



# Stuck at beginner level: Hearing parents' challenges in learning ASL word order

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Only a small minority of Deaf and Hard of hearing (DHH) children are born into a home with language that is accessible to them.



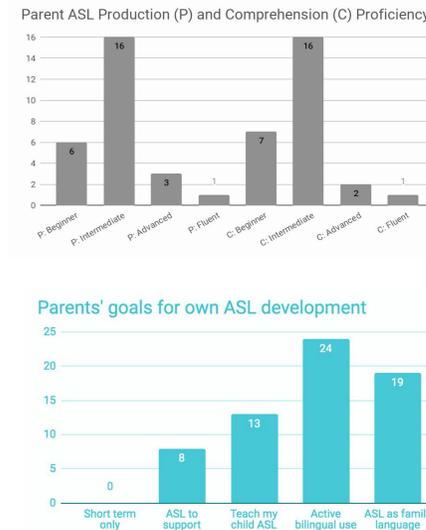
Some hearing parents opt to learn a sign language to provide accessible early language input and an inclusive home environment to their DHH child (Caselli et al. 2021). These parents' experiences as sign language learners offer insight on how to improve current resources for families who choose to sign.

## Interview Questions

1. What are your goals for learning ASL for yourself? for your deaf child?
2. What motivated you to choose ASL, despite pressure against signing with deaf children?
3. What methods are most effective for learning ASL in a family context?
4. What aspects of ASL have been the hardest to learn? the most intuitive to learn?
5. What resources do you still need to support your family's development of ASL?

Focus for today

## Interview Participants



21/23 of interviewed parents cited ASL word order as "Quite difficult" or "near impossible" to learn.

	Very easy	Not difficult	Quite difficult	Near impossible
Accurate form	1	14	7	1
Vocabulary	2	11	10	0
Fingerspelling	1	7	12	3
Nonmanuals	2	12	9	0
Storytelling skills	1	4	14	4
Word order	0	2	20	1
Classifiers	0	5	18	0
Eye gaze	0	16	7	0
Child-directed sign	1	12	10	0

"We started with vocabulary, which made sense at the time ... but because we started out with vocabulary and no grammar, it's been harder for us to shift the mindset into ASL grammar, [which] has been a huge challenge." [mother of 3 yo child]

"...all the vocabulary has been very helpful but now I'm hitting this wall...I really need to work on the grammar...to get really serious in practicing the word order and I'm not really finding a place to do that..." [mother of 6 yo child]

"I can't get any feedback on my word order [from Deaf adults]. Nobody ever corrects me, they're just thrilled I'm doing ASL..." [father of 3 yo child]

"Speaking English and signing ASL are completely different when you're using [ASL] properly, so that has been the struggle. I do a lot of...[signing] ASL in spoken word order. So that's how I kind of incorporate ASL into our lives." [mother of two children, 6 and 7 yo]

## Conclusion: Three recurring themes

- Parents feel their lack of ASL word order knowledge keenly and are uneasy about using English word order with ASL signs.
- Attempts to solicit word order instruction or correction are often unsuccessful, as Deaf adults may view word order corrections as discouraging and/or may modify their own ASL to be more English-like to accommodate beginning signer parents.
- Initial focus on vocabulary is helpful, but parents quickly need more advanced syntactic knowledge, which should be incorporated into family-centered ASL curricula.

## Selected References

- Caselli, N., Pyers, J., & Lieberman, A. M. (2021). Deaf Children of Hearing Parents Have Age-Level Vocabulary Growth When Exposed to ASL by Six-Months. *The Journal of Pediatrics*.
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