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Should I Teach My Baby to Sign? What Research Says about Baby Sign Language

by Susie S. Loraine, M.A., CCC-SLP

What is Sign Language?



Sign language is the use of specific hand motions, gestures, and facial expressions to communicate. In the United States, there are many different styles of signing, but American Sign Language (ASL) is the only sign system that is a complete language with a grammatical structure different from English. Other sign systems in the United States generally use signs in an English word order. People with hearing loss are not the only ones who use sign language. In fact, speech-language pathologists often use sign language with children who are unable to produce speech because of a disability, and some educators and parents use sign language with children who do not have disabilities.

Why Use Sign Language with Babies Who Have Normal Hearing?



Most babies understand speech before they are able to coordinate their lips, tongues, and voices to produce it. But because they can control their hand motions and gestures much earlier than they are able to speak they are capable of using sign language to communicate. For example, most nine-month-old babies cry or fuss to let their parents know they need something—such as when they are hungry. However, at nine months old most babies are physically able to sign “eat” (which involves bringing the fingertips to the mouth).

What is Baby Sign?



The term baby sign refers to babies using simplified hand motions and/or gestures—most typically based on ASL—to communicate their needs and/or wants. Most babies are able to imitate signs as early as eight to nine months of age. However, because babies’ motor skills are not yet mature, their signs are typically approximations—or inexact gestures.



Will Sign Language Prevent My Child from Learning to Talk?

Studies show that sign language not only helps a child learn to talk, but offers even more advantages for the child later in life.



Dr. Linda Acredolo and Dr. Susan Goodwyn spent two decades researching the use of sign language with babies who have normal hearing. They compared a group using sign language to a group that didn’t use sign language. Their research showed that by three years of age, children who signed as babies were talking with the skills of a four year old—a year ahead of children who did not sign. The study showed that signing with infants and toddlers can actually increase intelligence scores later in life. At eight years old, children who signed as babies scored an average of 12 points higher on intelligence tests than those who did not sign as babies. Babies using sign language were less aggressive, less frustrated, and more selfconfident. In general, signing tended to promote positive emotional development (Acredolo and Goodwyn, 2000).



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(cont.)

There have been several follow-up studies confirming the same results: more advanced language skills, higher scores on intelligence tests, increased self-confidence, decreased frustration, and more positive interactions between babies and parents.

Where Do I Begin?



In early language development, certain aspects of communication are more motivating for babies than others. Dr. Joseph Garcia shares the most motivating communication concepts in his program *Sign with Your Baby: How to Communicate With Infants Before They can Speak* (2001). He suggests to begin with names of things (car, dog, bear), names of people (Mommy, Grandpa), where someone or something is ("Where Daddy?" or "All gone"), wanting "more," and ownership ("mine"). A few of the initial signs Dr. Garcia suggests to teach early include: eat, more, milk, toilet, no, hurt, mommy, thank you, and other terms that are important to you and your baby. There are resources to help you and your baby learn early sign language, including *400 Webber® Sign Language Cards* and many others. See page 3 for more suggestions.



Resources:

Garcia, J. (2001). Which signs to start with and when to start. *Sign with Your Baby: How to communicate with infants before they can speak* (p. 31). Seattle, WA: Sign 2 Me and Bellingham, WA: Stratton Kehl Publications, Inc.

Goodwyn, S.W., Acredolo, L.P., & Brown, C. (2000). Impact of symbolic gesturing on early language development. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*. 24, 81-103.

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