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Valerie Sutton of La Jolla demonstrated SignWriting, which she developed, at a California Educators of the Deaf conference yesterday in Mission Valley. The system is used in 27 countries. *K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune*

Symbols widen deaf children's understanding

By David Hasemyer
STAFF WRITER

If you are a hearing person reading the word "house," you're able to immediately visualize in your mind's eye a dwelling that has a door, windows and perhaps a front yard.

But for a deaf child who has never *heard* the word "house" spoken before, seeing it might elicit no mental image whatsoever. It would be akin to a hearing person trying to decipher Japanese characters.

Now deaf children have their own written language, one that enables them to conjure up a mental image that matches the word "house."

It is based on the sign language, the method of communication the deaf are most comfortable with and fluently use.

It's called SignWriting and it was developed by Valerie Sutton, a La Jolla woman who wanted to give deaf children a written language of their own.

"SignWriting triggers in their brain that

the symbol they see translates into something real, like a house or a bus," Sutton said.

The success of SignWriting in the elementary schools of Albuquerque, N.M., was outlined in a California Educators of the Deaf conference seminar yesterday in Mission Valley.

The program is used in 27 countries, though Sutton said she is not aware of it being used in any San Diego County schools.

For children born deaf or who become deaf early in life, sign language is their first language. English is their second language, and an often difficult and frustrating concept to grasp.

SignWriting uses a system of graphic symbols that closely replicate the hand gestures of sign language. It connects the two and has some teachers praising it as a significant teaching tool for deaf children. SignWriting is essentially the ABCs of sign language, essentially an alphabet for writing the movements of the hands and fin-

gers used in signing.

"It brings their world alive," said Lorraine Crespin, a teacher at Hodgin Elementary School in Albuquerque. "You can see it in their faces. It's like that light bulb going off."

Instinctively deaf children are able to pick up SignWriting, she said. "You can put it in front of them and watch their faces. You can see it registering."


SignWriting makes the deaf child's integration into the mainstream world of English speakers a little less difficult.

"This gives them some confidence to make the transition a little easier," said Hodgin teacher Kate Lee.

"Think how important that is for a child to be able to communicate ideas and thoughts in a way that they have never had before. It opens the world to them."

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The conference is scheduled for 27-28 March at the Albuquerque Convention Center.

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