

# Teaching Babies Sign Language

by Dr. Jenn Berman



When I first started using sign language with my infant daughters I wondered if they would really pick it up. For months and months I signed and nothing happened. Then one day, Mendez looked up from her highchair and made the sign for “milk.” I felt like Anne Sullivan in the *Miracle Worker* when Helen Keller signed “water” for the first time. Suddenly, my daughter had the ability to communicate what she wanted!

## Why Sign?

There are many reasons why people choose to teach sign language to babies who are able to hear. The primary reason is to enable children to communicate before they have the ability to speak, which is generally believed to be one of the greatest causes of frustration in preverbal babies. In addition, many signing parents report that using sign language helps the bonding experience between them and their children because they are better able to understand one another. Studies have also shown that hearing children who sign have better recognition of letters and sounds, have larger vocabularies, more advanced communications skills, and higher reading levels. One study, in which families committed to using sign language for the first 24 months of life, found that signing children scored an average of 12 points higher in IQ tests than their non-signing counterparts. Part of that may be due to the fact that spoken or aural information is stored in the left hemisphere of the brain while visual information is stored in the right hemisphere and sign language forces children to use both sides, therefore increasing brain function.



## When Should You Start?

Most experts recommend introducing sign to your child around the age of seven months. Prior to six months of age, most children don't have enough memory to maintain a sign in their mind, much less make an association between the sign and a word or action. However, every child is different and your child may be ready a little earlier or a little later than six months old. There are signs you can look for to let you know that your child may be ready to start signing. Those signs are:

- She points to objects she wants.
- He waves “hello” or “good bye.”
- She is able to sit up unassisted.
- He looks at your face intently when you speak.
- She has a good pincher grasp.

## How Do You Get Started?

You don't have to spend a lot of money or become fluent in sign language to teach it to your child. Sign language experts recommend starting with three words that will help your child communicate something that is important to him. “Milk,” “more,” and “eat” are good starting points. Learn these signs and use them immediately before, during, and immediately after performing the action related to the sign. Make sure that you sign just below your child's sight line and that you sign and speak at the same time.

In Joseph Garcia's DVD, “Sign with Your Baby,” he recommends taking advantage of three different types of gazes to teach a sign. They are:

- 1) The expressive gaze, which is when your baby has a want or need and is looking to you with that “I want something” look.
- 2) The chance mutual gaze is when the two of you just happen to look at each other at the same time for no particular reason.
- 3) The pointed gaze, when you and your child look at the same thing and then look at each other.

Each of those moments is an opportunity to introduce a sign.

Some other times when children are particularly receptive to learning signs are during meals, while giving them baths, when they are getting dressed, at bedtime, when reading to them and during diaper changes. Signing “more” before giving your child

more food, for example, helps make the connection between the sign and getting more of what she wants. Showing her the sign for “diaper change” can help her to understand what is going to happen next and has the potential to make future potty training easier if your child is able to tell you when she needs a diaper change.

When your baby first starts to sign, it may not be as obvious as you expect because it takes a while for children to have the fine motor skills to make easily discernable signs. For example, the first time my daughter, Quincy, signed “more,” I thought she was just clapping her hands. When it hit me that she was signing “more” and I was able to give her more of what she was asking for, she was thrilled.

It is important to make signing fun. Don't force it on your child. You are best off incorporating it into your day-to-day activities. My husband and I especially enjoy the Signing Time series of books, CDs and DVDs teaching signs through repetition and music. We often sign what we learn to the CDs for our daughters who get a kick out of it.

While it is never too late to start signing with your baby, it is especially helpful if you start before the toddler years. Around the age of 17 months, children tend to be more frustrated and have more tantrums because their ability to tolerate frustration is low and their need to express themselves is high. Children who know how to sign tend to have fewer meltdowns and as a result, happier parents.

I highly encourage parents to introduce signing to their children. The small commitment of time and expense can make a much more peaceful home for everybody.



## Tips

- Start with three simple signs.
- Sign consistently. Repetition creates recognition for children.
- Acknowledge any signs your child does.
- Keep it fun.
- Don't correct your child's signs.
- Teach other caregivers the signs your child knows.
- Take advantage of moments when you have your child's full attention to use signs.
- Sign with others in front of your baby to expose him to signs.
- Try signing to your favorite songs.
- If your child will allow it, try guiding her hand to show her a sign.