
Using signs with baby

When your baby is learning to communicate, he does it in various ways: crying, smiling, turning his head, stretching his arms, etc. Very early, we also use and teach common gestures like pointing, “bye bye”, “sh”, extending the hand for “give me” and such. Although we will spontaneously use and teach those gestures, some parents are hesitant to teach other signs that might not be understood by everyone.

My child is not deaf

It is a clear and very common misconception that signs are only for deaf people. Although a deaf person will likely need to learn signs if they cannot develop verbal communication, anyone can learn signs, no matter if they can hear or not. Even a hearing child will learn signs if his parent is deaf and uses signs too. It is how they can effectively communicate.

Also, every adult uses conventional signs and gestures in their everyday life, whether it is to ask someone to give them a glass of water, calling someone to say dinner is ready, or discretely asking for money. It has absolutely nothing to do with hearing. Sometimes, the use of signs is just more convenient, if the person is too far, on the other side of a window, or if you don't want to interrupt someone talking.

Isn't my baby too young to learn signs?

Children can learn signs and gestures just as early as they can learn words. In fact, gestures might even be easier to learn since they are more “visible” than the movements of the mouth and tongue, and sometimes, might even resemble the object, the action or the concept.

Will signs delay the language development?

This is also a common misconception. Maybe it comes from the fact that a child might learn and use a sign before using the matching word. If this is the case, it does not mean that the sign is replacing the word, but maybe just that it was easier at that point, to remember and use.

Isn't my child going to rely on signs?

Unless you want to keep using signs for a long time, your child will quickly learn that using words is much more efficient than using signs, especially when outside of the family. At first, the child might have 5 or 10 signs for common needs or wants, but since your goal is not to develop a full repertoire of signs for every possible word, you will probably use many more words than signs when talking to the child or talking to other people in the family and outside. That means that your child will be exposed to a lot more verbal communication than signs. Your child will also realize very quickly that although you might understand his sign, Aunt Sue might not, so if he wants to communicate with her, he might as well learn words.

I don't know that many signs to teach him

There are various resources you can find, either at the library or online with an array of signs you can use. Don't expect to learn or use hundreds of signs since they will only be a bridge toward verbal communication. Should you use ASL signs (American Sign Language) or something else? It really does not matter. Those signs will be used within a fairly limited group of people and it is unlikely that your child will have an elaborate conversation in signs with another sign user, so don't worry about that. In addition, whatever source you are using for teaching your child, you can always invent signs yourself for things you can't find a "formal sign".

How long should i use signs?

That is probably a matter of personal preference, but once your child can speak in words, the signs will lose their purpose. On the other hand, if your child has difficulties in his speech, and you feel that the signs will allow him to still communicate effectively, by all means, continue using them.

What are the advantages of using signs?

As mentioned above, signs are often easier to learn simply because they are more visible, and often associated with the object or the action. For example, a sign for "eat" would be something like pointing the mouth, which is definitely easier to mimic than pronouncing the word "eat" or "hungry".

By being often easier to use, signs will give the child a mean of communicating if he does not remember the name of something or how to say the specific word. Being able to communicate will generally reduce possible frustrations on the child's part, making communication a more pleasant activity.

How should i teach signs?

You will teach signs the same way you will teach words: by using them. Start with just a few key signs to use. Choose some signs you can use over and over again in many contexts. Signs like "more", "eat", "done/finish" are easy to use often during the day.

Always use the word with the sign. You want the signs to be the bridge toward words not be used instead of words. By using both, the sign and the word at the same time, you will focus on the meaning of both, and the child will be able to learn either one, or both. And if the child learns the word first, that is great, isn't it?

Just like for words, create opportunities to use the signs: give only a few pieces of cereal so the child will have a reason to ask for "more", pretend to put on the child's hat on your head so he will say "mine", etc.

Use and teach signs in context. Your child will need to associate the sign (and the word) to what it means, and that will need to be something he can see, hear, feel or experience.

What signs should i teach?

The actual choice of signs will depend on your family, the baby's routine and preferences. Some signs will be very important and powerful, like "more" and "finish" because they can be used in many contexts. Signs like "eat", or "milk" will give the opportunity to the child to request something that is very frequent throughout his routine. Then, signs like "dog" or "car" could be things the child will love asking for. See what interests your child, and pick signs related to those objects, actions or activities. If the signs are motivating, the chances are better he will try to use them.

When should I start teaching signs?

Although you can start using signs around the child as early as birth, it is obvious that he won't be able to understand and use them for a while. Usually, the child will start paying more attention to communication around 6 months or so, and this is about the same for verbal words and signs. This means that if you are consistently using signs, around 6 months you might see some indications that he is understanding some of them, maybe by looking at the object you just "named". But remember that you have to use the verbal word at the same time, so is he responding to the sign or the word? It really does not matter. By the time the child is a year old, he can easily use several signs if they were taught consistently.

Do you have any question about using signs with your baby? Just post your question in the comment box below.

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