

Have You Heard of Baby Sign Language?

How to improve communication with babies and toddlers

Imagine a world without speech; where you know exactly what you want to say but have no way of expressing it to the people around you. This is the reality for our babies and toddlers before they learn to talk. They struggle with the limitations of a world without speech. By 6 months of age they know what they want to say but have no means of communicating it effectively. Is it any wonder they become frustrated! Even when they begin to talk, it's some time before they are able to get their little mouths around the words they need to express themselves effectively. Baby Sign Language can help ease this frustration by providing a means of communication to bridge the gap.

Baby Sign Language is based on 'keyword signing' and involves the use of simple gestures for words that are important to the baby. Each gesture is used in repetition to the associated spoken word, making babies more interested in the meaning of keywords from an earlier age. It should never replace the need for the spoken word.

The use of Baby Sign Language is growing in popularity all over the world. Most significantly for interested parents is that it's supported by extensive research. The most well known study, conducted by Drs Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn for the US National Institute of Health (NIH) in 1982, showed a clear learning advantage for children exposed to baby signing. Some people who don't recognise the long-term benefits of 'complementary' signing might think it's a fad or the latest passing trend in modern parenting, however the research is very positive and parents using Baby Sign Language are united. It's a very simple solution to a very frustrating problem.

Infants already use an extensive range of facial expressions and body language to communicate with their parents, and Baby Sign Language is a natural extension of this behaviour. They squirm when they are uncomfortable, put their arms up to be picked up when you walk by, and later learn to point at things.

Babies are fascinated with movement, especially when the movement is performed by a parent. In the beginning the baby will associate the movement with the word. In the case of 'milk', this association is made easily as they are rewarded with their favourite comfort and associate this with the gesture. The following 3 key activities tie it together – the use of the gesture and the spoken word followed through with the actual item.

The first step is having them understand what you are signing to them. It's suggested that you only use one sign such as the sign for 'milk' at this early stage so they don't become confused. You can begin as early as 3-4 months



months of age. With the sign for 'milk' it's easy to recognise that you have been understood when they go into flapping frenzy and get excited. By about 8-9 months of age they will be able to ask for 'milk' by replicating the sign. As a parent this is just as exciting as any other milestone they reach. Once they are able to sign back to you, slowly introduce another sign or 2 until you develop a vocabulary for all the important things you would like to communicate.

Growth and brain development during these early years, especially the first 2 years, is more rapid than at any other stage of a child's life. One of the most crucial milestones in a child's development is the development of their social skills and the ability to interact appropriately with others. The basis for appropriate social interaction is effective communication. The benefits of Baby Sign Language also include earlier communication, reduced frustration, increased language comprehension and further opportunities for bonding between parent and baby.

Teaching Baby Sign Language also teaches your child that there is more to communication and social interaction than just words. Effective communication does involve hand gestures, body movements and facial expression. Think of all that hand waving in Italy for example! Being a visual language it's fascinating to children as it arouses their curiosity and attentiveness towards further communication.

Some parents express concern that using Baby Sign Language may inhibit the speech development of their child. There is no cause for concern however; because as you are using 'keyword signing' you are enhancing the comprehension of the word, not replacing the need for spoken language. It's very important that you continue to use the spoken word with the gestures to enhance speech development. The previously mentioned National Institute of Health funded research demonstrated that babies who were using Baby Sign Language were able to communicate with spoken language 3 months earlier than babies who were not. Even more astounding was the fact that these same children went on to develop language comprehension skills that were 12 months ahead of their peers by the time they reached school age.

Ultimately the benefit of Baby Sign Language is it complements the words that you speak to your babies. It bridges the communication divide and is very rewarding for parent and child – and immensely rewarding.

Lisa Baade and Ian Creaser are the authors of *Toddler Interpreter, A Parent's Guide to Baby Sign Language for Hearing Babies and Toddlers*. The signs in *Toddler Interpreter* were researched and developed to fall within the capabilities and realistic expectations of the dexterity of a 6 month old baby. To take this 1 step further the *Toddler Interpreter* Baby Sign Language program is structured so that not only the most relevant baby signs are introduced first, these signs are also the easiest to perform. By the time the baby has worked through the 5 stages of learning, the baby signs have progressed with the child's development and most children will be ready to replace all signs with fully developed speech – the ultimate goal.

For more information or to contact Lisa visit www.toddlerinterpreter.com