



Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller

Using Sign Language As a Tool to Communicate

by Carolyn Riley, Sarah Merrill, and Erin O'Brien

Dear Reader,

Many thanks to **Carolyn Riley**, infant program coordinator, and **Sarah Merrill** and **Erin O'Brien**, infant teachers at the **John Hancock Child Care Center** in Boston, for writing this issue's very interesting article about sign language. They are very interested in communicating with anyone else who is using sign language with infants and toddlers.

You can e-mail them directly at criley@jhancock.com.

Karen Miller's newest book is *Simple Steps: Developmental Activities for Infants, Toddlers and Twos* (Gryphon House). Other books by Karen include: *Ages and Stages*, *Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*; *More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*; *The Outside Play and Learning Book*; and *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers*.

The itsy bitsy spider climbed up the water spout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out. Out came the sun and dried up all the rain and the itsy bitsy spider climbed up the spout again.

Just think how many hand movements happen during this song. You and your infants and toddlers are already using your own form of sign language. Children will often ask for their favorite songs by making the corresponding hand motions. What a rewarding experience it is to be able to have this reciprocal communication with such young children! Infant and toddler teachers already know how intelligent infants and toddlers are and how much information they can process and understand. Using sign language with hearing infants and toddlers in your child care setting can help both you and the children communicate with each other more effectively throughout the day while also having fun!

One Center's Story

We first began using two signs ("more," "all done") in our infant room during

mealtimes. As infant and toddler teachers know, mealtimes can often be hectic. When our children were given the signs to use, we were fascinated by how quickly they were able to understand the purpose and meaning of these signs. Since our population consisted of only hearing infants and toddlers, our goal for using signs was to use them as a tool to aid developing verbal skills. Infants who were not able to say the actual word used the signs as a way to tell us what they wanted.

Signs were incorporated into our spoken language and were always paired with the spoken word. If a child made the sign for "more," a teacher would take her lead and ask a specific question such as "You're asking for 'more' — would you like more juice?"

The children would usually give us some signal to let us know if we were on the right track by nodding yes or no. The signs enabled the children (some as young as eight months of age) to communicate their needs more clearly. Mealtimes became a much more pleasant and positive experience.

The children began to extend the use of these two signs into other aspects of their day. While singing songs or reading stories, they asked for “more.” For teachers, using the sign for “all done” became a great transitional tool. It was a way for us to signal that an activity was coming to an end. The nonverbal children began to sign “all done” as their coats would come off after a walk or even when they were all done playing with a toy. Over time, more signs were introduced into daily routines and activities. “Coat,” “hat,” “shoes,” “stop,” “help,” “mommy,” “daddy,” and “work” are some of the signs we found helpful.

Interest spread to our toddler teachers when they realized the children were using signs that had been a part of their daily communication in the infant room. The interest level and ability to use the signs appropriately varied among the children. One young toddler who had been introduced to signs at a fairly young age by her infant teachers knew signs for many animals. While her teacher sang songs, she liked to participate by signing the names of animals as a kind of game.

As verbal language blossomed with our toddlers, signing became more of a way for the children to emphasize their point by using the sign in conjunction with saying the word. We find that the hands-on action involved with signing is a powerful tool for those toddlers who want to physically express their emotions. Some toddlers use the sign for “stop” to help themselves gain some control in situations that could escalate. One teacher noted that giving her toddlers the sign for “clean up” made this a much more successful and fun daily routine for the children.

In recent years, more attention has been given to the use of sign language with young children. The book *Baby Signs* by

Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn (1996) supported what we were experiencing. The teachers who have been consistent with incorporating signing into their classrooms have obviously seen stronger results. Parents also reported that they were seeing their pre-verbal children use signs at home. One child used the signs for “coat” and “shoes” to tell her mom that she wanted to go outside.

Why Use Sign Language?

As a means of communication and supporting self-esteem:

Infants and toddlers are active thinkers and doers. Often their cognitive skills surpass their verbal skills. This process can lead to frustration. The goal for using signs is to help with communication. When children realize someone is understanding them and responding to them, they become more active participants in their environment. They have more control in the world around them. We noticed that the use of signs did not discourage verbal skills; it simply put thought into action while verbal communication developed.

Children love multi-sensory learning that involves seeing, hearing, speaking, and doing. Sign language can enhance language experiences by engaging all of these modalities. Teaching sign language is a developmentally appropriate practice that promotes acceptance of differences and allows for hands-on language learning in the early years. (Good, Feekes, & Shawd, 1993/94, p. 81)

Using sign language:
(Loyson, 1998)

- Encourages a multi-sensory approach (visual, kinesthetic)
- Promotes better understanding of others with special needs

- Promotes the whole language philosophy
- Adds enrichment to the classroom
- Can assist in attention skills and following directions
- Promotes learning through the seven intelligences
- Could be critical in an inclusion classroom

Suggestions for Starting Sign Language in Your Setting

- Start with one or two signs that are relevant to everyday routines and needs
- Make consistency a priority — repeat the word and sign together to foster verbal language
- Gain support of colleagues
- Educate and inform parents
- Be patient and don't expect perfection — kids will improvise signs

References

- Good, L., Feekes, J., & Shawd, B. (1993/94). Let your fingers do the talking — Hands on language learning through signing. *Childhood Education*, 81-83.
- Loyson, J. (November 1998). NAEYC Conference, Toronto.

Recommended Books

- Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn. *Baby Signs*. Contemporary Books, 1996.
- Ben Bahan and Joe Dannis. *Signs for Me*. DawnSign Press, 1990.

Checkerboard Press. *Baby Signs and Animal Signs*.

Harold S. Collins. *Signing at School*. Garlic Press, 1992.

Elaine Epstein. *Say It, Sign It*. Scholastic Books, 1994.

Cindy Wheeler. *Simple Signs*. Puffin Books, 1997.

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, and good ideas — as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers — to:

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Safety Warning

A child in our infant room, an 11-month-old girl, was picked up by her father for a doctor's appointment. She had had a runny nose and cough. The teachers said that although she had eaten breakfast, she was refusing her bottle and her lunch at 11:30. The father picked the child up at 2:00 for a 3:30 doctor's appointment. After he got home, he called and said she had vomited and gagged the whole way home. She was tired and would not nap.

At the doctor's appointment, the doctor saw a small window cling ("stickies" that attach to windows) that had been stuck to the inside of the infant's throat and could only be seen with a bright light. It had to be removed with tweezers. She had either picked it off a window or had found one that had fallen and put it in her mouth. It had been in her throat for over three hours. Thank goodness she did not nap or eat!

I was very concerned because this was MY child and I am the director of our center. I see these window clings in many centers. I even admit to using them in the classroom. No more!

— Sharon Griffin