



atlanta Parent

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Talk to the Hand

Teaching your baby
sign language

by Eve Dennard-Lewis

What do you do when your baby gives you the finger? When she points upstairs with her index finger and mumbles, do you pretend to understand? Does she get frustrated when you misinterpret her message?

When babies want to communicate, they babble, whine, coo or cry to get your attention. Most parents must play the guessing game to figure out what their child is suggesting or impatiently demanding. That is, unless they know sign language.

Most babies use sign language on a small scale before communicating verbally. When babies wave goodbye or lift their arms to be picked up, they are "talking" with signs. But what happens when little ones point and mumble but parents don't quite get the message?

Parents are realizing that adding more signs to their babies "vocabulary" would make life easier. Shaking, nodding and pretending to understand baby talk may soon be a thing of the past as more parents



(water)

Jillian, 5, has been signing since 10 months.

teach their hearing infants basic words and phrases in American Sign Language (ASL).

"They're able to tell you what they want," says Pam Crawford, a Tucker parent who began teaching her son ASL when he was 6 months old. "He signed his first sign, fan, at about 9 months, and he does the dog sign a lot now."

Debbie Lesser, a sign language interpreter and founder of the Little Signers program, says, "There is so much research that confirms how positive it is. Signing helps reduce frustration because it gives them a natural kinesthetic tool to communicate their needs."

Lesser explains that signing has made her life easier. If her children ask to get a balloon at the grocery store and they forget to say "please" and "thank you," she is able to sign the reminder without yelling it across the store.

Did you know?

You can begin teaching your baby sign language at birth. Babies typically respond or initiate signs between 6 to 10 months.

Infants and toddlers also feel more understood. Mealtime is easier because they can answer the question, "Do you want more?" A child can reply by signing the word more or finished, "as opposed to getting frustrated and throwing things off the highchair," says Lesser.



(more)

Debbie Lesser and her daughters Jillian, 5, and Alison, 3, sign more.

Common Misconceptions:

- *My baby will not learn to speak*
False: Sign language promotes speech and in most cases advances children's verbal abilities.
- *Teaching sign language is complicated*
False: Parents are encouraged to teach a few simple words at a time and make signing a natural part of the daily routine.
- *My baby will be confused and overwhelmed*
False: Using sign language helps to clarify concepts much earlier than speech alone.
- *I will feel embarrassed if people think my child is deaf*
False: You will feel proud of your baby for being able to communicate more effectively.

Benefits of Sign Language:

- Advances cognitive and linguistic development
- Reduces frustration, whining and temper tantrums
- Boosts emotional development and self-esteem
- Enriches the parent-child relationship
- Promotes acceptance and communication with the deaf community

*Only 30% of hearing parents with deaf children learn ASL

*Source: Gail McKay, Creative Communications

Lesser emphasizes the importance of starting with four to six words such as: milk, more, eat, all done, please and thank you. As the child becomes comfortable and “fluent” with those few words, the parent can add a few more. The idea is to learn a little at a time, just like babies learn any language.

“The majority of signing children between the ages of 11 and 14 months begin using ‘sentences’ about 10 months earlier than is typical,” according to authors Michelle E. Anthony, M.A., Ph.D., and Reyna Lindert, Ph.D. in their book *Signing Smart with Babies and Toddlers: A Parent’s Strategy and Activity Guide*. “Children ages 6-18 months have an average of 25 signs and

spoken words, compared to the developmental norm of three to five words. Signing children at 18 months have an average of 79 signs and 105 spoken words, compared to the developmental norm of 10-15 words.”

The biggest concern that parents have about teaching their baby ASL is that the child will sign instead of speak. According to Lesser and other researchers, the opposite is true. Signing seems to enhance a child’s ability to express ideas as he becomes more verbal. “Kids naturally drop the signing once they are able to communicate verbally, and it’s up to parents if they want to continue signing,” says Lesser.

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Resources:

Videos

- Signing Time (6 volumes), www.signingtime.com
- My Baby Can Talk, www.mybabycantalk.com
- Sign with Your Baby, www.sign2me.com



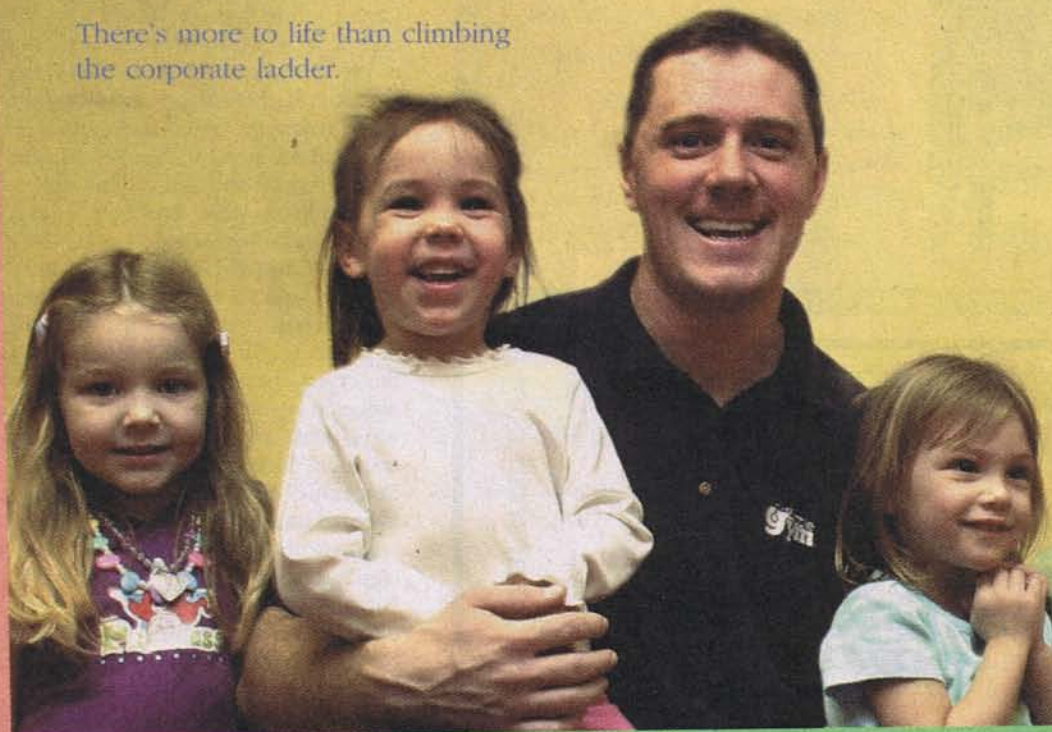
Books

- *Baby Signs: How to Talk to Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk* by Linda Acredolo, Ph.D. and Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D.
- *Signing Smart with Babies and Toddlers: A Parent’s Strategy and Activity Guide* by Michelle E. Anthony, M.A., Ph.D. and Reyna Lindert, Ph.D.
- *Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children’s Literacy* by Marilyn Daniels, Ph.D.

Groups / Organizations / Classes

- Little Signers, www.littlesigners.com (770) 442-1160
- Creative Communication, www.gailmckay.net (404) 622-7672

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