

Teaching Your Baby to Communicate Using Sign Language By Christine Belaire, Ph.D.

Imagine being in a restaurant with your toddler, and it is pleasant-no screaming. You and your spouse are able to eat dinner in peace, play with the baby, and even talk. We are lucky enough to enjoy that exact scenario. How? One main reason is because our daughter Rachel (14 months) knows baby sign language and can use her signs to communicate her needs to us. Rachel can tell us when she is hungry, when she wants more, and when she is full. Her signing allows her to communicate with us without screaming or crying. She is able to sign the words please and thank you when she asks for something, which reduces our frustration. Further, Rachel giggles with delight when she communicates her needs through signs and we in response give her what she wants. She seems to gain a sense of satisfaction when she realizes that her behavior causes us to respond. She has learned that she has power through positive communication behavior.

“Communication is power,” stated Shelley Chesney, M.S., CCC/SLP, a speech pathologist. Communication is one of the biggest achievements in child development. We begin from birth trying to teach our children how to communicate with us. With infants, communication is challenging because they do not know how to effectively communicate their needs, and we must rely on interpretation of sounds, gestures, and cries to understand their needs. In reality, trial and error prevails. Communication is at best a guessing game for a while. We parents learn to interpret our child’s behavior; however, the rest of our family and friends may not understand our child’s unique gestures or sounds rendering them unable to communicate. It is not until children learn to speak that they are able to articulate their needs in a manner in which all people understand. Unfortunately, many children do not obtain a large vocabulary until two years of age or older, which prolongs this time of limited communication.

Many parents long for their children to speak to them so that the child can communicate if there is a problem. Sacky stated, “I wanted my children to be able to tell me what they needed so that I could meet their needs faster. It’s frustrating not knowing how to soothe them.” Higher-level communication distinguishes people from animals, and effective communication is essential to our being. Communication is our connection to other people. As parents, we long to have that level of communication and connection with our children. If there were a method of teaching our children to communicate earlier in infancy or toddler-hood, most parents would welcome the opportunity. The good news is that teaching early communication is possible and easy. Babies who learn sign language begin communicating with language (signing and verbal) earlier, in general, than babies who do not sign. According to Shelley Chesney, “The gross motor, simple hand movements of sign language are much easier to do than to coordinate all of the muscle movements to produce speech. Children do these movements normally, we just assign meaning to the movements.”

Early Communication with Sign Language has proven many significant benefits for child and parent. A study funded by the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development shows that signing infants and parents enjoyed numerous benefits including:

- Increased Ability to Communicate with Caregivers
 - Allows baby to share her world
 - Baby can communicate her needs and desires
 - Parent can understand the child better and faster
- Decreased Frustration by reducing
 - Tears
 - Tantrums
 - Whining
- Better language skills
 - Larger vocabularies
 - The ability to understand more words
 - An increased interest in books
 - Speak earlier
- Higher IQ scores
 - When tested at seven and eight years of age the children who signed as infants had an IQ that was on average 12 points higher than the non-signing group.
- Boosts of self-esteem and self-confidence
 - Babies feel understood
 - Babies are proud of their accomplishments
- Strengthens the parent-child bond
 - Better communication
 - Increased trust
 - Quality interactions

Signing helps reduce frustration for both babies and parents because the baby is able to articulate what she needs or desires rather than simply crying or whining. Rebecca noted, “We didn’t have the typical terrible twos because my son was able to communicate his needs better. It was so nice just knowing what he wanted and being able to understand him.” Amy stated, “signing made all the difference in the world in interpreting her wants and needs.” When Shelley used signs with her own children, she found that the signs particularly increased communication with her daughter whose speech was unclear due to multiple ear infections. “She was able to use signs with speech to clarify what she was saying. As a result, we were both less frustrated.” Signing can be extremely helpful to a child when sick. Teaching your baby signs like “help, pain, and hot” can relieve stress on a parent and child when attempting to determine if something is wrong with the child. Amy reported using signs to reduce crying and whining by prompting her children to “use their signs” in a similar way that we teach children to “use their words.”

With all of these benefits, some ask, what are the limitations? The beauty is: there are none. Teaching your baby to sign is easy and takes no more time than you

already spend with your child. The process begins by adding signs to your communications with your baby. You are already talking to your baby on a regular basis; now, you will simply talk and sign simultaneously. Now, do not get carried away by saying, "But I don't know sign language." You only have to know more than your baby. By age 15 months (which is long before babies are able to communicate effectively), many babies know five to fifteen signs. If you do not know any sign language, you will simply learn as you go. If you want your child to learn American Sign Language (ASL) as a second language, you will want to begin using ASL signs and follow a more complex model (teaching a second language is a different process all together). However, if you are only wanting a method of communication with your child, you can use any form of sign language including your (or your child's) own signs. Consistency is important: choose your signs and use them exclusively. There are two basic steps to teaching your child to sign.

- Choose a sign
 - Begin with 1-3 basic signs that represent everyday events or objects. Common beginning signs are:
 - Eat
 - More
 - Drink
 - Ball
 - Milk
 - Sleep
 - Book
 - Find an online directory or book of signs or learn from a friend
- Begin signing to your child
 - Use the sign every time you say the word. Consistency is important for memory.
 - Pair the sign directly with the event or object (i.e. use eat immediately when beginning to eat rather than before eating). Your child has a short memory and will associate the sign with the closest event.
 - Praise every attempt at signing by your child

Many parents report fear that teaching their baby to sign will discourage the child from talking. However, research shows that the opposite is true. "Babies who sign are more likely to talk earlier because they have already learned that words have power," reported Shelley Chesney. Further, "As babies have their natural conversations with mom, they learn that signing causes mom to respond. There is a natural developmental progression from gestures (signing) to speaking.

According to Shelley Chesney, "Simplicity is the key. Baby signing is more gesturing than signing." You can begin signing to you child as early as you wish, but many parents begin when the child is around six months old. Your child will take weeks to months to begin signing, and some babies begin signing as early as seven months old. Do not feel discouraged during this process. Your child is watching you and learning. We began the process when our daughter was six

months old, and she began signing during the latter part of her eighth month. During the time when we were signing, but she was watching, it was evident by her reactions that she understood the signs, but she was not ready to use them. Once she began using the signs, there was no stopping her. Some parents report that their children begin signing quickly, other children wait longer. Age of the child is one factor that may account for the difference: The older your child is when you begin the process, the faster she will learn the signs. Frequency of use, the number of people signing and personality also affect the process. There is no one correct way. Your child will develop the skill to sign along the same lines that she develops other developmental skills.

Learning sign language will follow the same pattern as learning verbal communication. Your child will understand signs long before she is ready to use them and she will practice the signs to herself in the same way that children babble before they talk. In addition, children will use modified forms of the sign before they use it correctly. With spoken language, children often mispronounce words as they are learning. It is as important that you continue to sign correctly as it is that you speak correctly. Your child will adapt the sign as her fine motor skills develop. Often, children use multiple forms of a sign over time. For example, the sign for “eat” is putting your hand to your mouth as if you are placing food in your mouth. Children may point one finger to the mouth or place one finger inside the mouth. Also, the child may begin by putting the open hand to the mouth and later use only one or a couple of fingers. Any attempt at the sign shows learning and should be praised. Further, babies’ signs often look similar for signs that have similar movements or body placements and require small fine motor distinctions. For example, babies may sign similarly those signs that are around the mouth (eat, drink, thank you). You may need to consider the context of the baby’s actions to determine the meaning until she is able to refine the sign. Some babies will develop their own signs. If that happens, accept her signs and praise her efforts. As your child learns more spoken language, the signs will gradually taper off.

Following are some additional tips that you may find helpful. As you begin this process, make it fun. Your child will learn, strive to please you, and be delighted with her success. When you use a sign, be expressive and animated. Your child will learn easier in a positive environment. In addition, sign in all situations, not just your home. The more environments your child pairs with signing, the more she will generalize the skill and sign more frequently. Further, involve as many people in the process as possible. Encourage extended family members, friends, and babysitters to learn the signs and use them with your baby. Repetition equals learning. Lastly, be patient. Your child will learn to sign at her own pace.

If you want more information about baby signing, the libraries and internet have extensive resources on the subject. Find some good information and begin. You will find on the internet that you can easily spend excessive amounts of money

on resources, but spending money is not necessary. There are sites that provide free information including online dictionaries with pictures. Some of the sites I found most helpful were: www.signwithme.com, www.signingbaby.com, www.babysigns.com, and www.kindersigns.com. If you are planning to use baby signs on a limited basis, you may only need to learn ten to thirty words. Your child may determine if she wants to know more signs as she grows.

Signing with your baby is an experience that will bring you closer together and provide multiple benefits to you and your child. My experience with signing to my baby has been positive and rewarding. At fourteen months of age, Rachel uses approximately twelve signs and speaks about ten words (some duplicates: she signs and speaks the same word). She giggles with glee when using a sign gets her what she wants. Signing has increased our communication and lowered our frustration levels. Extended families and friends love being able to understand Rachel and are eager to learn new signs. The communication bonds her closer with my husband and with me because we are able to meet her needs more precisely. It is never too early to begin teaching our children to communicate.