



Encouraging Spoken Language Through Signs

by Jennifer Vroom, MS, CCC-SLP



Most people assume that only the Deaf Community uses sign language; however, this is not true. Before babies communicate meaningful words to get their needs met, they develop the ability to gesture. In fact, both hearing and deaf individuals are able to use sign language as early as 8 months of age (www.sign2me.com/asl.htm). Other populations that may benefit from sign language include those with autism, Down's syndrome, developmental apraxia of speech, cochlear implants, oral-motor weakness, and hearing children with deaf parents.

Three Common Types of Sign Language

Similar to spoken languages, sign languages vary depending on the age, location, ethnicity, and gender of the speaker. In the U.S., the most commonly used types of signs include the following:

- **ASL:** American Sign Language is accepted as the standard language for Deaf Culture in North America. It is as different from spoken English as French or Spanish. With its own unique set of rules, it relies on visual versus auditory communication.
- **Signing Exact English or Conceptually Accurate Sign English (CASE):** CASE mimics the sentence structure of standard spoken English to include articles, plurals, tenses, etc. In other words, you sign exactly how you would speak the same word/sentence.
- **Signed English:** Also referred to as Pidgin Sign English (PSE), this method combines the two types of signs defined above.

Why use signs?

A common concern for parents and caregivers is that using sign language will hamper a child's speech development. Yet, whether a child is pre-verbal, verbal, hearing, or deaf, there are many good reasons to use sign language. Here are some ways sign language benefits a child:

- Decreases frustration: Does your child whine or scream when he/she wants something? For children unable to communicate their needs verbally, sign language helps reduce their frustration.
- Builds vocabulary: Rather than just pointing to something, signs teach children how to use symbols for objects, descriptors, actions, etc.
- Increases social skills: Successful communication with family members and people in a child's environment creates a sense of belonging. It also allows him/her to manipulate language for various social functions including sharing information, commenting, requesting, and turn taking.
- Increases early literacy skills: Research supports that learning signs before learning to talk may encourage literacy/reading skills later in life (www.sign2me.com/asl.htm).
- Increases motor development: By creating signs, the child practices coordination of hand and body movements, which not only improve overall motor skills, but ultimately help stimulate speech production.
- Increase length of utterances: Signs may help a child transition to using longer phrases and sentences. For example, instead of using one word to request ("Cookie!"), you may ask the child to imitate two or more words through signs ("Cookie, please").

Where do I begin?

Once you make the decision to start signing to your child, you need to choose vocabulary that's basic and general enough to use in a variety of situations. For instance, use the sign/word "more" to request "more juice, more kisses, more music, turn the t.v. back on," etc.

Start off easy and increase complexity as your child progresses. To prevent frustration and confusion, remember to collaborate with your caretaker, therapist, and/or teacher making sure each person teaches the same signs. Finally, if speech is your child's ultimate goal, always model words verbally while signing! Some simple starter signs may include:

- | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| • Eat | • Drink | • Stop |
| • Play | • More | • Mom/Dad |
| • Finished or all done | • My/Mine | • Help |

Helpful Hints

It won't happen overnight, but eventually words will come. For most children. If your child is not talking, or he/she continues to struggle during interactions, contact a Speech Pathologist for answers specific to your child.

Every child is different. You cannot force a child to talk if they are not ready, but you can encourage communication by creating opportunities to talk. For instance, keep toys and snacks out of reach. When the child shows interest in these, model a sign while also saying the word. Remember to provide a delay, giving the child some time to imitate your gesture.

The child's signs may not be exactly like your model, so accept signs that are similar. Once the child attempts to create the sign, provide a reward by giving him/her the requested object or action immediately. This strengthens the association between the symbol (sign) and the object or action. Some children need "hand-over-hand" assistance. In such cases, an adult guides the child's hands to create a sign before giving him/her the requested object/action.

Resources

Riekehof, L.L., (1993). The Joy of Signing: 2nd edition: Springfield, Gospel Publishing House, pp. 9-14.

Scott, S. and Lee, J.H., (September 2003). Serving Clients Who Use Sign Language:
<http://www.asha.org/about/publications/leader-online/archives/2003/030401fa.htm>.

(September 2003). Established Signs or Non-Standard Signs Choosing Your Approach to Early Communication, www.sign2me.com/asl.htm.

(September 2003). About ASL, <http://www.aslinfo.com/aboutasl.cfm>.