

Established Signs or Non-Standard Signs?

Choosing Your Approach to Early Communication

Note: Although we refer to American Sign Language (ASL) in the following text, we also support the use of other standardized signed languages in the countries in which they are used. We are currently developing regional editions of the SIGN *with your* BABY® Complete Learning Kit that incorporate the use of native sign languages such as: British Sign Language, Australian Sign Language, and New Zealand Sign Language, among others.

Recently, parents, caregivers, and childcare professionals have started using sign language to communicate with preverbal infants. Signing with babies is gaining popularity because it empowers children with early communication skills and helps to significantly reduce frustration.

Currently, there are two schools of thought about what type of signs to use with babies. First, there are people who advocate for the use of signs from an established, standardized sign language such as American Sign Language (ASL). The SIGN *with your* BABY® program is firmly based on ASL. There are others who feel that signing is only useful for a short period of time in a child's life; therefore, they feel that it is best for parents to make up their own signs. These 'home signs' are made up of simple gestures or movements and are not standardized, meaning that one person's sign for 'dog' may be completely different from another person's sign for 'dog'.

If you are investigating both of these approaches, we encourage you to read this document. It is a collaborative statement prepared by Dr. Joseph Garcia and Northlight Communications, publishers of SIGN *with your* BABY®, with contributions from educators, parents, caregivers, and researchers. Together, we have thoroughly investigated both methods and we have come to this unified conclusion:

There are compelling advantages to using standardized ASL signs!

Allow us to share with you some of our experiences, insights, and observations that have led us to become such strong advocates for the use of standardized ASL signs in early communication programs for hearing babies.

ASL signs

- offer consistency
- are easy to learn
- are easy for babies to understand
- are widely known and easily accessible
- allow for creativity

Using ASL signs with babies

- facilitates social opportunities
- offers educational advantages
- reinforces motor development milestones

In this position paper, we will discuss each of these advantages in detail and share with you some of the reasons why so many parents and educators support the use of ASL in programs for young children.

ASL Signs Offer Consistency

A standardized system

The advantage of using ASL signs is that they are standardized throughout North America. If you go to a book store and open several ASL dictionaries, you will find that the vast majority of the signs are made the same way in each book. You will occasionally find some regional variations in ASL signs. One such sign is the sign for ‘juice’. For our program, we have simply chosen to present the most commonly used sign for ‘juice’.

Although these regional variants exist, they do not pose a challenge for most parents. Hearing babies who sign typically use very basic vocabulary that can be understood by most ASL users throughout North America.

Consistency across childcare settings

Because ASL signs are standardized, they offer consistency across childcare settings. This consistency helps facilitate transitions for teachers or children who move to new classrooms or childcare centers. Teachers or children who move to centers using non-standard signs may have to learn an entirely new set of signs. This may be very confusing, especially for young children who have grown accustomed to using particular signs.

Consistency across educational settings

In addition, ASL offers consistency across educational settings. Dr. Marilyn Daniels author of the critically acclaimed *Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children’s Literacy* (Bergin & Garvey 2001) has found, based on over ten years of research with hearing babies and children in this country and the UK, that there are significant advantages for both children and parents if vocabulary words from ASL or BSL are presented to children rather than “home made invented signs”. This is important as children routinely move from childcare settings, to nursery school, to preschool, to kindergarten, to elementary school, to high school, to college, and will consistently encounter ASL to varying degrees in each of these venues.

ASL Signs Are Easy to Learn

Ideal for busy parents

Most typically developing children will learn and use somewhere between 20 and 50 signs before speech becomes their dominant form of communication. The good news for busy parents is that it doesn’t take much time to learn ASL signs. Even if you’ve had no prior experience with ASL, it only takes a minute or two to learn the first few signs. Once you get comfortable using these signs, you can learn additional signs at a pace that works for both you and your baby.

Some people think that they will have to learn an *entire* language to sign with their baby. As a parent of a hearing baby, all you need to learn is a handful of simple signs. We encourage you to use single signs to reinforce single words, as you speak them. For example, if you say to your baby “Would you like more?” all you have to do is *sign* ‘MORE’ as you *say* the word ‘MORE’. However, if you are interested in learning more than just a few signs and want to study ASL as a language, we encourage you to do so.

ASL Signs Are Easy For Babies to Understand

Critics have stated that some ASL signs may be too abstract for babies to understand. The truth is that many ASL signs are iconic—that is, they are manual imitations of the objects and actions they represent. In other words, most ASL signs actually look like what they signify. For example, the ASL sign for ‘bird’ is easily understood because you simply place your fingers near your nose to represent a bird’s beak. This makes American Sign Language easy to learn—both for your child and for you!

Signs and words are learned in the same way

What happens when babies encounter more abstract ASL signs? Our experience has shown that babies will learn and remember signs that are *regularly demonstrated to them in context*, no matter how abstract or iconic the sign is!

Consider the fact that hearing babies can understand spoken words—which are usually even more abstract than signed words. The sounds “m” and “ah” have no inherent meaning, but when we put them together to form the word ‘mama’, babies quickly learn to associate this symbol with the nice woman who feeds them and takes care of them! To some degree, all words and signs are abstract symbols. If we use the *word* ‘mama’ in context enough times, most babies will learn to understand what this symbol means. If we also use the *sign* for ‘mama’ every time we say that word, babies will come to understand this symbol as well.

ASL is Widely Known and Easily Accessible

ASL: the third most commonly used language in the U.S.

ASL is widely used in the U.S. and Canada, not only by people who are deaf or hard of hearing, but also by educators, interpreters for the deaf, children with special needs and their families, hearing people who have deaf friends or relatives, and students who have studied ASL in high school or college. The advantage of this is that the ASL signs your baby uses will be recognized and understood by many people.

ASL Signs Allow for Creativity

A few special signs

Even though the SIGN *with your BABY*® program is based on ASL, you may want to create special signs for family members, friends, or pets. You and your baby can create these signs together using simple movements and gestures. We encourage you to document them so that others who interact with your baby can learn and use them.

Using ASL with Children Facilitates Social Opportunities

All parents who sign with their babies are encouraged to teach the signs they are using to everyone who interacts with their child. This helps to ensure that their child’s attempts to communicate will be understood by others.

A growing circle of friends

As babies grow, their vocabularies quickly expand. Their circle of friends and acquaintances also grows as

they begin to participate in playgroups or spend more time in childcare settings. The use of ASL in these settings allows children who sign to easily communicate with one another. However, the use of non-standardized signs in these settings can be problematic. Imagine the confusion in a classroom full of toddlers who are each using a *totally different* set of signs and gestures!

A larger community

The beauty of using ASL is that you will give your child the opportunity to have social interactions with *anyone* who uses ASL: parents, teachers, caregivers, doctors, and other children.

Using ASL with Children Offers Educational Advantages

A boost for early literacy skills

Sign language is becoming an integral part of preschool curricula. Research shows that adding a kinesthetic (movement) element to verbal and written language learning will positively impact early literacy skills.

Dr. Marilyn Daniels, author of *Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy*, has found that hearing students in pre-kindergarten classes who receive instruction in both English and ASL scored significantly higher on standardized vocabulary tests than hearing students in classes with no sign instruction. Over the years, her studies have clearly demonstrated that adding visual and kinesthetic elements to verbal communication helps enhance a preschool child's vocabulary, spelling, and early reading skills. For more information about Dr. Daniels' work, go to www.marilyndaniels.com.

A foundation for second language learning

Imagine spending your time developing a unique system of signs and gestures to teach your baby, only to discard it once she learns to talk. Compare that to learning signs from a rich and beautiful language that she can continue to use and explore as she grows. It is comforting to us to know that if our babies learn to use ASL signs; their usefulness will not end when our children learn to speak. And considering the growth of ASL programs from preschool through college, it is nice to know our children will already be comfortable with signing and can build on the foundation established during infancy.

Using ASL with Children Reinforces Motor Development Milestones

Reinforcing important motor skills

During infancy and the toddler years, the development of both fine and gross motor skills is critical to language and cognition. There is well-documented research indicating that the gross motor skill of bringing the arms and hands together at the midline of the body is one of the most significant developmental milestones in infancy. It is a primary step in integrating the right and left hemisphere of the brain to work together and is crucial to sensory integration. This motor skill, paired with the visual skill of gazing toward midline, is reinforced by the use of sign language.

Many of the ASL signs recommended for babies involve basic hand movements made at the body's midline. For example, the signs for 'MORE', 'BOOK', 'SHOES', all encourage a baby to move their hands together toward their midline.

Once a baby is able to make these moves to midline, the next developmental step involves crossing the midline. There are many ASL signs recommended for babies and young children that encourage the crossing of midline. The ASL signs for ‘HUG’, ‘BABY’, ‘BEAR’ and ‘SPIDER’ encourage the development of this important motor skill.

People who make up their own signs may not include signs that cross midline, unknowingly passing up an opportunity to reinforce this important motor skill that can strengthen sensory integration. To read more about sensory integration, go to <http://www.sinetwork.org>.

Why Educators Support the Use of ASL

“We’re already using ASL!”

ASL is currently a standard part of many preschool curricula. Therefore, many teachers are already familiar with basic ASL signs and are welcoming the introduction of ASL into infant and toddler programs.

Consistency across the curriculum

MaryJo Dostal, Director of Union Bay Children’s Center (serving the students, staff and faculty of the University of Washington) and co-founder of Sprouts Educational Resources shares her experiences:

“Based on our experiences of introducing ASL to hearing infants, toddlers, and preschoolers over the last five years, we have found ASL to be an incredible bridge between receptive language and verbal language. It is a wonderful tool for children learning English as a second language and for introducing a second spoken language. We have also found ASL to be an effective connection for children moving through infant, toddler and preschool groupings. By having the consistency of ASL throughout our entire program, the children and staff can easily communicate through recognized signs.”

Facilitating communication for all children

Teachers recognize the importance of creating “inclusive” educational environments where *all* children can successfully learn and socialize, no matter what special needs they may have.

The use of ASL in early childhood programs is an important part of creating an inclusive educational environment. The use of non-standard signs may actually prevent children in these environments from communicating with one another.

“We use ASL due to the fact that some of our children will be using signs to communicate for a very long time. It is MOST rewarding to see all of the children in the classroom, both children with special needs and typically developing children, using signs to communicate with each other.”

-- Kelly Kirchmar, MA, CCC-SLP,
Speech-Language Pathologist

A Legal Foundation For the Use of ASL in Childcare Settings

Inclusion mandated by law

Inclusion is the philosophy that all children should be included in mainstream educational settings. In the U.S. and Canada, there are specific laws that support inclusion and mandate the least restrictive educational environment for children who have disabilities.

The following laws address the rights of individuals who use ASL as their primary form of communication. They ensure that these individuals have the right to have access to their native language of ASL in educational and work settings.

Public Law 94-142, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975)
The IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (1997)
The ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)
Canadian Human Rights Act

ASL vital to inclusive childcare environments

By using ASL in early educational settings, you help to ensure that children, staff members, parents and caregivers who use ASL are provided with the opportunities mandated in these federal laws. Given these federal mandates and our nation's desire to create inclusive environments, it makes sense to begin exposing *all* children to ASL in their early years.

An important benefit of using ASL in an early childhood setting is that it can facilitate communication between typically developing children and those with special needs. It also gives adults who use ASL as their primary form of communication more opportunities to work effectively in childcare settings.

To learn more about IDEA, go to http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/Policy/IDEA/the_law.html

To learn more about ADA and childcare go to <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/childq%26a.htm>

To learn more about the Canadian Human Rights Act, go to <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/H-6/index.html>

To learn more about Canadian laws pertaining to inclusion go to <http://www.schoolnet.ca/sne/e/index2.html>

Why Parents Support the Use of ASL

“Both of my children have learned ASL signs easily and use them functionally. My daughter, Sarah, was able to understand a woman at a baby shower the other day who signed “good job” to her. It is so rewarding to know that she has this skill at such an early age, and will have it throughout her life. This would not have been the case had we ‘made up’ our own signs.”

Teresa Fanton, Thornton, CO

“Our daughter was able to express herself through simple signs (milk, more, all done) at 8 months old. She is now 13 months and readily uses over 35 signs to express herself. Just the other day she picked up a feather from our parrot and signed, “bird- hair”. It is amazing! She can express herself and we can discuss concepts you wouldn't normally think a 1 year old would understand.”

Jessica Jordan, Nashua, NH

“Due to the fact that Miles has Down Syndrome, learning American Sign Language signs has helped to reduce his frustration immensely, while his oral-motor skills continue to develop. I wanted Miles to be able to have a structured language system that he could use in the world, not just at home. When people don't understand what Miles is trying to say, he will often use sign language to clarify his message. If we made up our own signs, people in the community may not know what he is trying to say.”

“The signs have been easy for Miles to master as he gets older and his fine motor skills improve. At 30 months of age, he knows and uses, in addition to verbalizations, almost 200 signs. We encourage Miles to talk and sign at the same time. This has truly helped me to know what he knows, and we would have had no other way to know these things without the use of his signs AND words.”

Ruthie Ross, Denver, CO

“Maya knew over 100 ASL signs by the time she was 18 months old. ASL was easy for her to learn and proved to be a very effective communication tool. Maya’s transition from ASL to spoken language was seamless. At 18 months she said her first three-word sentence, ‘No water (in the) pool.’ Now that Maya is 25 months and knows well over 1000 spoken words, we still use ASL signs as a game. We appreciate the fact that the ASL signs that we learned may eventually serve as a bridge to help us communicate with deaf users of ASL.”

Katy Beck & John Hatten, Bellingham, WA

Final Thoughts From Author Dr. Joseph Garcia

“Using ASL not only provides family and extended family members with a unified system of communication, it also can offer childcare providers a standardized system to better serve the needs of all children.

“By using American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), or the signs of a specific region, we open the doors to communicating with a much broader community of people – and we lay the foundation for our children to continue learning and using ASL throughout their lives.

“I think ASL is a gift from the deaf community. I can’t think of a better way for us to honor that gift than by using it to facilitate early communication and bonding.”

Dr. Joseph Garcia,
Author of SIGN *with your* BABY®

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