

Sign Language Empowers Hearing Babies to Express Their Needs

Parents are amazed by what infants can say.

Why are songs like “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” and “The Wheels On The Bus” so popular among young children? One reason is that the words are accompanied by dynamic hand and body motion. This motion not only makes the experience more memorable, but it actually gives young children the ability to participate long before they can sing the words to the song. This principle has been taken one step further by early childhood development researcher Dr. Joseph Garcia, who has developed a system to enable preverbal babies to express their needs and observations through sign language, before they can speak.

His method, brought to the world in the SIGN *with your* BABY® Complete Learning Kit, teaches parents how to empower their babies, as young as eight months old, with expressive communication skills. This system is gaining enthusiastic support not only from parents but from child development experts as well.

Dr. Burton White, Director of the Center for Parent Education and author of *The First Three Years of Life* and *Raising a Happy Unspoiled Child*, has seen the many benefits offered to families who use signs with their preverbal babies. During his years of research (more than 30 years) he found one of the greatest advantages to signing comes when the child is between 17 and 20 months of age. “What it boils down to is children are least able to tolerate frustration during that three-month period in our experience.” says Dr. White, “And one of the major reasons is, they can’t easily say what’s on their minds. A child who has a reasonably extensive signing vocabulary is much better off in that respect.”

Dr. Garcia’s method does not require parents to learn an entire new language. Rather, it teaches that even a few simple gestures can make a big difference in empowering and meeting the needs of their babies. Parents start slowly by teaching their babies some easy American Sign Language signs that represent simple ideas their babies can understand, like “More,” “Eat,” and “Milk.” When babies are able to replace some of the screaming, whining and crying with a few simple hand gestures, it can dramatically improve their relationships with their caregivers. Parents who use Dr. Garcia’s system report reduced frustration for them and their baby, a stronger parent/child bond, and accelerated verbal language development.

Compelling stories of signing babies are becoming more and more prevalent as the wave of parents who use this method begins to swell. Debbie Jenkins, the mother of a signing baby boy named Sebastian, tells this story in the SIGN *with your* BABY® Training Video.

She had no sooner placed Sebastian (11 months old) in his car seat when a wasp entered the car and began buzzing around the back window of the car. With some effort the wasp soon buzzed right by Debbie’s head and out the car window. Satisfied the wasp was gone, Debbie prepared to drive off when Sebastian began frantically signing “More, more, more”. Debbie, said, “No its okay, its gone.” Sebastian continued to sign “More, more, more,” until Debbie noticed that there was another wasp in the car. Fortunately, Debbie was able to remove the wasp without incident. This story, like others proudly told by parents of signing babies, illustrates just one of the many benefits of Joseph’s system: babies can now initiate conversation and problem solving.

Since all people, babies included, learn through repetition, signing serves as a powerful educational tool. Parents who sign with their babies tend to repeat words, both verbally and with signs, more than parents who only speak to their babies. Where a non-signing parent might just ask their baby, “Do you want more?” a signing parent might sign “More” several times while verbally asking, “Do you want more? More? Okay, I’ll give you more.” So signing babies tend to get more exposure to each word being emphasized with a sign. Moreover, each of those words is reinforced by the multiple modalities in which it is conveyed to and from the child: audibly, visually, and kinesthetically.

- Audibly (the spoken word)
- Visually (observing the gesture, facial expression of the parent, and the context)
- Kinesthetically (producing the physical gesture)

History And Scientific Foundation

SIGN *with your* BABY® was born from an experience Dr. Garcia had while visiting the family of a deaf friend. There he saw a baby, around ten months old, communicating with his parents in a much more sophisticated way than he had seen with hearing children of hearing parents the same age: the child was using American Sign Language. Joseph was so impressed, he decided to make it the focus of his research and ultimately the thesis for his masters degree. During his research, he discovered that hearing children began replicating signs as early as eight months, with some exceptional children as early as six months. This new discovery seriously challenged the opinion of many child development experts, including Piaget who theorized that babies can’t mentally represent symbols until they are almost two, and therefore can’t learn to talk until then. Instead, it appears that young infants are lacking in the fine motor skills necessary to produce spoken language, not the conceptual ability to understand and use language. Joseph also found that once the signing children began speaking, they tended to have a better grasp of grammar and syntax, past and present tenses, and of language in general.

Recent and current scientific research continues to support his findings. Parents and teachers who participate in these studies indicate that they experience reduced frustration, stronger bonds with their babies, and that their children have an increased interest in books.

Dr. Kimberlee Whaley, associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State’s College of Human Ecology has also studied the benefits of signing with hearing children. Her pilot study found that using American Sign Language signs in a pre-school setting greatly reduced the frustration for preverbal children and their teachers. According to Whaley, it is much easier for our teachers to work with 12-month-olds who can sign that they want their bottle, rather than just cry and have us try to figure out what they want. This is a great way for infants to express their needs before they can verbalize them. Dr. Whaley recently received funding for a longitudinal study that began in November 1999. She recommends SIGN *with your* BABY® to participating families.

Dr. Marilyn Daniels, of Penn State University, has also conducted several studies that focused on using American Sign Language with hearing children. She discovered that students in pre-kindergarten classes who receive sign instruction test significantly higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test than students in pre-kindergarten classes not receiving sign instruction. Her findings mirror the benefits discovered in other studies while offering new insight into the advantages signing offers in developing literacy in older children. She concluded: “Their superior scores indicate that simultaneously presenting words visually, kinesthetically, and verbally enhances a child’s vocabulary development.”

One might think that if an emphasis is placed on manual communication, verbal communication will be delayed. In fact, the reverse seems to be true. When this issue was reviewed in Acredolo and Goodwyn’s study, it was discovered that not only do signing children tend to learn to speak sooner, but by age two they have a vocabulary of 50 more real words, on average, than their non-signing counterparts. By age three, children exposed to signing had language skills approaching that expected of four year olds. In the same way that crawling seems to stimulate a child’s interest in walking, signing seems to provide an excellent bridge to verbal communication.

Dr. Daniels’ research with preschoolers and elementary school students reinforces the understanding that signing with speech strengthens reading and speech communication skills. Armed with the knowledge that signing can be beneficial well after a child can speak, the advantages of using an existing sign language from the start becomes increasingly clear. Without a standard, each childcare facility could be faced with interpreting a unique set of signs for each child. Using an existing language places all students and teachers on the same page and offers a foundation upon which students can continue to grow. Dr. Whaley, Dr. Daniels and Dr. Garcia all support the use of native sign languages like American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language (BSL).

Signing Serves Many Populations

The advantages of signing have been well known for years in communities serving children with language-delays, autism, Down syndrome and deafness. Alice Stroutsos, a Seattle-based Speech-Language Pathologist specializing in working with older toddlers and preschoolers, uses signs to help her patients who are language-delayed. She uses signing as a language-stimulation technique to help facilitate spoken communication. The technique involves using signs in conjunction with spoken language, to get her clients invested as communication partners. Once they are invested, interested, and signing, she continues to move them toward more verbal communication. Since speaking requires fine motor skills, it takes more time and practice to master than it does to replicate a hand gesture. Movements in a parent’s mouth and throat that comprise verbal communication are mostly hidden from a child’s view. However, signing offers a much more visual and kinesthetic means to learn each word.

The fact that the neuropath ways responsible for language rest upon the same neuropath ways for motor coordination is an important factor. Professionals serving children with autism, Down-syndrome, and other special-needs have known this for years and have developed successful motor therapies for these populations to assist in their language development. By improving their motor coordination through movement exercises, the brain’s capacity for learning language is strengthened. Signing is an excellent way to employ motor coordination and language simultaneously.

As a result, growing numbers of professionals within these communities are recommending Joseph's program.

American Sign Language (ASL) is the third most used language in the United States. British Sign Language (BSL) enjoys comparable popularity in the United Kingdom. Since SIGN *with your* BABY® uses native sign languages, it has been enthusiastically embraced by numerous educators and other professionals within the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing communities in these countries. As many as 70% of the parents of deaf children never learn the language that will most likely be their child's primary form of communication. If hearing parents of hearing babies can learn to use signs, perhaps parents of children who are deaf will be more inclined to follow suit. Childcare facilities are frequently faced with the request to integrate children with special needs into mainstream programs. By offering native sign language signs to children in both communities, they share a common language with which the children can connect.

A New Way to Parent

This process of signing goes beyond just getting children to communicate earlier. It is a system that has the potential for changing the way parents interact with their babies. It has been suggested by child development experts that a parent who is communicating with their baby is less likely to neglect or abuse them. Therefore, it is feasible to imagine that parents who get into the habit of communicating with their children as babies may be more inclined to keep the lines of communication open as their children age. How then might that aging process be affected when children learn from the earliest possible age that they can express their thoughts and feelings, influence their environment in a positive way, and solve problems through communication? The current and future generations of signing babies will hopefully be more attuned to effective communication.

Whether for the purpose of strengthening the bond between caregiver and child, or the bond between diverse communities of children and adults, this method of signing with speech is sure to gain momentum in the coming years. Certainly, the wave has already started to build!

SIGN *with your* BABY

Dr. Joseph Garcia has made the process of teaching signs to babies as simple and accessible to parents as possible through his SIGN *with your* BABY® Complete Learning Kit. This package includes a 60-minute training video, a 109-page book and a Quick Reference Guide that displays 54 of the most useful signs for babies and toddlers. The Complete Learning Kit has been honored with multiple awards and can be purchased on-line at www.sign2me.com or by dialing toll-free 1-877-SIGN 2 ME (1-877-744-6263).

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