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# Talking Before Speaking? Using Sign Language to Increase Communication Skills in Late Talking Toddlers

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February 11, 2008 by [Laura](#) – [12 Comments](#)

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Using sign language to help toddlers learn to communicate is the fastest and easiest way I know to reduce frustration in the entire family. When I got my degrees as a speech-language pathologist in the late 80's and early 90's, this was still a new idea. Often when I suggested this to families then, they were hesitant and suspicious. Did their child have a hearing loss that no one had told them about? Did I think their child would never be able to learn to talk? Thankfully now most parents I encounter have heard of this method are eager to try. Frankly, it's the first

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strategy I introduce during my initial check with a new family. Many families say it's a life-changing idea for them. (See Pat's comment under *When to Worry*.) Before talking about how to do this, let's visit what sign language is and isn't, and then let's highlight the reasons why using signs is such a good idea.

### What Sign Language Is?

Learning sign language is incorporating a few key gestures into your daily routines when a parent talks with the child. Babies then learn to use the same key gestures to "talk" back to the adult. This process becomes communicative and enhances the normal parent-child connection. Most speech-language pathologists and other pediatric interventionists use American Sign Language (ASL), the same sign language that hearing impaired individuals use. Another popular method is "Baby Signs, a system of modified signs pioneered by Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn." These signs were designed to closely match naturally-occurring gestures for words. In my practice I teach and use both. Some of the ASL signs are too difficult for little hands to master, so I teach the Baby Sign version for that particular word. However, using ASL is universal in the educational field, so many teachers and therapists recognize and use the same signs. This can be quite helpful if a child goes to preschool, daycare, or has more than one therapist on his team.

### What Sign Language Is Not?

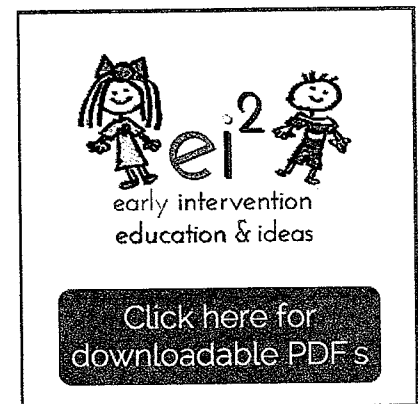
Some parents get so caught up in the initial excitement of signing that they enroll in courses and invest lots of money in textbooks and videos. Just when the parents really get going, their kid decides to go and TALK! I've seen parents almost disappointed that signs may not be a lasting "second" language for their kids. For me and for most parents, using sign language is a means to an end. We want the child to become

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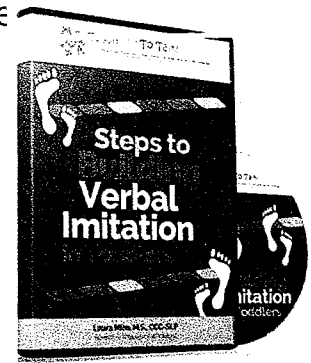
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communicative and eventually talk. Signing is one way to help accomplish our overall goal. Be sure to check out our Store for a complete



## Benefits of Signing

Researchers, particularly the National Institutes of Health, have conducted studies that revealed the following benefits of using signs with babies & toddlers:

1. *Using signs reduces frustration.* Signing gives the child a symbolic way to communicate before he's able to speak. This reduces stress for everyone because (finally!) there's way for him to let you know what he needs beyond crying, pointing, and grunting.

2. *Signing may make learning to talk easier (and sometimes faster) for children.* When children are exposed to signs, they experience the "word" in a multi-sensory way. They hear the word as you say it, see it as you sign it, feel as they sign it, and then finally say it. There's also good evidence that producing an accompanying motor movement makes it easier for some children to produce the word.

3. *Signing stimulates intellectual development and emotional growth.* Research has proven that upon entering kindergarten, kids who used signs had higher language scores, used more sophisticated play, and had IQ averages 12 points higher at age 8. (These studies were performed on children who were described as typically developing.) In the book *Baby Signs*, authors Acredolo and Goodwyn state, "Signing allows you to see how smart your baby really is." This is so true for kids who aren't talking yet. Many people assume that they're not smart, and this is often not the case. On the emotional side, signing gives children a "can do" attitude. It gives kids power to control what happens in their lives, and their self-esteem and confidence is

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boosted. This is so important for late talkers. You can see the pride on their little faces when they finally realize, "I can make Mommy understand what I need!"

### **Will signing prevent my baby from learning to talk?**

I always answer this question with an emphatic **NO!** It's actually the opposite! As noted above, there are lots of reasons, backed by research, that prove that signing does not keep a baby from talking. Some parents are afraid that signing makes a baby "lazy" about using words. This is absolutely false!!! When babies can talk, they do talk. I promise! Not signing because you're scared your baby would prefer to use signs instead of words is as crazy as saying you won't let your baby crawl because you are afraid he won't learn to walk, or not teaching your baby to wave bye-bye because you think he might not learn to say "bye-bye." Signing is an extension of using gestures to communicate. As long as you keep emphasizing the spoken word as you sign, your baby will associate the word with the sign and drop the sign when he or she can consistently say the word. Trust me on this. I have RARELY seen a kid hold onto signs past the point when he or she could communicate verbally proficiently. On the rare occasion that this happens, the kid hangs onto a favorite sign or two, and then it's pretty easy to fix at that point because you insist that he say the word. Please don't let this little issue that very likely will NEVER happen keep you from trying signing. Any person, (I don't care if it's a therapist, doctor, teacher, or whoever) who tries to discourage signing because they think it might prevent talking is, for a lack of a better word, *wrong!* It absolutely, positively helps.

### **Getting Started**

There are many good programs available to help you teach your baby to sign if you feel you need one. I've already mentioned

Baby Signs, a book by Acropolis and Goodly. There's also a complete book and video on teaching signs to your baby called Sign with Your Baby by Dr. Joseph Garcia. The Signing Times series is a darling set of videos that kids and parents can watch together and learn the signs. Many PBS stations air this program. (Let me emphasize WATCH TOGETHER. It does a child no good to learn to use signs if his parents don't know what he's communicating! Again, let me restate that parents should be very careful about the amount of TV, even good quality programming such as this, that they allow children to view, particularly for children under 2. See the post entitled "No TV" for the scary truth about television viewing.)

There are also many good sites on the Internet that demonstrate signs. Look for my post in the next few days entitled "Early Sign Language Vocabulary" for links to my favorite sites.

Before I would invest in books or videos on signing, I would start simple by teaching your baby a few signs on your own. As I've stated throughout this site, learning from mommy and daddy is much more effective than learning from a video!

There aren't many special skills your baby needs to have mastered before you introduce signs. If your baby is waving, clapping, pointing, or shaking her head no, then she's already using the fine motor skills she needs to sign, and she's already mastered the concept of gesturing to make things happen in her world. Is your baby bringing things to you for you both to look at together? Then your baby already understands the concepts of initiating communication and of joint attention. I have taught signs to children who weren't using these kinds of gestures yet, but it makes it much easier if they are.

Children who may not be ready to sign include those who are demonstrating overall developmental lags. This includes delays in cognitive skills (the way she's learning and thinking), those with problems in social interaction (Children who don't or rarely have an interest in other people. For example, they could care less if they attend to what you're showing them, or they never take the initiative to get your attention), or those who have severe motor coordination problems, may not be able or ready to sign when you first begin. As a concerned parent I'd go ahead and try to introduce a few basic signs, even if you're not sure if your child is ready. You may be surprised! For kids with motor problems, recognize that his first attempts to sign may be off-target just as we recognize that our child's first word attempts often don't sound perfect either. Look for and reward the effort. For kids who lack the social interaction skills, work on these first, and then try signing during times when they are highly motivated to get something from you.

The most important thing to do with signing is to make it FUN! In the Acredolo & Goodwyn book, the authors emphasize, "Make signing a game and not a chore." They recommend that signs be worked into your day, and not practiced during structured, set-aside "signing lessons." I have found that parents typically do better when they associate using signs with particular daily routines, such as snack time, bath-time, and especially during play time.

Signs should always be done in context. For example, don't teach your baby the sign for banana unless you have one and are ready to eat it! Once your baby is signing, don't have him "show off" signs when it doesn't make sense. Many parents do this with signs (and words!) for grandparents and friends. They have their kids "perform" by signing or saying words when the object/event is not there. This is very confusing, especially for late talkers. You ask him to show Grandma the sign for "more" when there's

nothing there to ask for, be sure to check out our store for a complete guide to teaching sign language. Or worse, he starts to sign "more," and you give him nothing in return! During therapy sessions mothers are always trying to get their kids to repeat a new word for me that they might have said earlier in the day or week during a specific event. More often than not, the child does not repeat the word, much to the disappointment of his mother. The reason for this is that it just doesn't make sense to the child. Resist the temptation and "keep it real." If you want him to show off his new skill, set up a real situation, and then have him use the sign.

## How to Introduce Signs

**1. Always, always, always say the word you're signing.** The child needs to associate the word, sign, and object/event/picture you're labeling as one in the same. Don't forget to continue to prompt the word, even if you don't think your child will or can say it. Sometimes a child will surprise you by saying a word when you are working on teaching the sign. Accept this "gift" and move on to a new sign. Don't insist that he do the sign too if he's saying the word. Remember – speech is your goal! The only time I try to get a child to use a sign when he's also saying the word is when his speech is so unintelligible that his parents have no idea what he is saying.

**2. Pick out a few basic signs to get started.** Don't try to learn a sign for every word you say. There will be a suggested list for signs to teach in the next few days in another post entitled "Early Sign Language Vocabulary." Pick all-purpose signs like "more" or "please," as well as signs for your toddler's favorite things. Signs associated with food usually work the best in the beginning.

Signs I Don't Teach – With late talkers, I never teach a sign for a word he can already say. I also never teach the signs for gestures he may already use or when the gesture is easier, such as

shaking your head for “no” and “yes.” Be sure to check out our Store for a complete alphabet or numbers with signs to toddlers. It makes no sense to teach them “academic” signs at 1 or 2 (or even at 3 or 4 in my opinion!). They need to learn signs they can really use in their daily environment.

**3. Repeat the sign and word many times.** You have to say the word and show a sign many, many times for a baby to learn the association. Point and show him the object again and again while you are saying the word and signing. Always keep the sign in context so it makes sense.

**4. Help your baby perform the sign.** This is the number one reason parents report failure during their previous attempts to teach a toddler to use signs. Some children may resist your help, but go ahead and provide gentle guidance to help him get started. I don't force kids to do it, but I do continue to provide lots of help until they begin to forcibly resist. Even then I might persist in hand-over-hand assistance at least sometimes, because many late talkers are not coordinated enough to imitate signs without help. They often don't realize this themselves. You might also find it helpful to use a firmer touch since light pressure is often uncomfortable and almost ticklish to some children with tactile defensiveness.

**5. Accept your baby's version of the sign, even if it's not perfect.** Many babies aren't coordinated enough to imitate signs exactly like you show them. For example, many babies modify the sign for “more,” which is typically done by tapping together the fingers of both hands. Some initially clap, some tap their fists, and still some tap one finger of one hand to an open palm of the other. Praise and reward his attempts. Don't correct him since he's not likely going to use his signs forever. The prize is communication, not perfect signing. If you can remember his version, accept it and move on to a new one.



The only times I “correct” signs are when a baby is signing for a complete sign that’s very similar to another sign, or when I am prompting one sign and the baby uses another one. For example, I am saying and signing “please” and the toddler is signing “more.” By correcting, I mean moving his hands to form the correct sign.

Another common problem is “scrolling.” A child might perform every sign he knows hoping he gets to the right one. When this happens, I always place his hands in his lap to stop the “scrolling,” and then I model the correct sign and word. Most of the time this means that you are teaching too many signs too quickly and your child is on overload. It could also be that he is so excited that he can’t stop and think before he tries to communicate what he wants. Either way, slow down and let him master the signs he’s learned before teaching new ones.

**6. When your toddler can consistently use a sign, don’t continue to model the sign yourself.** Model (say) the word and let him do the sign by himself. This increases the complexity of the task. Prompt the sign by saying, “How do we sign \_\_\_\_\_?” or, “Show me \_\_\_\_.” This also helps him become spontaneous, or to begin to use signs on his own.

**7. Praise and reward your child lavishly for signing.** Smile, clap, and respond enthusiastically when your kid signs. Oh – and don’t forget to reward him by giving him what he’s asked for! Nothing is more disappointing to a brand new signer than performing a sign and getting a big “no” or worse, no response. Many years ago I had a mother show me a picture of her daughter in her sleeper signing “candy” at 6:00 am. While I wouldn’t give my own daughter an entire package of M&Ms before breakfast, I would have gladly given her 1/2 a piece of fruit snack just to prove that I “got it” when she signed. Look for a way to reward his or her early attempts, even if it goes against your initial instincts. Reinforcing communication in a late talker

is more important than proving what she's controlling in or for a complete you can be.

**8. Teach all the adults and older children in your child's life his signs.** I can't tell you the number of times a mother has told me that her child's dad/grandmother/babysitter/sister asked, "What does (sign) mean?" I think this is even more frustrating for a child who is a late talker because she can't say the word, and now someone doesn't know what she's trying to sign!

**9. Be patient and persistent.** The only time I stop teaching new signs is when a kid is talking well. I keep modeling signs for a nonverbal kid for months. (But I always make sure we're working on the foundational skills for signing – using other gestures, joint attention, and interacting.) I don't give up after a few sessions if they don't get it, and as a parent, you shouldn't give up either. Keep making (oops- I mean "helping") him do it, and one day, he'll get it. I have told many parents and new therapists, you can't make a kid talk, but you can make him sign!

**10. This is worth repeating – MAKE SIGNING FUN!** Use something very motivating such as snack foods or his favorite activity. For a description of how to do this, look under the post "Facilitating Words – Moving Beyond Grunting and Pointing" in the Featured Articles section for specific additional directions. I want to encourage you to make learning to communicate the most fun thing your toddler gets to do in the course of the day! When you are enjoying yourself, your baby will enjoy himself. Enough said!

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