

Baby Signing



Babies are born with an inherent body language that is common to all cultures. Long before the emergence of speech, babies spontaneously communicate with their parents using gestures and sounds to stimulate their loving attention. Smiling, for example is the first friendly sign that keeps the mother close and attentive. In later life, it acts in a hundred different ways to signal amicable feelings towards people. It is without doubt, the most important social signal in the human repertoire of gestures and signs.

Many parents experience intense frustration in understanding their baby's signals. Even though common sense goes some way in helping them understand their baby's needs or wants, in practice, they have to respond to a dozen or more cues and come up with the right solution. Sign language is one way of taking the guesswork out of parenting!

Natural gestures

In recent years, important progress has been made in the field of baby sign language. However, the concept is not new. Parents and babies have been signing to each other for centuries. However, until recently, there was no developmental research to suggest that babies could be taught to sign. We now know that babies have the ability to use at least 70 signs by the age of 9 months.

Parents and practitioners that have established a deep bond with the baby are acutely aware of what they are trying to say. They know that they turn away from an unwanted stimulus or avert their gaze if over-stimulated, that they bring their arms in front of their bodies to form a temporary bar when distressed or in discomfort and that they fuss, grunt, squirm or become very still when it is time to eliminate.

Other universal signs include the characteristic head nod and head shake which are so familiar, that we take them for granted. Essentially, the 'Yes' nod is a bowing or submissive action, although we see it as an affirmative signal. The 'No' head shake stems from the infantile action of rejecting food. Both signals have been recorded in people born deaf and blind, which suggests that they may well be inborn.

The hand wave is also extremely widespread and has been used as a greeting signal for thousands of years. Babies rhythmically move their hands from side to side, but gradually refine the action according to cultural tradition. Other social signs such as pointing, clapping and raising the arms to be picked up begin to emerge at about ten months of age and are almost global in their distribution. Pointing seems such an easy thing to do that we tend to take this type of action for granted. Pointing in babies is usually associated with seeing and hearing the names of familiar objects and with the development of hand-eye co-ordination.

Benefits of signing

When parents first hear about signing, they may wonder if this means forcing or rushing their baby to grow up before they are ready. This may be why many parents wait until their toddler begins to speak before focusing on two-way communication. They may also think that learning to sign is hard work-it isn't! Parents do not need to be accomplished signers to communicate with their baby. Baby sign language is about using natural gestures alongside normal speech from the shake of the head for 'No' and the wave of the hand for 'Goodbye' to conventional signals that are easily understood. There is no need to put time aside for signing if it is naturally incorporated into normal day-to-day routines.

Some of the benefits include:

- Development of speech and language
- Enhanced eye contact, facial expressions and body movements
- Increased social and behavioural skills
- Less frustration in expressing basic needs and wants
- A calmer and more contented baby
- Enriched parent-baby bonding
- Visual and muscular co-ordination
- The development of a second language
- Increased interest in books and the world around them
- Fun interaction between the parent and baby

Signing is also recognised as good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum.

Brain development

The brain is involved in language processing from birth. However, hand-eye co-ordination develops before speech. This is because the motor areas of the brain develop faster than the speech centres. The regular use of gestures and signs reinforces and strengthens the neural pathways and increases the number of sites where information is stored.

Visual co-ordination also develops long before verbal sounds emerge. Even though it takes several years for the eye muscles to fully develop, babies naturally tune into body language. Signing involves movement, which in turn enhances visual development and encourages the eyes to work together as a team.

The brain also retains information as a result of association. For example, if the words 'eat', 'sleep', 'cuddle' and 'milk' are repeated alongside gestures, babies soon associate the spoken word with the visual symbol. Vivid facial expressions and lip movements give the words and signs more meaning and enhance understanding.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that teaching formal signs at an early age enhances brain development and IQ, increases social skills and decreases frustration. Some researchers have also found that signing babies engage in more sophisticated play than non-signing babies. Others claim that signing children have a larger vocabulary and a higher literacy level than their non-signing peers. Signing children also demonstrate better recognition of letters and sounds and spelling. What is certain is that signing parents spend more time interacting with their children, which ultimately enhances the overall communication process.

Sign language for beginners

- Introduce simple signs such as 'eat', 'milk' and 'bed' from birth
- Use one sign per sentence
- Be consistent in the signs that you use and repeat them regularly
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Be generous with facial expressions
- Always follow the baby's lead
- Introduce signs that have special meaning such as 'teddy', 'blanket', 'cuddle', 'nappy' from six months onwards
- Do not get babies to perform signs on demand
- Be patient and relaxed about signing
- Use signs alongside familiar rhymes and songs
- Always praise the baby for any signing attempts made
- Don't let signing take priority over the need for normal speech

Signs must come across clearly if babies are to understand their messages. They must be crisp and sharp and difficult to confuse with other signals. They must be performed with strength and amplitude each time they are brought into action. Signing must be accompanied by eye contact, clear speech and lip movements to reinforce the baby's understanding of how language works and never in silence. In the absence of hand gestures, the message is clear. Always be consistent with signs, repeat them frequently, and emphasise the word along with the sign. Having fun is another key element. Babies are far more likely to sign if the experience is an enjoyable one!

Parents are usually very good at making sense of their baby's rudimentary hand gestures and actions and feel overwhelmed with joy when they see the first sign. However, each baby will sign differently depending on motor development and manual dexterity. Some babies sign a few days after seeing the sign, while others sign weeks or months later. An interesting phenomenon is that even after an absence of signing, babies develop enough memory to reproduce taught signs much later on. All that is needed is a 'trigger' in the form of a familiar signing rhyme or song.

Universal signs

Universal signs that work well include:

- *Food or eat*- place finger tips or hand to mouth
- *Milk*-open and close the hand (a natural gesture that all babies produce)
- *Bottle* - move closed fist up and down
- *Cuddle or love*- hug arms with both hands
- *Hot*- blow the air
- *Drink*- cup hand and bring it towards the mouth
- *Hungry* - rub tummy with the palm of the hand

- *Cold* - pretend to shiver
- *Wet* - shake fingers in front of the chest
- *Wash* - rub fists against the part of the body that is to be washed
- *Book* - hold hands flat with palms up
- *Bed* - rest head on both hands
- *Pain* - point to the area of pain

Sign systems

Signing has a long and ancient history. The fact that people all over the world have developed their own sign systems attests to the need to communicate through the use of gestures. However, each culture has adopted its own set of symbolic signs that have acquired a totally distinct meaning. For example, the 'okay' thumbs up sign in the UK and USA means 'nothing' in France. In Japan, it is the gesture for money and in Greece it is used as an insult.

The huge variation between different cultures makes the task of assembling an international sign system an impossible one. Each sign system expresses its features differently, which allows for regional usage and jargon. In the UK, a variety of sign systems are used by speech and language therapists for children with a wide range of difficulties. Makaton Signing, for example is invaluable in serving children with language delays, autism, Down Syndrome, hearing impairments and learning disabilities. Signs are used at the same time as spoken language, providing additional clues to help children understand what is being said. Teachers need to have a licence and to be fully trained in its use. For more information go to www.makaton.org

American Sign Language (ASL) is acceptable worldwide and has full claim to the status of an independent second language. It is a functional language based on natural gestures, which makes it an ideal sign system for hearing babies. There

are no legal restrictions on the use of ASL, which makes the system more available to parents and practitioners interested in baby signing. There are several websites that contain drawings, pictures and videos to help parents and practitioners learn the signs for a particular word. Sign books are also widely available both online and on the high street.

British Sign Language (BSL) is a fully fledged language used by deaf people in the UK. Although BSL uses key word signing in conjunction with spoken English, the system emphasises grammatical distinctions and is therefore probably more useful for advanced levels of communication. For more information go to www.britishsignlanguage.com

Although there are many different sign systems, they all provide a way for the parent and baby to communicate with each other long before the emergence of speech. However, for parents with hearing babies or children, with no identified risk of speech delay, it is not necessary for them to learn a formal sign system. Unfortunately, most signs in standard sign systems are far too difficult for a baby to use. Babies are still months away from having the fine muscle co-ordination required for a standard sign language.

Some experts advocate that parents use gestures they already know or make up their own signs to communicate with their baby. All they need to do is use signs that are easy to remember and easy for the baby to physically reproduce. As long as the baby and parent are communicating with each other and having fun, any sign will work.

Conclusion

Parents who sign to their babies have a distinct advantage in responding fully to their baby's needs. This strengthens the parent's confidence, pleasure, and

responsiveness. Signing empowers babies to communicate what they can't say to get their basic needs met. This reduces stress and frustration and makes for a happier, calmer baby-and parent! Signing facilitates a foundation of trust and understanding between the parent and the baby and enhances the special and intimate relationship between them. All these things make signing a very worthwhile activity!

By Dr. Lin Day, Baby Sensory