

A Sign of The Times Using Sign Language with Your Baby

From the time of birth, babies have an instinctual need to communicate with those around them. However, the time between birth and recognizable speech can be frustrating for both parents and child. A baby's speech muscles are still underdeveloped leaving the child with limited ability to express their needs and wants. **Introducing American Sign Language (ASL) is an excellent bridge to verbal communication!**

However, several misconceptions exist regarding signing with babies. Questions abound concerning the use of ASL vocabulary with babies, including what are the real benefits, what age should parents introduce signing, and how can parents be successful with a signing approach?

Let me begin with busting three myths surrounding the signing phenomena.

Myth #1: Using sign language with babies will delay their verbal development

Published research finds the opposite to be true. One such longitudinal study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development followed the progress of 120 families with signing babies. Comparison after comparison, they found that babies exposed to signing understood more words, had larger vocabularies, and scored higher on intelligence tests than their non-signing peers. Babies who sign typically talk sooner and engage in more sophisticated play. Related research at Pennsylvania State University found that preschoolers who received sign instruction tested significantly higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test than those students not receiving sign instruction. Signing produces a scaffolding approach to language development by providing the child a visual and kinesthetic layer to the auditory input for language.

Myth #2: All signing systems and gesturing programs are equally beneficial

Babies have natural tendency to use gestures. They reach their arms up to indicate wanting to be picked up. They point toward an object of interest. Many families enthusiastically embrace gesturing and incorporate home signs, or made up signs used within the family structure. These signs have a limited meaning outside of the family unit. However, using vocabulary from ASL, the third most used language in the U.S., allows standardized signs to be used consistently across multiple settings including many preschools and elementary classrooms. ASL signs are easy to learn and many are iconic, providing a visual "hook" for babies to latch on to.

Myth #3: Parents need to be fluent in ASL to begin signing with their baby

In reality, it only takes a few minutes to learn the basic signs needed to get started. Consistency with a few signs is much better than inconsistency with many.

The benefits of signing are numerous. By introducing your baby to ASL you are providing a tool for your pre-verbal baby to tell you what they need and want. Signing essentially provides a window into their mind. The time between 16-17 months of age can be a very stressful period filled with tantrums and confrontations due to the child's inability to adequately express themselves. Parents who have introduced their child to ASL notice reduced frustration in their baby and themselves! Signing reinforces language development and engages babies in the reading process as they become an active participant while signing. Additionally, signing has been widely used as a proven

method for working with children with special needs, including Downs Syndrome, Apraxia of Speech, Autism, and Reading Disabilities.

What is the best age to introduce your baby to ASL? Any time is appropriate; however, babies who are shown signs around 6-7 months of age could begin producing signs around 8-9 months, when their fine motor skills are more developed and their memory retention has expanded. Even though younger babies are not expressing signs yet, they are still learning to associate the verbal, kinesthetic, and visual cues tied to certain objects and emotions. A typically developing baby will be able to understand 5-6 words by 9 months of age and may not be verbalizing at all. However, in that same time frame a child may understand as many as 75 signs. Even if your child is already speaking, it's never too late to start signing. Preschoolers love signing and learning ASL keeps them engaged in the language acquisition process.

Becoming successful with signing need not be overwhelming. Begin with 2-3 simple signs such as "more", "milk", and "eat". Consistently sign these in various meaningful contexts, such as mealtime. Your face is the most interesting object for your baby to gaze at, so make use of the attraction by making signs close to your face and when you and your baby have made eye contact. Remember to verbalize the word as you sign it to help your baby associate the relationship. Learn the signs for the items that naturally interest your baby. These highly motivating signs will be of special value as you intentionally focus on what excites your baby. Remain positive and be patient!

Signs can be used in a variety of contexts such as game time, song time, and especially story time. Board books with bright colors such as Eric Carle's "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" or "Brown Bear, Brown Bear" are excellent books to practice with. Sign only a few key words as first, keeping it simple.

And the best tip for success... Have FUN! Signing with your baby can be an exciting and rewarding adventure. As one mom stated: "It's been great to communicate with (my baby) on that level and I can't imagine not signing with a child of this age!" (Jennifer R.). Remain positive and be patient! With consistent modeling in context, your baby will learn to sign!

Classes and workshops provided by SeeSaw Signing are an excellent way to begin your journey. The interactive structure of classes is designed to teach parents the basic signs needed to begin introducing ASL to your child, in a fun and relaxed environment. Deborah Vaughan is a certified Sign2Me presenter and has been signing for Boulder Valley School District for many years. For upcoming class schedules go to www.Seesawsigning.com or call 720-581-7336.