

Visually Adapted Sign Language

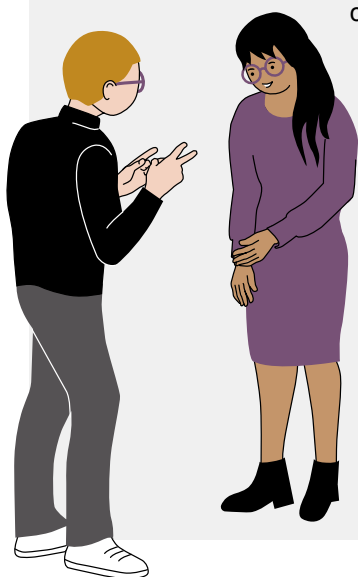
Visual impairments affect the ability to interpret visual signs, and if you are close to someone with combined visual and hearing impairments, you need to know how to adapt communication. This may involve sign language, signs supported

language (TSS), or signs as alternative and augmentative communication (AAC). Feel free to use our advice to understand and to support you in facilitating communication in different ways.

Individual Adaptations

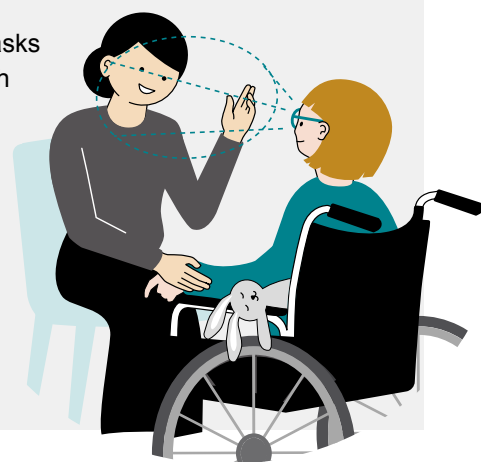
For the person to be able to interpret sign language, they need to see facial expressions, hands, and the body of the person signing. Therefore, it is important to understand how the person uses their vision in

communication. If possible, ask them what adaptations make things easier. If it concerns someone who has difficulty expressing their thoughts on this, you can observe if they step back when you approach, touch your hands, move your hands, tilt their head back, or turn their head. These behaviours provide clues on how to adapt your communication.



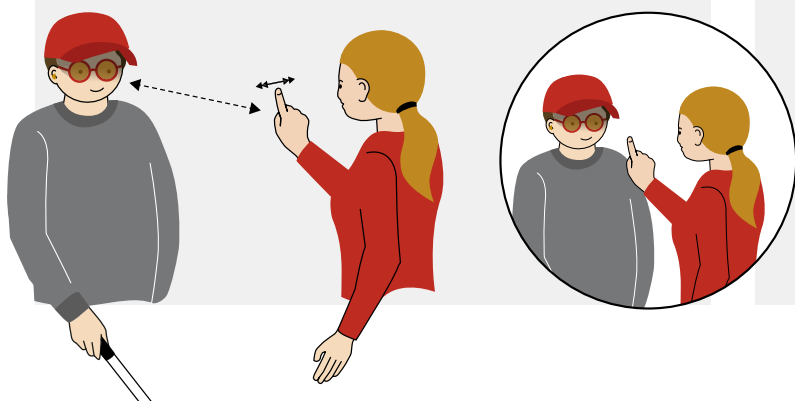
Position Yourself in the Person's Field of Vision

Ensure that you are within the person's field of vision. They may need time to notice you, find the right position, and shift their gaze in your direction. The person may also prefer you to be on a specific side. Wait with signing until you are certain they can perceive your signs. Avoid having anything on your face that could make interpretation difficult, such as masks covering your mouth or shiny jewellery. Position yourself at eye level with the person.



Consider the Distance

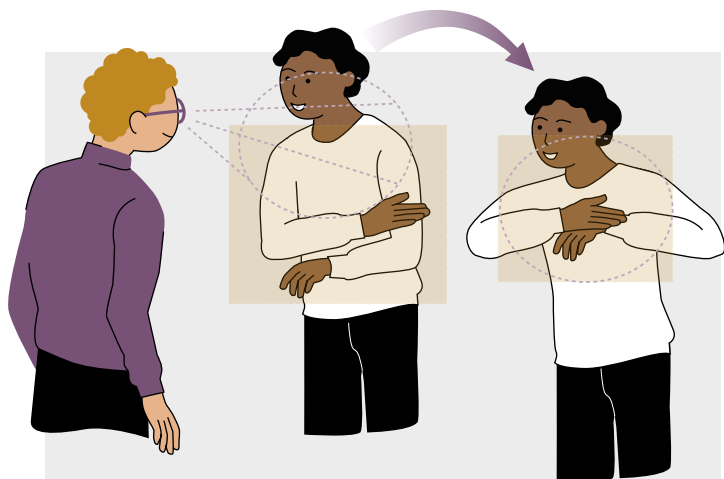
If the person has a limited field of vision, it is generally helpful to increase the distance so they can interpret both hands and facial expressions. For individuals with reduced visual acuity, the appropriate distance depends on the complexity of what is being signed, the context of the communication, and the characteristics of the signs being used. For example, some signs are concrete and involve large, clear movements that are easy to perceive (like WOMAN), while others are more abstract with smaller movements that may be harder to discern (like WHERE). If the person positions themselves far away enough at a distance where they include the face, body, and hands in their field of vision, reduced visual acuity may still make it difficult to perceive details. The pace of communication should be adjusted so the person has time to regulate the distance.



Information in the Face and Body

Sign language is expressed through hand movements, hand shapes, facial expressions, direction of gaze, head movements, mouth movements, and posture. People with visual impairments may struggle to notice all this information simultaneously. If they can only perceive part of what is signed, it affects understanding. To make things easier, you can, for instance, add more information with your hands or reinforce it through your facial expressions. You can for example give the sign, but also spell it out slowly. If the person needs extra support or is learning sign language, give them time to observe your head movements and facial expressions. You can augment by exaggerating signals or pointing to your eyebrows or mouth.





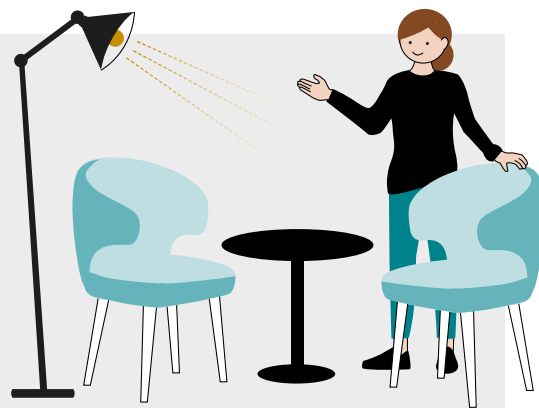
Adapt the Signing Space

The signing space is a three-dimensional area in front of the signer's body. You often need to reduce this space so that a person with a visual impairment can perceive both the hands and facial information. You can move your hands closer to your face when signing or adjust the signs to a smaller "cube" if needed. For instance, you can sign DOG in the air instead of on your leg or ASSISTANT lower down the arm/hand. If the person is proficient in fingerspelling, it can be used to replace a sign that is hard to perceive – finger-spelling takes up less space in the signing area.



Group Conversations

Participating in group conversations can be challenging if the person cannot see everything happening simultaneously. Slow down the pace and ensure that everyone in the group is clearly visible. Sign one at a time and take turns in a calm pace. This gives the person time to shift their gaze to whomever is speaking. If one person needs more support from others to engage in a larger social context, you can indicate whose turn it is to sign by pointing or mentioning the person's name. The person you point to should wait until the listener has visually located them before starting to sign.



Environmental Adjustments Facilitate Communication

Visually busy environments are more straining for the person. Ensure that your face and hands are optimally lit. Avoid situations where the person is dazzled and ensure that no shadows fall on your hands or face. Consider contrasts. Your hands are easier to perceive against a mono-coloured shirt that contrasts with your skin tone and reaches up to your neck. If the person cannot indicate what environmental adjustments help, observe how they act in different lighting conditions as well as indoors and outdoors. Outdoors, it may help for the person to wear a cap and/or sunglasses. If communication is difficult in the current environment, you might need to move to another location.

Offer Tactile Support in Communication

In some situations, it may help to use tactile support in visual communication, such as in the dark or when walking side by side while signing. The person can hold their hand on your wrist, and this to help them find where to direct their visual attention within the signing space. Sometimes tactile signs can be used,

where the person interprets by placing their hand on yours. The person can alternate between visual interpretation and tactile signing. If they are learning sign language, it may help to receive tactile support for how to perform the signs, such as shaping their hands. The person may struggle to visually interpret all aspects of a sign – hand shape, movement, position – and it becomes easier to perform the sign themselves if they know how it feels.

