

USING SIGN LANGUAGE WITH YOUR CHILD



In recent years, there has been a lot of focus on the use of sign language with children who are not yet talking. We have learned through research in this area that using sign language can in fact support and facilitate the development of functional language, rather than hinder it. The observed benefits of using sign language include, increasing your child's functional communication, reducing frustration of not being able to clearly communicate needs and strengthening the bond between caregiver and child through successful interactions. People often use a variety of gestures when communicating with others to support what we say, shaking our head no, shrugging our shoulders as to say "I don't know" are just a couple of examples of this. Sign language is a formal gestural communication system but used with young children in the pre-verbal stage, it can be a tool to build vocabulary, increase a child's understanding that symbols have meaning and reinforce the benefits of clearly communicating ones needs with others.

Here are some tips to consider when using sign language with your child:

- Always pair the spoken word with the sign when you use it. The use of the sign is to supplement or support the spoken work, not replace it. You can help them learn a new sign by taking your child's hands and showing them how to make it.
- Some signs can be difficult for little hands to coordinate. Accept your child's best approximations of the movement you model. By accepting their best approximation, you will know what they are trying to say the next time your child uses it.
- "Baby Signs" by Acredolol and Goodwyn provides modified signs that may be simpler and easier to use. Your child may naturally show a simplified gesture of the target sign and establishing their version of the sign as the one you use is a great way to give them the ability to successfully communicate to you and your family.
- Teach signs that are functional to and a part of your child's everyday experiences so that he/she can talk about and request what matters. Starting with specific words such as cracker, and bubbles allows a child to learn the idea that each item has a name and that they can use these names to get a desired object or action. Once your child understands that concept, it is easier to teach general and social words such as "more," "please," or "thank you."
- Initially, your child may quietly use the sign but in time, through the repetition of your models, your child may start to pair the sign with a sound (such as, "mmm" as he/she signs "milk"), or word approximation (such as, "muh" as he/she signs "milk) once this happens, more emphasis on the spoken language occurs and your child may drop the use of the signs on his or her own.

References:

11 Tips to Improve a Child's Communication Using Signs, by Jill Eversmann, MS, CCC-SLP; Asha Leader 2018
Coaching the Caregiver, by Cari Ebert, MS, CCC-SLP