

Sign? But I want my child to talk!

TRAINING = 1 Hour

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Chances are if you are reading this article, it is because your child has not developed oral language skills as quickly as his or her age-mates – or perhaps not at all. And now, your child's speech-language pathologist has suggested that using gestures, or sign, to communicate with your child, and to encourage him or her to be communicative with others, is an appropriate first step in his or her treatment plan.

This can be very scary to some parents who, obviously, want to give their child every chance, and every reason, to talk. In fact, you may be thinking that if your child learns to sign, he or she will be less likely to talk. You may also be confused about why your child's teachers would use sign since his or her ability to hear sounds is not a problem.

These kinds of concerns are very common. However, they are also unfounded. In fact, using sign to help your child learn to communicate is one of the best – and fastest – ways to help teach your child to use oral language! This article is provided to help you understand the reasons for using sign with your hearing child and to provide you with additional resources you can explore to find out more.

Reason #1 All children who are learning to talk use gestures before they use words.

Language comes in 3 modes or methods to communicate. Gestural (signs), Oral (words), and Written (reading and writing). Typically developing children learn to use these modes in this order. First, they use gestures, then they learn to represent these gestures with an oral word. Eventually, most children will learn to represent the oral word with a written one.

Most of the time, we don't consciously teach babies to use specific gestures. But, babies are interested in communicating with us long before their oral muscles are coordinated enough to produce words. Fortunately, producing gestures only requires control of larger muscle masses – such as hands and fingers – in comparison to the substantially more refined movements necessary for oral language. So, babies use gestures to get their message across!

Babies put their hands over their heads when they want to be picked up, they point to things they want, they wave bye-bye and blow kisses. Each of these gestures are very effective in communicative what they want to others. Eventually, babies learn to say “up” and “cookie” and “bye-bye” and “I love you.”

Still worried that a child might not be motivated to talk if he or she has learned to communicate through sign? Hmm...just because you learned to speak, did that stop you from learning to write? No. In fact, it helped you learn better and faster! (Think how hard it would be to try to write words if you didn't know how to say them) So, think of sign as the foundation for your child's oral language (and eventually written language) development.

Reason #2: Gestures/sign help establish critical social skills for communication

Early gestures help babies connect with their environment and develop important social relationships even before they can produce words. This is one good reason to teach your child to use sign. We want children who are late to learn oral language to communicate in any way they can. In fact, it is critically important that children learn that they can control their world through their actions in order for language learning to take place.

When adults respond consistently to children's signs or gestures, children learn they can control their environment through communication. For example, a child learns to sign "more" and, upon using the sign, gets more of the desired thing. This acts as a powerful catalyst for children to continue to make an effort to communicate with others in their environment and a positive social spiral is established (this means that successful communication interactions lead to more and more communication attempts by the child). Alternately, children who do not have a functional communication system (in any mode) become less and less likely to engage in communication interactions. A negative communication spiral such as this is detrimental to the development of language in any mode.

As you can see, time is of the essence in helping your child learn the importance of communication. The mode of communication is of small consequence. But, delaying opportunities to engage in communicative interactions can have lasting negative effects. On the other hand, once children get the hang of communication, they usually want more

Reason #3: Gestures/sign help facilitate important cognitive skills to support communication.

Another important foundation for the development of oral language relates to specific cognitive, or thinking, skills. One of these skills is **imitation**. In fact, children must be able to imitate in order to learn to talk. Signs are much easier for children to learn to imitate than words. An adult can actually guide a child's fingers into a position that will imitate a specific sign – something that is impossible to do with spoken words.

Since children are able to see their hands and compare them to someone else's hands, learning to imitate sign is much easier than learning to imitate words. Once imitation is mastered in the gestural mode, children can move toward the much more demanding task of learning to imitate spoken words.

Another critical cognitive prerequisite to language development is termed **symbolic function**. This means that children can understand that one thing can stand for (or represent) another. During play, a block can represent a car, or an airplane, or even a building. Words, too, are symbols that represent specific things and concepts in our world. Gestures are symbols, too! A child who has learned to use a specific sign to represent a word has developed the important skill of symbolic function and is much more ready to apply this knowledge to talking.

Reason #4: Children's brains process sign more efficiently than words

Some researchers have found that, for many children, the difficulty learning oral language is related to having a smaller capacity to hold information in their immediate short term memory (we call it working memory). It's hard for them to hold onto the word and think about its meaning since the sounds "disappear" as soon as the word is said (we call this degradation of the acoustic signal). One way we can help children is to keep saying the word over and over again. ("I see a dog, Do you see the dog? I like dogs. It's a dog. A dog!).

On the other hand, we can hold a gesture or sign for as long as we wish. Rather than having to provide the verbal input over and over again, we can keep our hands in the same position. This way, we can give the child as much time as he or she needs to process the word and link it with whatever concept we are targeting. The stable nature of signs helps children identify and learn them much more easily than words

In addition, oral language relies only on the auditory pathways in the brain. Sign is processed through the visual pathways that develop sooner than auditory pathways. When we talk and sign at the same time (which is almost always the case during intervention), a child can process the information through both channels rather than only one or the other. (We have known for a long time that learning that takes place through multiple pathways is much more effective than using a single sense!) Again, this helps support language learning by making it easier for the child to process the incoming information.

Reason #5 Studies have proven that using sign to help children learn to talk is beneficial.

Need some more proof? How about this. There is not a single study that suggests that sign inhibits the development of oral language in hearing children. In fact, just the opposite is true!

Studies involving teaching sign to young children range from investigations on the effect of signing with infants (babies who were taught sign learned to talk much earlier than babies whose parents did not use sign), toddlers (youngsters who were delayed in learning to talk learned to say words much more quickly and learned more words when sign was used) and school-aged children (students who were taught using sign and oral language learned more vocabulary than children who were not provided with instruction that included sign).

Summary

The use of sign to support the development of oral language for your child is supported in theory, in practice, and in research. The evidence is overwhelmingly in support of the notion that sign has the potential to facilitate oral language development that is faster, more organized, and more durable.

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How can you help? Your efforts in using sign at home can make a big difference in the benefit your child can receive from speech-language intervention. So, jump on in and sign, sign, sign! Your child will eventually thank you (in words!) for it.

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