

Sign Language

There is much evidence that teaching infants sign language to infants is beneficial in several ways. The average age that children start to speak is around 23-24 months. However, even at this age, it is sometimes difficult for infants to express their needs. There is evidence that this can cause youngsters to tantrum and become frustrated. Speaking is a complex system of motor movements that include: Placement of tongue, complex movement of lips, vocal chord control and control of breathing. According to several researchers, children can communicate through sign language much earlier due to more simplistic motor movements of the hands.

There is a debate as to who actually began research in this area. Some educators reference Werner and Kaplan (1963) as the first to explore sign language with children. However, Drs Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn of UC Davis have been the most cited psychologists of this subject. Joseph Garcia was also a pioneer who began researching sign language instruction on hearing babies in 1987. However, Drs. Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn conducted a longitudinal study with the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development that got educators attention throughout the world. The results included that signing babies understood more words, had larger vocabularies and engaged in more sophisticated play than non-signing babies. Parents of the signing babies in the study noted decreased frustration, increased communication, and more satisfying parent-infant bonding. Signing babies also displayed an increased interest in books. Perhaps the most remarkable finding of these researchers was an increase in IQ scores. They revisited the families of their original study. The children were now 7-8 years of age. The children who signed as babies had a mean IQ of 114, and the non-signing control group had a mean of 102 (Acredolo and Goodwyn, 2000).

Other scientists have taken this research further suggesting that sign language can significantly increase brain activity. Daphne Bavelier, David P. Corina, and Helen J. Neville of Georgetown University discuss how sign language increases activity in different areas of the brain than that of spoken languages. The *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* also discussed the subtle and sometimes significant different brain functions of sign language verses spoken communication.

Laura-Ann Petitto of Dartmouth conducted research on bilingual education including sign language. It was discovered that children are not confused by learning two languages at an infant stage and in fact, a 14 year study concluded that bilingual education outperformed monolingual children on standardized tests.

Sign Language has also been shown to be beneficial for children of special needs. The Center for the Study of Autism advocates using sign language for children who have difficulty with spoken language. Claire Donovan and *Down Syndrome Today* magazine advocate sign language for children with Down Syndrome. Many children also suffer from poor reading skills. *The Journal of Learning Disabilities* has discussed significant results that improve reading when children learn sign language.

Brief History of Sign Language

In 1620, Juan Pablo Bonet of Spain published *Reducción de las letras y arte para enseñar a hablar a los mudos* which means “Reduction of letters and art for teaching mute people to speak.” This is considered to be the first text for deaf individuals to communicate by using signs. Charles-Michel de l'Épée of Bonet published his alphabet in the 18th century. The first public school for deaf children in Paris was opened in 1755 by Abbé de l'Épée. A graduate of the school by the name of Laurent Clerc went to the United States and with the help of

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, they founded the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut in 1857. Gallaudet's son went on to create the first college for the deaf (Gallaudet University) in Washington, D.C. The university remains one of the most prestigious institutions for the hard of hearing in the world.

Just as in spoken languages, there are many forms of sign language. Of these 69 languages, they include African sign languages, Brazilian, French, Russian, Dutch, Belgian, Irish, Mexican, Spanish and many others. For the purposes of this study, American Sign Language was used.

How to Teach Signs to my Baby

Teaching sign language to infants has been researched and several steps have proven effective. First, a parent must know when to teach sign language. If your child can wave bye-bye or hold a toy, then your child learn elementary signs.

To begin this process, it is important to consider some simple steps:

- Observe when your child starts to wave or can grab. This takes place at about 9 months.
- When the child wants something such as food, that is a good time to teach the child to sign demonstrating to him/her the appropriate sign such as “hungry.”
- Be sure to say the word that the child is signing as well as demonstrating the sign.
- Demonstrate the sign just a few times in these moments when your child wants something and use physical prompts to help your child complete the sign.
- After the prompt, immediately give your child what he or she wants such as food.

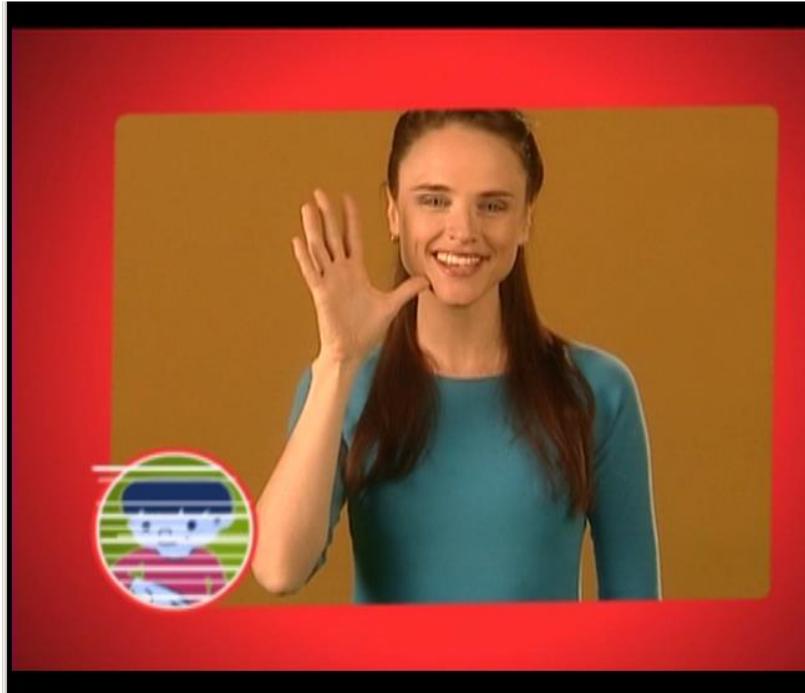
- Do not worry about failure, this will happen for a while.
- It is never too late, older children who can speak can benefit from sign language.
- Use visuals when your child is calm or create a lesson such as the BabyFirstTV DVD on Sign Language.

What Signs Should I Use?

For the purposes of research we conducted in this area, we used 10 signs, and measured success based on a three point scale. 1 = Incorrect, 2 = Partially Correct and 3 = Fully Correct. The operational definitions included that a score of 1 was the child do not attempt the sign or the sign given do not resemble the correct answer. A score of 2 meant that the child attempted the sign and there was partial correctness to the delivery. For instance, for the sign “eat”, the child may touch his/her chin or nose instead of mouth. A score 3 meant that the child completed the sign correctly. We suggest you score your child in the same way and start off with these five signs.

Mother

A child often wants his mother. When your child is asking for Mom, Mom or another family member can physically prompt the child to sign Mom and then his/her mother immediately comes to the child to create positive reinforcement. When the child is calm, pick an opportunity to show this sign on the BabyFirstTV DVD.



Father

A child often wants his father. When your child is asking for Dad, Dad or another family member can physically prompt the child to sign Dad and then his/her father immediately comes to the child to create positive reinforcement. When the child is calm, pick an opportunity to show this sign on the BabyFirstTV DVD.



Eat

“Eat” is a great sign for a child to learn since children are often hungry. When your child wants some food, physically prompt the child to sign “Eat” and then immediately give the child food to create positive reinforcement. Of course, we recommend that you feed your child according to your Pediatrician’s recommendations. When the child is calm, pick an opportunity to show this sign on the BabyFirstTV DVD.



Play

Children love to play and when you are playing with your child, pick several points during the activity to have the child sign play to remind him/her of what you are doing. When the child is calm, pick an opportunity to show this sign on the BabyFirstTV DVD.



Car

Children often need to go to the car or play with a toy car. Every time these activities occur physically and verbally prompt your child to sign “Car.” When the child is calm, pick an opportunity to show this sign on the BabyFirstTV DVD.



Other signs can be taught as well. Children as young as one year have been shown to be able to learn many signs. The following are other signs you can use to communicate with your baby or youngster.

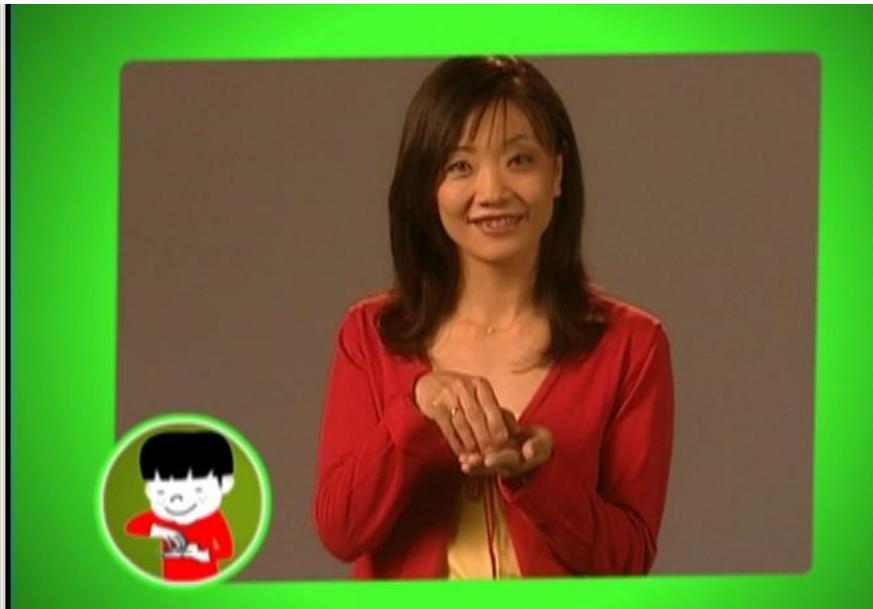
Banana



Apple



Cookie



Drink



Water



Bottle



Milk



Baby



Kiss



Sleep



Ball



Book



Car



Ear



Feet



Hands



Eyes



Nose

