

# HOLIDAY GATHERINGS:

## What Parents Want You to Know

A Practical Guide to Supporting Parents  
and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children  
at Family Gatherings



Created by:  
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CONNECT**



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## Introduction

This guide is designed for anyone who interacts with families that include Deaf or Hard of Hearing members. Its purpose is to help us understand how our attitudes and beliefs shape the way we plan and participate in family gatherings. Please share this with friends and relatives. For more information, scan the QR code on the next page to read two related blogs.

## Why Is This Guide Important?

When Deaf children are deprived of language during holiday gatherings, they are not just missing words; they are missing the very moments that form family, faith, and identity. While others share stories, jokes, prayers, and traditions, these children are left watching from the margins.

Without access to language, they are cut off from knowledge, relationships, and the ability to understand God, themselves, others, and the world around them. Their world stays small, not because of their minds, but because we failed to make room for their language and their existence.

Inclusion at the holidays isn't merely about politeness. It is about opening the door to belonging, memories, and meaning. When we create an environment where sign language is welcomed and used, we don't just invite Deaf children to the table - we expand their world.

This year, don't let a child sit in silence while the room is full of joy. Your intentionality may be the difference between exclusion and belonging.

Together, we can help every parent and child feel seen, heard, and included this holiday season.



”

**The limits of my language mean  
the limits of my world.**

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

# Scan for More Resources and a Downloadable Copy



[How to Combat  
Dinner Table Syndrome](#)



[Holiday Gatherings:  
What Parents Want You to Know](#)



# Understanding the Term “Hearing” and Why Values Matter

At Deaf Kids Connect, one of our core values is Integrate. We believe true harmony comes from connecting the Deaf and Hearing worlds in a way that honors both. Integration means recognizing that each world holds values of equal worth and offers something meaningful. When these values meet, we gain opportunities to learn, share, and grow together. Our long-term goal is Gospel-shaped transformation: cultivating relationships where parents model language and cultural flexibility, honesty, and integrity, revealing a glimpse of God’s glory through their lives.

First, when you see the term “hearing,” we are using it simply to describe identity. It means you are a person who can hear and speak. This term does not mean you have a disability, nor is it negative, it is simply a description of the world you experience. Understanding this distinction helps us recognize our differences and how we can build bridges together.

You’ll notice we have two columns: one showing Hearing values and the other showing Deaf values. These represent two different worldviews, two ways of experiencing life and making sense of reality. Each value reflects that what we experience is true, meaningful, beautiful, and real. Values show us that our existence matters – that we are seen, heard, understood, and valued.

## **Values Come From the Soul.**

Our values express how we respond to the world through our soul, which has three parts:

- Emotions
- Desire/Will
- Mind

We have these because God created us in His likeness. *“Let us make mankind in our image.”* Genesis 1:26

God Himself has emotions, will, and mind. Because we are His image bearers, our souls reflect His likeness. This means our values are not random, they come from how God designed us to exist and relate to one another.

**Two Worlds, Equal Worth.** These two sets of values, Hearing and Deaf, are not ranked. One is not better, smarter, or stronger than the other. They are equally valuable and deserve equal respect. *“If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. Or if one part of our body is honored, all the other parts share its honor.”* 1 Corinthians 12:26

When we understand both, we gain a rich opportunity to:

- Engage with one another
- Share perspectives
- Learn new ways of communicating
- Borrow insights that enrich both worlds

Wolf Wolfensberger developed “Social Role Valorization (SRV)” in 1983 and wrote on how social roles and societal perception shape how people are valued or devalued. When we no longer see others as people like ourselves, we create the conditions to treat them as “less than” and that is where harm begins.

When power, understanding, and respect are shared equally during this exchange, something truly beautiful happens, especially at holiday gatherings, where connection, belonging, and celebration come together.

# Values

Both worlds hold values rooted in how they receive and process information. Neither is superior, they are simply different, and both are worth honoring.

## Hearing

**Speaking**

**Sound**

**Linearity**

**Tone**

**Listening**

**Speed**

**Individuality**

**&**

## Deaf

**Sign Language**

**Tactile / Touch**

**Use of Space**

**Facial Expressions**

**Seeing**

**Information Sharing**

**Collective Participation**

In Deaf ministry, which operates in a profoundly cross-cultural context, it is crucial to recognize the role of values. Values are shaped by a person's lived experience, affect how they see the world, and determine how they interpret reality, relationships, faith, and ultimately the message of the gospel. Values define what people consider good, important, and worthy, and they profoundly influence behavior, language choices, and patterns of life.

The moment parents first encounter their Deaf child, they are entrusted with a divine calling to shepherd one of the most unreached, neglected, and overlooked populations in the world. God has already equipped them with the capacity to love, lead, and disciple. This means parents need support from the community to grow their skills in sign language and share the gifts of including their children who are different and beautiful. Let us now explore a brief definition of values. **You can help parents by honoring and seeing that Deaf values are good, important, and worthy.**

<p><b>Speaking</b> Using the voice and words to share thoughts.</p>	<p><b>Sign Language</b> A real language using hands, face, and body with its own grammar - not just gestures.</p>
<p><b>Sound</b> Hearing information with the ears - words, tone, and background noises.</p>	<p><b>Tactile / Touch</b> Information can be accessed through touch, especially in DeafBlind and close contact communication.</p>
<p><b>Linearity</b> Talking in a straight line - one word after another, one idea at a time.</p>	<p><b>Use of Space</b> Meaning is shown in physical space - signs move around the signer to show who, what, where, and when.</p>
<p><b>Tone</b> How a voice sounds (louder, softer, excited, upset) to show meaning or emotion.</p>	<p><b>Facial Expressions</b> The face works like tone in speech - eyebrows, eyes, and mouth shapes change meaning.</p>
<p><b>Listening</b> Understanding what someone says by hearing their words.</p>	<p><b>Seeing</b> Eyes are the main way to get information - watching people, signs, and surroundings.</p>
<p><b>Speed</b> Conversations move fast, and people are expected to keep up.</p>	<p><b>Information Sharing</b> Passing along what they know so everyone stays informed and included.</p>
<p><b>Individuality</b> Emphasis on personal expression and independence in communication.</p>	<p><b>Collective Participation</b> Everyone pays attention together so no one misses information.</p>

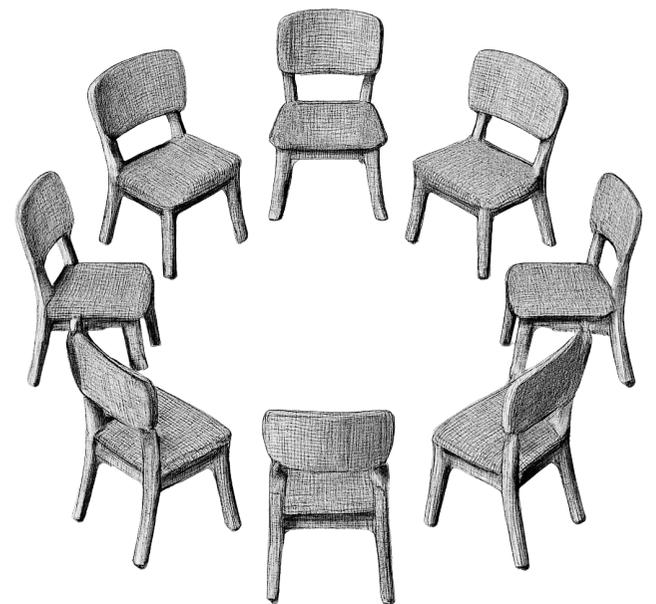
# Deaf-Friendly Seating

During holiday gatherings, it is essential to ensure that your room setup is Deaf-friendly. What does this involve? It means arranging the space so that everyone can see one another. For instance, if the chairs are positioned in pews or rows, how can I see you? Visual access is particularly important for families with Deaf and Hard of Hearing children.

The arrangement of a room can significantly impact communication for everyone, particularly for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. These seating arrangements are crafted to promote visibility, facilitate conversation, and foster inclusivity. When individuals are seated in a way that allows them to clearly see faces, hands, and body language, it becomes much easier to understand signing, speech, and visual cues.

## Circle Seating

A circle helps everyone face each other. This means no one's back is turned, and nothing blocks the view. People can clearly see expressions, gestures, and signs from all directions. This setup supports equal participation, reduces communication barriers, and helps everyone feel like part of the group.



## U-Shape Seating

The U-shape creates an open space where everyone can see the front of the room and each other. It works well for presentations, visual aids, and group discussions. This layout keeps lines of sight clear and helps participants follow the conversation without missing information.

These room designs are not just about where chairs go — they help create a welcoming space where Deaf and Hard of Hearing people can learn, share ideas, and participate with confidence. A good seating layout makes communication easier, supports visual connection, and helps everyone feel included.

If you have a round table or a square folding table, they can be great choices for holiday gatherings. When your family plays games or enjoys fun activities together, make sure everyone can see one another. Be mindful that Deaf and Hard of Hearing children need clear lines of sight so they can fully understand what is happening and be part of every moment. **When we set up our spaces thoughtfully, everyone gets to participate and enjoy the celebration.**



Remember, inclusion begins with awareness and intentional action, it won't happen accidentally.

# The Emotional Impact of The Invisible Family Member

## Parents' Experience

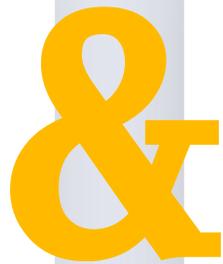
We see our children being excluded from conversations and jokes.

Even when the room is full of people who love them, we can feel their isolation.

“

“It keeps them in a cycle of isolation. They're constantly being told, 'Don't worry about it... I'll tell you later.'”

”



## Children's Experience

Children notice when they are missing information, laughter, and context.

They scan faces, trying to piece together what everyone else already knows.

“

“Your mouth is moving, but I have no idea what you're saying.”

”

# WHAT FRIENDS & FAMILY CAN DO

## Help Every Child Feel Included

- **Get Their Attention First:** Look at them, sign their name, wave at them, or tap gently before you speak or sign.
  - *It signals that they're part of the conversation.*
- **Face Them When Talking:** Speak clearly and at a normal pace. If you know the ASL alphabet or a few signs, that will show your effort.
  - *Your face & eyes helps provide visual cues, louder doesn't mean clearer.*
- **Summarize:** If they miss something, offer a brief recap. Be proactive, don't wait for them to catch up on their own. The world already expects them to adapt, and they feel that pressure every day.
  - *When you take the initiative to engage, you show that their experience matters too.*
    - *Avoid: "Never mind."*
    - *Try: "Here's what we were talking about..."*
- **Engage With Them:** Ask questions, pause for their thoughts, and give room for replies. If they're looking around or shifting their gaze, don't assume they're disengaged, they're gathering information and finding where they fit into the conversation. This is part of how they stay connected.
  - *Inclusion is intentional and built, not accidental.*
- **Use Tools:** Turn on captions during movies or shows, or use a speech-to-text app when the room is loud. Play card games [UNO, etc.] Don't be afraid to get creative, point to objects, demonstrate actions, or use simple drawings to make meaning clear in the moment.
- **These supports make language visible and accessible.**
  - *Small changes create big access.*



# CONSTANT Cognitive Load

## Parents' Experience

We are always interpreting, monitoring, anticipating, and repairing communication gaps.

We rarely get to just "be present."

“

"I'm constantly interpreting... and not able to be fully present."

”

&

## Children's Experience

Children are working twice as hard to understand.

What looks like "quiet" is usually exhaustion, confusion, or giving up.

“

"Everything is a surprise – I never know what's happening until it happens."

”

# WHAT FRIENDS & FAMILY CAN DO

## Lightening the Mental Load

- **Sign language interpreter and Deaf Interpreter:** Contact your local interpreter agency and request both a sign language interpreter and a Deaf interpreter for your family gathering.
  - *This support gives parents time to recharge while also offering opportunities to learn new communication skills from the interpreters.*
- **Support Parents, Instead of Reinforcing Their Burden:** Parents need more support than you may realize. They feel burdened, not because their child is a burden, but because the world is still foreign and unfamiliar to them. Be willing to step into their world, play, and show them what an amazing human their child is.
  - *Encourage parents: they are doing a great job!*
- **Offer Breaks Without Judgment:** Deaf and Hard of Hearing children work harder than you realize. They're decoding sounds, watching faces, tracking conversations, and filling in missing pieces, all day long. That mental effort builds up, and it often appears as fatigue, withdrawal, or frustration. Give them permission to step away, rest, or recharge.
  - *Silence isn't avoidance. It's recovery.*
- **Check for Understanding, Not Performance:** First, turn off music, the TV, or other clattering distractions during conversations. Less noise = less brainwork for Hard of Hearing children. When you engage, ask: "Does this make sense?" instead of "Do you get it?" One question invites support; the other feels like a test.
  - *Allow the child to respond or not respond. Their participation should be an option, not an expectation.*
- **Respect Their Energy:** If they pull back, it's not attitude, it's overload. They are constantly trying to keep up with a pace that isn't designed for them. What you can do is pause between topics, avoid rapid subject changes, and give space for processing. Their brain is multitasking every second.
  - *Give grace, not guilt or pressure.*



# THE POWER OF Accessible Communication

## Parents' Experience

Even basic ASL from others changes everything.

When people sign, our child feels seen — and we feel supported.

“

“Learning even simple signs tells my child they are worth the effort.”

”

&

## Children's Experience

A child who sees others sign learns:

*I belong here.  
They want to talk to me.*

“

“I want to join, but I need a way to do it.”

”

# WHAT FRIENDS & FAMILY CAN DO

## Helping Every Child Understand and Be Understood

- **Face the Child When You Speak or Sign:** Communication shouldn't feel like a puzzle. Don't talk from another room, behind their head, or while walking away.
  - *If they can't see you, they can't access you.*
- **Keep Hands and Mouth Visible:** Don't cover your mouth, talk while eating, or speak with your head down. Deaf and Hard of Hearing children rely on clear visual, linguistic, and environmental cues to participate.
  - *Visibility and language supports comprehension.*
- **Use Captions and Visuals:** Turn on captions, write keywords, or use gestures and pictures.
  - *Visual language is access, not extra or a last resort.*
- **Repeat Names and Context:** Say who you're talking to and what you're talking about.
  - *Clear entry points reduce confusion.*
- **Don't Rush:** Pause before switching topics and avoid interrupting each other. Give grace, not guilt or pressure.
  - *Processing time is communication time.*
- **Try Your Best to be Visual:** Speech, sign, gestures, pointing, typing, it all counts. Always open the door for sign language because communication becomes accessible when everyone shares the responsibility, not just the child.
  - *Communication is not one-size-fits-all.*



# STRUCTURE IS NOT CONTROL

## It's Connection

### Parents' Experience

We build structure - games, turn-taking rules, visual routines.

It is not to restrict, but to give everyone a way in.

“

“We have to have a purpose and a structure, otherwise my child feels very lost.”

”



### Children's Experience

Children thrive when expectations are clear.

Routine tells them what to do, how to join, and when to speak, instead of guessing.

“

“When I know what's happening, I can be part of it.”

”

# WHAT FRIENDS & FAMILY CAN DO

## Clear Routines Create Safety

- **Deaf and Hard of Hearing children thrive when the environment is known:** Tell them what's about to happen, who's arriving, what activities are planned, when dinner starts.
  - *Knowing the plan helps them relax and stay present.*
- **Use Visual Schedules:** A simple list, pictures, or icons on a wall can guide the day. Visibility and language supports comprehension.
  - *When expectations are visible, communication becomes easier.*
- **Use Captions and Visuals:** Turn on captions, write keywords, or use gestures and pictures.
  - *Sign language is access, not extra or a last resort.*
- **Announce Transitions:** Give a heads-up before changing activities or leaving a place. Be sure to tell them first before you make announcements to the whole family. Shift the status quo. Typically, they are always last to know and last to show up or leave the room.
  - *They are important members of the family too.*
- **Keep Instructions Clear and Simple:** Short phrases work best. Break tasks into steps.
  - *Clarity isn't bossy or dumb, it's supportive.*
- **Hold Space for Flexibility:** Structure provides a map, not a cage. If plans change, explain it.
  - *Predictability builds trust and can solve problems when conflict arises.*



# HOME IS A Safe Place

## Parents' Experience

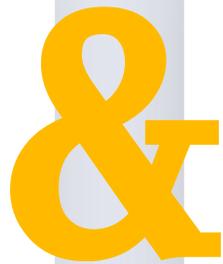
We can't always control extended family gatherings.

But our dinner table can be a safe place where communication is accessible to everyone.

“

“Most of our life is consumed with helping our child understand. Home is where we see it all matter.”

”



## Children's Experience

Children look forward to the spaces where they are not outsiders.

It is where language is shared, participation is expected, and they can relax.

“

“I can't wait to go home – that's where I understand.”

”

# WHAT FRIENDS & FAMILY CAN DO

## Make Your Home Welcoming & Inviting

- **Honor Their Communication Needs:** Use signs, gestures, captions, quiet spaces, or tools and strategies that work for them.
  - *Their home language is their safety net.*
- **Reduce Correcting and Critiquing:** Home is not a classroom or a test or a therapy session.
  - *Let communication be natural, not monitored.*
- **Create Spaces for Rest:** Silence, alone time, or sensory breaks are not avoidance. They're recovery. They spend their day navigating misunderstandings, loud environments, and constant mental effort.
  - *Every child deserves a place where nothing is demanded of them.*
- **Celebrate Who They Are:** Notice their strengths, not just their struggles.
  - *Affirmation protects identity.*
- **Avoid Forcing Participation:** Let them join conversations at their pace.
  - *Your home should feel welcoming, not exhausting.*
- **Make Them Feel at Home:** Home is where Deaf and Hard of Hearing children should feel safest to be themselves - seen, understood, and never overwhelmed.
  - *Home is where their brain, body, and identity should exhale.*



# THE TRUE COST AND The True Gift

## Parents' Experience

Inclusion is not optional.  
It requires intention.

This means it requires  
time, advocacy, creativity,  
and courage to learn sign  
language.

“

“No one else is going to do it – so  
I have to.”

”

&

## Children's Experience

Inclusion tells the child who  
they are. Belonging forms  
self-existence as a Deaf  
person with pride and  
dignity.

“

“If no one tries to talk to me, then  
I guess I'm not meant to be  
here.”

”

# WHAT FRIENDS & FAMILY CAN DO

## The Sacred Weight of Raising an Image-Bearer

- **See Them as God Sees Them:** Don't define them by what they can't hear; see who they are.
  - *Each child reflects God uniquely.*
  - *"I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Psalm 139:14*
- **Speak Truth, Not Lies:** Parents hear enough doubt from the world. Your words can strengthen their calling.
  - *"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Proverbs 18:21*
- **Share the Load:** Offer to help, listen, interpret, include, or learn a sign.
  - *When you carry the burden, you share the blessing.*
  - *"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Galatians 6:2*
- **Believe Their Life Has Purpose:** Your belief fuels their confidence.
  - *"For we are made in the image of God." Genesis 1:27*
- **Make Them Feel at Home:** Home is where Deaf and Hard of Hearing children should feel safest to be themselves - seen, understood, and never overwhelmed. Home is where their brain, body, and identity should exhale.
  - *"The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace." Psalm 29:11*



# You Have the Power to Stand Out

Raising a Deaf or Hard of Hearing child comes with a cost: time, effort, advocacy, patience, and emotional labor. The world rarely sees that parents are translating, explaining, navigating systems, and creating access everywhere they go. But what feels like a daily burden to outsiders is, at its core, a sacred assignment.

This child is not a mistake, a project, or a problem. They are a gift, created intentionally, carrying God's image in ways the world would miss if they didn't exist. The true cost of raising a Deaf or Hard of Hearing child is great, but the true gift is even greater, because they reveal a part of God the world would never see without them.

A Deaf or Hard of Hearing child is not distant, disengaged, or disinterested. They are waiting...for access, for intention, for invitation. **And you have the power to stand out.**

- A meal becomes a ministry
- A game becomes a doorway
- A sign becomes a welcome
- Your effort becomes their belonging



People with disabilities are subjects of relationships  
**NOT** objects of programs.

Jeff McNair, PhD

Deaf Kids Connect Board of Directors



# Support Our Mission

If you have any questions or want to partner with us, you can reach us by email.

You can support our mission in three impactful ways:

1. Becomes a prayer partner
2. Donate
3. Volunteer

Your involvement helps us invest in parents as disciplers, one child at a time.  
Email us at [adminteam@deafkidsconnect.com](mailto:adminteam@deafkidsconnect.com)



Scan this QR code to donate.



God invested Himself in the design of each person.

Janeen Jarrell



# DEAF KIDS CONNECT

## About Deaf Kids Connect

Deaf Kids Connect is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has been serving for over 27 years, focusing on connecting Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and their families with the love of Jesus. With a dedicated team of employees, contractors, and volunteers, we offer unique workshops, training, and mentoring programs. We stand out as the only ministry working directly with parents of Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, supporting them in their journey and guiding them in gospel-centered care. By connecting families with a Christ-honoring community, we help them find a sense of belonging.

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If you would like any additional information about our programs supporting parents or our Family Summit, please contact us at [adminteam@deafkidsconnect.com](mailto:adminteam@deafkidsconnect.com).

**“Holiday Gathering: What Parents Want You to Know”** [2025] was created with deep care and with the heartfelt stories of parents who walk this journey every day, 24/7. We poured our hearts into this resource so parents can be equipped and empowered to disciple their Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. We kindly ask that you honor this work by not copying or reproducing it without permission.