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Gestures as a Precursor to Spoken Language

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Before a baby says his first words, the foundation for communication, language, and learning begins to develop. The interaction between a baby and his caregivers enables social connection, allows the child to develop linguistic and play concepts, and is essential for later reading and academic success. It is through this interaction that gestures, predictors of preschool language ability, begin to take shape. Starting around 9 months, children should be using two new gestures a month, resulting in 16 gestures by 16 months of age.



Gesture Timeline

(* order in development may vary)

• 9 Months – Give / Shake Head



- o Instead of taking toys or objects from those around them, children learn to give as well as indicate “no” by shaking and/or turning their head away from undesired toys or food.

• 10 Months – Reach / Raise Arms



- o Children begin anticipating the reactions of others. They signal to be picked up first with their arms reaching out, then with open hands facing up and arms raised.

• 11 Months – Show / Wave



- o By this age, children are motivated to get and maintain others’ attention by showing an object. Children are also motivated to participate in frequent social routines, and begin to wiggle their hands to wave (i.e., a mature wave develops later).

• 12 Months – Open-Hand Point / Tap



- o Gesturing becomes more intentional, and open-handed pointing and tapping on objects is accompanied by grunting or early speech sounds to better gain attention.

• 13 Months – Clap / Blow Kisses



- o Children begin to learn by observing and imitating others, particularly when clapping or blowing a kiss.

• 14 Months – Index Finger Point / “Shhh”



- o As the “Shhh” gesture (finger to the lips) and index finger pointing begins to develop, children are on the verge of becoming symbolic communicators.

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(cont.)

• 15 Months – Head Nod / Thumbs Up / Hand Up



- o At this age, children begin using gestures that are like words, such as thumbs up to indicate “yes.” These gestures shed light on what children are thinking. These gestures also indicate that children know that they are sharing ideas with others.

• 16 Months – Additional Symbolic Gestures



- o By 16 months, children continue to develop additional symbolic gestures such as “high five” and “I dunno,” giving the learning of spoken words a boost.

Children may acquire different gestures at different times depending on family and culture. Additional communication milestones typically begin developing during these 9 to 16 months, including the use of eye gaze and facial expression to share attention and emotion, an increase in the use of gestures and sounds, and more variation between actions during play. During this period, the ability to comprehend the meaning of spoken

words is also emerging. Acquiring 16 gestures in 16 months is a crucial developmental milestone for all children because it acts as the springboard into the 18-21 month vocabulary burst, and acts as an early predictor of social language development, literacy skills, and academic success.

It is important that parents are aware of speech, language, and social developmental milestones so they can identify any gaps or inconsistencies along the timeline children achieve them. Not reaching these milestones may result in developmental delays. The earlier a delay is identified, the sooner a child can receive support to aid in the development process before significant delays are apparent.



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Resources:

“16 Gestures by 16 Months” by the FIRST WORDS® Project (2014). Retrieved 11/7/2016 from firstwordproject.com/resources

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