

Canadian Association of the Deaf

Guide on Terminology

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Terminology

The issue

What are the “proper” terms and definition to be used in regard to deafness?

CAD-ASC’s position

The Deaf, the deafened, and the hard of hearing are all very distinct groups. Using the proper terminology shows respect for differences.

deaf:

A medical/audiological term referring to those people who have little or no functional hearing. May also be used as a collective noun (“the deaf”) to refer to people who are medically deaf but who do not necessarily identify with the Deaf community.

Deaf (with capital D):

A sociological term referring to those individuals who are medically deaf or hard of hearing who identify with and participate in the culture, society, and language of Deaf people, which is based on Sign language. Their preferred mode of communication is Sign.

deafened (Also known as late-deafened):

This is both a medical and a sociological term referring to individuals who have become deaf later in life and who may not be able to identify with either the Deaf or the hard of hearing communities.

hard of hearing:

A person whose hearing loss ranges from mild to profound and whose usual means of communication is speech. It is both a medical and a sociological term.

hearing impaired:

This term is not acceptable in referring to people with a hearing loss. It should never be used in referring to Deaf people. “Hearing impaired” is a medical condition; it is not a collective noun for people who have varying degrees of hearing loss. It fails to recognize the differences between the Deaf and the hard of hearing communities.

person who is deaf :

Acceptable but overly sensitive substitute for “deaf”.

manual deaf, Signing deaf:

A deaf person whose preferred mode of communication is Sign language.

oral deaf:

A deaf person whose preferred mode of communication is verbal and auditory and/or lipreading. An oral deaf person who can Sign and speak can be considered “Deaf” if he/she is accepted as such by other Deaf persons and uses Sign within the community.

deaf-mute:

Unacceptable. A deaf person may choose not to use his/her voice; this does not make him/her a “mute”.

deaf and dumb:

Offensive.

Deaf-plus:

Although it has been used for many years to refer to people who have disabilities in addition to deafness, the preferred terms are “Deaf with mental disabilities”, “Deaf-blind”, “Deaf with CP”, etc.

Sign language:

The official language of the Deaf community. Should always be capitalized, just as “English” and “French” are capitalized, be all three are legitimate languages.

TTY:

The proper acronym for the special devices used by deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing people to communicate with each other through the telephone system. The French term is ATS.

TDD:

No longer acceptable as the acronym for special telephone devices. (See the CAD-ASC’s position paper on TTY/TDD.)

TT (Text Telephone):

Used in some European countries and by the Federal Communications Commission of the United States as a substitute term “TTY”. Not accepted in Canada because it is a hearing-invented term and because the Sign for it is impolite in ASL.

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