



This resource is intended to promote critical thinking when evaluating and working with Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who present with characteristics that may also be observed in neurodivergent individuals (e.g. autism, ADHD). Individuals may not demonstrate all of these features. They may also have more than one underlying reason for the surface level observation, or you may observe fluctuating capacity.

This is not an exhaustive list of traits that are observed in either identity. The goal is to demonstrate some examples and how they may present, so that you can apply this consideration to your own caseload.





COMMUNICATION RELATED CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAY BE INFLUENCED BY

Hearing Status

Feature of Neurodivergent Communication

A feature of neurodivergent (ADHD, Autistic) communication where making eye contact is uncomfortable or more difficult to maintain attention	Atypical eye contact	Secondary to hearing difference: they are taking in visual information in the environment or from the person they are communicating with
A feature of executive dysfunction, which may be observed in ADHD, Autism, and in some people with mood disorders or aquired brain injuries	Inattention	Secondary to being in a listening environment with poor signal to noise ratio, difficulty localizing important stimuli and squelching unimportant stimuli, or listening fatigue
Overresponsiveness to sensory stimuli, or difficulty processing sensory information, observed in Autism and ADHD	Difficulty focusing in noisy or visually overwhelming environments	Secondary to need for a supportive listening environment and need for visuals to support clear communication
Language disorders are common among people with ND identities. Executive dysfunction (e.g. impaired working memory) can also impact understanding and use of complex syntax.	Errors in Syntax	Syntax errors may be seen for students who haven't yet been explicitly taught the syntax rule and did not have access to incidental learning through sound,
Vocal stimming and regulation through sound or the tactile feel of vibration	Vocalizations	Awareness of sound with activity
Monotone pitch, high volume, can be observed in neurodivergent speech	Atypical voice characteristics	Pitch, volume, and breath control can be challenging for deaf and hard of hearing communicators using spoken language. Noticing and using vocal characteristics to signal meaning (e.g. questions, ending a sentence, implying meaning) may be difficult as well.

Feature of Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Communication



COMMUNICATION RELATED CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAY BE INFLUENCED BY

Deaf Culture and ASL

Feature of Neurodivergent Communication

Feature of Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Communication

A feature of neurodivergent (ADHD, Autistic) communication where honesty is highly valued, and therefore communication is very direct or “blunt”	Direct Communication	A feature of Deaf culture in that information is highly valued and communication is very direct and honest
Neurodivergent communication feature of connecting by giving all facts and info (“infodumping”)	Giving ALL the details	Giving ALL the information and details is often considered typical or appropriate in Deaf culture.
Not understanding*or* not following expected social norms because of lack of knowledge, impulsivity due to executive dysfunction or emotional regulation, or due to valuing truth and honesty	“taboo” comments	Clear, direct description, especially for physical attributes, is common in Deaf culture. Many subjects are approached directly, not avoided.
Applying a literal meaning to non-literal language is a feature observed most often with Autistic communication	Difficulty understanding figurative language	Unfamiliarity with English idioms
Language disorders are common among people with ND identities. Executive dysfunction (e.g. impaired working memory) can also impact understanding and use of complex syntax.	Errors in Syntax	Applying a rule of ASL Grammar to English





COMMUNICATION RELATED CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAY BE INFLUENCED BY

Language Deprivation

Feature of Neurodivergent Communication

Feature of Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Communication

A feature of neurodivergent (ADHD, Autistic) communication where the individual has a high interest topic they often focus on and want to connect by sharing	Perseverating on one topic	A person with limited vocabulary may go back to the same topic because they are comfortable and have the necessary vocabulary for it
Often, one of the first observed features of Autism is delayed linguistic milestones	Delayed Linguistic Milestones*	If a child has limited, delayed, or no exposure to language of any modality (e.g. sign, speech, AAC), they may experience delayed linguistic milestones
Alexithymia, or difficulty identifying and describing emotions, is a common characteristic of Autism	Difficulty identifying emotions	This child may not yet have the vocabulary to describe emotions, especially if language support has focused on requesting only
Difficulty with emotional and sensory regulation is a common feature of many neurodivergent diagnoses	Meltdown, emotional dysregulation	If a child doesn't have the language skills to express their needs, feelings, and desires, we may see these things expressed through behavior

* Look to Aaron Shield's body of work for more information about the acquisition of signed languages for Deaf Autistic children who are native signers. *

