



Using Sign Language with your Child

How to start using simple sign language to support spoken language with your child.

Encouraging spoken language

Most people assume that only people who are deaf use sign language; this is not true. Before babies can use words to get their needs met, they are able to make gestures (i.e. wave “bye bye”). In fact, both hearing and deaf children are able to use sign language as early as 8 months of age. Other children may benefit from learning sign language. These include children with autism, Down syndrome, childhood apraxia of speech, cochlear implants, oral-motor weakness and hearing children who have deaf parents.

Common types of sign language

In the U. S., the most common types of signs include:

- **American Sign Language (ASL)** is accepted as the standard language of Deaf culture in North America. It is as different from spoken English as French or Spanish. It has its own unique vocabulary, grammar and syntax.
- **Signing Exact English (SEE)** uses the vocabulary and sentence structure of standard spoken English, including articles, plurals, tenses, etc. In other words, you sign exactly as you would speak the same word or sentence.

Why should I use sign language with my child?

Some parents and caregivers are concerned that using sign language will slow their child's speech development. In fact, studies have shown that children who are exposed to signing have higher language and IQ scores than kids who are not exposed to signing. They also display fewer tantrums and have better social skills. Whether a child is pre-verbal, verbal, hearing or deaf, there are many good reasons to use sign language. Using sign language with your child can:

- **Decrease frustration:** Does your child cry or scream when they want something? For children who can't use words to communicate their needs, sign language may help reduce their frustration.
- **Build vocabulary:** Rather than just pointing to something, signs teach children how to use symbols for objects, descriptors and actions etc.
- **Increase social skills:** When a child is successful at communicating with family members and people in their environment, it creates a sense of belonging. It also allows them to use language for social functions such as sharing information, commenting, asking and turn taking.
- **Increase early literacy skills:** Research supports that learning signs before learning to talk may help support literacy skills later in life.

- **Increase motor development:** By producing signs, the child practices coordinating their hand and body movements. This not only improves motor skills, but may help stimulate speech production.

Where do I begin?

Once you decide to start signing with your child, you should choose words that are basic and general enough to use in many places. For instance, the sign and word “more” can be used to ask for more juice, kisses, music, turn the TV back on etc.

Start with basic words and add more words as your child progresses. Share your signs with your child’s caretaker, therapist or teacher to make sure you all use the same signs. If speech is your child’s goal, always say the words while signing them. Some simple starter signs are listed below.

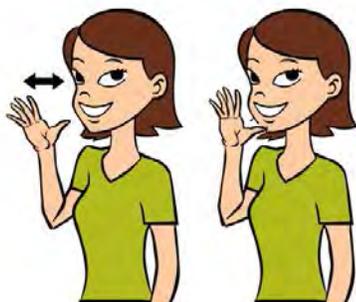
Helpful hints

It won’t happen overnight, but with time words will come for most children. If your child is not talking or they continue to struggle during interactions, contact a speech pathologist for answers specific to your child’s needs.

Every child is different. You cannot force a child to talk if they are not ready, but you can help them use words and signs by creating opportunities to communicate. For instance, keep toys and snacks out of reach. When your child shows interest in these, model a sign while also saying the word. Always give a delay after you sign and say the word. This gives your child some time to imitate your gesture.

Your child’s signs may not be exactly like yours, so accept signs that are close. Once your child tries to make the sign, provide a reward by giving them the requested object or action right away. This strengthens the association between the symbol (sign) and the object or action. Some children need “hand-over-hand” help. In such cases, an adult guides the child’s hands to create a sign before giving them the requested object or action.

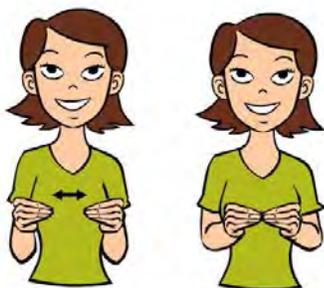
Examples of common signs*:



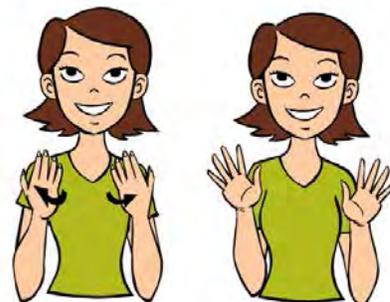
Mom



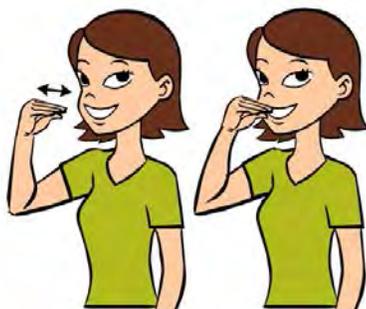
Dad



More



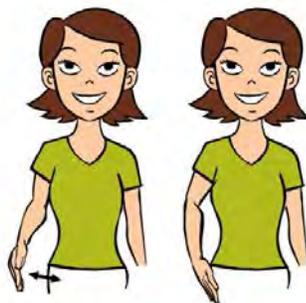
All done



Eat



Milk



Dog



Cat



To Learn More

- Speech & Language Services 206-987-2104
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- www.seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

What do I do next?

Make a list of objects and actions that your child likes and may request. This may include names of things (car, milk, and bear), names of people (Mommy, Grandpa) and requests for actions (tickle, swing, sleep). Include some ways to communicate such as how to say 'yes' and 'no', and showing pain (hurt). After you have created a list for your child, visit one of the signing books or online dictionaries below to find and learn the new signs. Most libraries also have books and videos demonstrating signs.

Resources:

Websites:

- My Baby Can Talk at www.mybabycantalk.com
- ASL Pro www.aslpro.com/cgi-bin/aslpro/aslpro.cgi
- American Sign Language Browser commtechlab.msu.edu/sites/aslweb/browser.htm.
- Baby Sign Language www.babysignlanguage.com

Books:

- "Sign with your Baby: How to Communicate with Infants Before They Can Speak," (2001), Joseph Garcia.
- "Baby's First Signs," "More Baby's First Signs" and "A Book of Colors," by Kim Votry and Curt Waller, Gallaudet Press. These colorful books feature illustrations of a toddler signing a word with a picture demonstrating what the sign is about. The illustrations include a diagram that depicts exactly how to perform the sign and the English word.

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Adapted with permission from Super Duper Hand Handouts, "Encouraging Spoken Language through Signs" by Jennifer Vroom, MS, CCC-SLP and "Should I Teach My Baby to Sign" by Susie S. Loraine, M.A., CCC-SLP.

Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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