



# Fact Sheet

## Understanding Coactive and Tactile Signing

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Coactive signing and tactile signing are two different types of adapted sign language used to communicate with children who are deafblind. It is sometimes easy to confuse these two modes of signed communication. Coactive and tactile signing are equally important, yet both serve different functions. It is a good idea to discuss, as a team, when staff members will use coactive signed communication with students and when tactile signed communication should be used instead. The purpose of this article is to describe the two systems and to clarify the appropriate use of each.

### What are coactive and tactile signing?

Project SALUTE (Successful Adaptations for Learning to Use Touch Effectively) defines coactive signing as the physical guidance of the child's hand(s) to facilitate production of a standard manual sign for expressive communication (Project SALUTE, 2002).

Coactive signing involves taking the child's hands and, in a respectful way, molding the child's hands through the signs, so that you are helping the child make the signs. The purpose of coactive signing is to teach the child a new sign or one that he or she is in the process of learning, or to help the child refine a sign to be closer to a standard, recognizable sign. Coactive signing is also used to help the child express his or her wants and needs through signed communication. The child's hands are molded to make the sign as accurately as possible so that the child learns and experiences how to make the sign accurately. If the child later makes the sign spontaneously, but not exactly perfectly, we of course accept the approximation but continue to model the correct sign so that over time, the child will become more precise with the sign. The person takes the child's hand or hands and moves them to shape the sign from the perspective of the child. In other words, the movement of the hands should be the same as if the child would be signing independently.

Project SALUTE defines tactile signing as a communication method based on a standard manual sign system in which the receiver's hand(s) is placed lightly upon the hand(s) of the signer to perceive the signs (Project SALUTE, 2002).

Tactile signing is used when the person places his or her hands under the child's hands to express something *to* the child. It is used when the child has no functional vision or a significant visual impairment. The other person needs to sign underneath the child's hands so the child can feel the

signs and interpret them tactually. If the child had vision, the person would sign in front of his visual field.

### **Avoiding confusion between coactive and tactile signing**

Sometimes an adult mistakenly uses coactive signing instead of tactile signing when expressing something to a child. Two common situations in which this occurs are:

- ❖ When the adult takes the child's hand or hands to tell the child something, instead of placing their hands beneath the child's hands.
- ❖ When the adult takes the child's hand or hands and signs coactively something that the child would not have wanted to sign independently.

Two examples that illustrate these common mistakes are:

#### **Example #1**

**Scenario:** The intervener (one-to-one aide) takes the child's hands and coactively signs SCHOOL FINISHED YOU GO HOME

**Comment:** While it is appropriate for the intervener to inform the student that the school day is finished and he or she will be going home, the intervener incorrectly uses coactive signing (take child's hands) instead of tactile signing (places her hands under the child's) when she is the one telling the child what is happening next in the child's schedule.

#### **Example #2**

**Scenario:** The teacher and the student are gluing some textures together for an art project. The teacher observes that the student is getting restless, so she takes the student's hands and coactively signs MORE because she wants the student to continue with the activity. This happens despite the fact that the student is starting to show clear signs of wanting the activity to be finished.

**Comment:** The issue here is that the teacher should have used tactile signing when signing MORE because it is the teacher - not the child - who wants the activity to continue. The student would never have signed MORE independently because he or she was already expressing feelings of boredom, restlessness, etc. through behavior.

### **Avoiding confusion between right-handed and left-handed signing when coactively signing**

it is important to remember that signed communication always involves a dominant and non-dominant hand. (For people who are right handed, for example, the right hand would be the dominant hand.) Therefore, it is often said that there are right-handed and left-handed signs. This is generally only an issue for the child when she or he is signing expressively, such as during coactive signing.

Signs are sometimes reversed when signing coactively with a child because, when sitting or standing across from a child, we inadvertently use our dominant hand to mold the child's non-dominant hand. For example consider the following scenario:

**Scenario:** You are right-handed so you sign "TOILET" by making a "T" hand shape with your right hand and shaking it in front of your right shoulder. You then want the child to sign "TOILET", so you reach across with your right hand, take the child's left hand and the child signs "TOILET" with his or her left hand.

**Comment:** The problem is when the child is right-handed and accustomed to signing "TOILET" with the right hand, he or she may not understand that a left hand shaking a "T" hand shape has the same meaning as it does when signed with the right hand. One strategy to eliminate this reversal is to put your arms around a child from behind when signing coactively.

Obviously it is important to initially identify whether a child is right- or left-handed. If it isn't immediately clear, pay close attention to which hand the child uses for eating or playing with his or her favorite toy. The most important factor to remember regarding right- and left-handed signs is consistency. If signs are going to be done right-handed for a particular child, it is imperative to always use right-handed signs with her or him.

#### In Brief

- ❖ Coactive signing involves taking the child's hand or hands to sign with him.
- ❖ Use coactive signing only to help the child express what he wants or needs, or to teach him a new sign or a sign that he is in the process of learning.
- ❖ Sign from the child's perspective when using coactive signing, with the same spatial orientation the child would use if he or she was signing independently.
- ❖ When coactively signing one-handed signs, e.g., toilet, eat, candy, etc., remember to sign with the child's dominant hand.
- ❖ Tactile signing involves placing your hands underneath the child's hands when signing.
- ❖ Use tactile signing when you are telling something to the child.
- ❖ Sign from your own perspective when using tactile signing, with the same spatial orientation as if you were signing to the child with no physical contact.
- ❖ Coactive signing is important because it teaches the student how to make the signs; tactile signing teaches the student how to read other people's signs, and also serves to demonstrate conversations between other people - so the student learns that communication is going on all the time, even if she or he isn't always a direct participant.

#### Related Links

##### On coactive signing:

<http://www.projectsalute.net/Learnedhtml/Coactive.html>. Project SALUTE (Successful Adaptations for Learning to Use Touch Effectively), Northridge, CA: California State University

##### On tactile signing:

<http://www.projectsalute.net/Learned/Learnedhtml/Tactilesigning.html>. Project SALUTE (Successful Adaptations for Learning to Use Touch Effectively), Northridge, CA: California State University)

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*Fact Sheets from the Colorado Services for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss are to be used by both families and professionals serving individuals with dual sensory loss. The information applies to children, birth through 21 years of age. The purpose of the Fact Sheet is to give general information on a specific topic. More specific information for an individual student can be provided through personalized technical assistance available from the Colorado Deafblindness Project. For more information call (303) 866-6681 or (303) 866-6605.*

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