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TALKING WITH HANDS

Ten-month-old Elissa raises a curled fist, the size of a large Brussels sprout, squeezing it several times in rapid succession. Her eyes zoom in on her mother's breasts.

"THAT'S THE SIGN FOR MILK," says her mom, Katharine Gee, a wildlife biologist. "She can tell me when she's hungry instead of crying. What's great is that now her father can understand her too. Dads don't usually pick up on all the different cries as easily."

Babies can communicate with their parents before they can speak by making signs with their hands. Apparently they have a lot to say, from when to change their diaper to asking for a favourite toy. Though baby signing has been popular for a few years, the trend doesn't seem to be slowing down. It's booming across Canada for hearing parents and babies, with classes springing up in every community. Kathleen Waidhofer of Baby Hands Productions says requests from Canada for her award-winning DVD, *My Baby Can Talk*, increased tenfold from 2005 to 2006. The comedy *Meet the Fockers*, with Robert De Niro as a competitive grandfather who teaches his toddler grandson hand signs, helped fuel the popularity. Now there's even a *Complete Idiot's Guide*, published by Alpha Books, called *The New Baby Talk*.

"It's a simple concept with powerful results," says Waidhofer. "Preverbal babies who have been taught sign language simply move their little hands to ask for something to eat or drink instead of crying."

It's also well-established within the deaf community. Deaf parents have been using American Sign Language for years to communicate with their infants, who typically start signing by eight months. In comparison, most hearing babies speak their first words between nine to 12 months.

American Joseph Garcia, after observing this gap, began research with hearing parents and hearing babies in 1987 at Alaska Pacific University. The results were startling. Hearing babies who were exposed to signing regularly at six and seven months were able to communicate effectively using hand signs by their eighth or ninth month.

THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF BABIES

Australian mom and mezzo-soprano, Priscilla Dunstan, believes she has unlocked the meaning of the five cries that all newborn to three-month-old babies make. Dunstan says she has tested her theory on many babies of different races and cultures from all over the world. Although Dunstan's research may not have a scientific basis, mothers of crying babies everywhere have responded positively. Dunstan was recently featured on Oprah, along with eight moms and their infants, and was a sensation. Priscilla Dunstan's five key sounds or 'words' found in the pre-cry stage (before the baby becomes hysterical) of newborns:



owh
"I'm sleepy."
This sound is from the yawn reflex.



neh
"I'm hungry."
The 'N' sound comes from the sucking reflex.



heh
"I'm experiencing discomfort."



earr
"I have lower gas."
This may be accompanied by the drawing up of the legs.



eh
"I need to burp."
The reflex sound a baby makes trying to push air out of its tummy.

Dunstan finds that most parents are able to hear the first word "neh" right away but some of the other words take more time to decipher. To find out more, visit www.dunstanbaby.com

Garcia was one of the first to start the baby signing trend rolling when he opened his business Sign With Your Baby. A parent himself, he was thrilled when he was able to teach his own infant son to sign.

"My son opened up his world to me and that would not have been possible without those signs."

THE BENEFITS

Parents can start teaching simple signs as early as six months. By teaching babies even a few of the 100 basic signs, you can understand what they want before it ends in screaming frustration. In turn, babies feel empowered by being understood. Even when babies start talking, it usually takes considerably more time before the child's speech can be clearly understood.

Current studies have proved that young babies recognize that a word or sign can represent something specific several months earlier than medical experts previously thought. Teaching hand signs allows babies to communicate these concepts and words that they normally couldn't say until much later. Janet Jamieson, a professor at the University of British Columbia who teaches deaf education, confirms that the brain is ready to produce language well before the tongue.

"Babies really are able to communicate using their hands months earlier than they can talk," Dr. Jamieson says. "It comes down to physiological differences. It's easier to use a chubby little hand than to coordinate all of the hundreds of delicate muscles in the tongue to produce speech. It's also easier because babies can see their hands, while the tongue is hidden."

Research on signing shows that it doesn't slow down normal speech development and there's some evidence that it may make kids smarter. One study in California found a gap of 12 IQ points in second grade between children who had learned sign language as babies and those who hadn't.

WHERE'S THE DOWNSIDE?

Perhaps we're expecting too much. Parents who take sign

language courses for the purpose of teaching their babies to sign are likely to provide a lot of other stimulation. Signing shouldn't get all the credit.

"I find it highly unlikely that babies will read better in grade two because they learned to sign as infants," says Dr. Jamieson. "It's a mistake to think we're going to build a better baby. Signing shouldn't be focused on some academic achievement down the road. Just relax and enjoy it."

The real benefit of signing may be the interactive contact between parents and babies. Anything that joyfully nurtures one-on-one contact is good.

"Classes are also better than learning from DVDs because both parents and babies benefit from the social contact," says Dr. Jamieson. "Mothers have been parenting infants for thousands of years. Thanks to evolution, they're inclined to cherish their babies and do so with or without formal instruction."

WHAT ARE BABIES REALLY LEARNING?

Signing does give babies some basic tools early, but they're not really learning a language, according to Dr. Jamieson. What they're learning is 'baby sign talk' – a few isolated bits of vocabulary using a simplified form of sign language, the way babies might start speech with early sounds like 'ma ma ma'. Baby signing programs tend to focus on basics like 'wet' or 'milk' because babies can successfully use those signs. And babies tend to gravitate to the signs that work for them and get results.

"One of the first signs is milk because the hand squeezing requires the least amount of dexterity," says Dr. Jamieson. "All babies can do that. They're working from their strength here. Sign language picks up on that. If you observe a six-month-old, you'll see that hand shapes develop with certain regularity."

"Baby signing really only covers a transitional period from a few to several months. It fills a gap. By 14 months, most babies prefer to use spoken language. It's faster and they get a bigger reaction. Once babies begin to have words, it's a natural progression for them to choose speaking over hand signing." 🌈



eat



milk



more

Baby Hands Productions, www.MyBabyCanTalk.com

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