D.R. (1995a). Reading to deaf children: Learning from deaf adults. *Perspectives in Education and Deafness*, 13 (4), 4-8.

Schleper, D.R. (1995b). Read it again and again . . . and again. *Perspectives in Education and Deafness*, 14 (2), 16-19, 24.

Stewart, D., Bonkowski, N. & Bennett, D. (1990). *Considerations and implications when reading stories to young deaf children*. Occasional Paper No. 13. East Lansing, MI: Institute for Research in Teaching, MSU.

Trelease, J. (1995). *The read aloud handbook*. NY: Penguin Books.

Van der Lem, T., & Timmerman, D. (1990). Joint picture book reading in signs: An interaction between parent and child. In Prillwitz, Siegmund, Vollhaber (Eds.), *Sign language research and application: Proceedings of the international congress. Hamburg, March 23-25, 1990*. Amsterdam: Signum.

Whitesell, K.M. (1991). *Reading between the lines: How one deaf teacher demonstrates the reading process*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH.

For many years, educators have known that children who come from homes in which storybook reading takes place have an educational advantage over those who do not. These children are more likely to read before they are given formal instruction, and those who are not early readers are more likely to learn to read with ease when formal instruction does begin.

--Dorothy Strickland & Denny Taylor, 1989

[[A Look at the Research](#)] [[Literacy Home Page](#)]



*Questions or comments regarding the above subject matter should be sent to:
David R. Schleper DRSCHLEPER@gallua.gallaudet.edu*

*Web page comments may be sent to:
Ken Kurlychek k_kurlychek@gallua.gallaudet.edu*

*Last modified February 14, 1997
Copyright © 1997, All Rights Reserved
Pre-College National Mission Programs*



Gallaudet University
800 Florida Ave. NE
Washington, DC 20002-3695