

The American Sign Language Debate for Baby



Marsha Peterson

Should babies be using sign language? What is the purpose? Can they really understand the signs? How do parents start using it with their babies? What are the best words to use? Will signing keep my baby from talking? Will it help with the *terrible twos*?

I am a single mom who has always worked full-time. My family is not typical; I am raising a child with Down syndrome with autism, and we live with a Labrador and an attack cat. Using American Sign Language has been part of our communication since 1993. It was not anything I chose to do; in fact, it scared me to think I would have to learn how to talk with my hands. How would I do that? How would I fit learning a new language into my schedule when my son was just released from a near-fatal hospital stay at eleven months old? My son is now nineteen years old and has well over 1,000 signs, and I can tell you firsthand, it is the most wonderful, rewarding experience you may have, and you will not believe how it improves bonding.

My son had just come home from an eight-day stay in the hospital, and his Early Intervention teacher resumed her home visits. One day she told me she thought we would need to learn sign language. At that time I was managing twenty-seven people, including pharmacy, home health care professionals, and caregivers. Time to learn sign language just was not going to fit into my schedule. I watched as the teacher introduced the first sign—*more*—with a musical toy. That is the key; introduce a new sign with something your baby enjoys. Food also works great. My son actually learned the sign for “more” before his teacher left for the day.

The time when I felt the full impact of how powerful signing is for babies was the day my son came to me in the kitchen, obviously wanting something. What do we do when we figure out what baby wants? We usually point in the direction of the object or say, “This?” and give it to him. What my son wanted was his Sit ‘n Spin. I pointed in the direction of the toy, but he did not move. It actually startled me. What I learned from this is that he wanted me to name that toy. I was still learning how to sign so I was not sure how to sign Sit ‘n Spin. I called and signed it the “yellow spin.” He signed and, to his best verbal ability, repeated after me. From that moment forward I never had an outburst or behavior issue over the Sit ‘n Spin!

When and how can you start? I would suggest starting with the first time you feed your baby after birth. Even though your baby will not do a sign until a few months later, parents are the ones who need to get in the practice of using the sign, so start early. When you use “eat” to feed your baby, start slowly. Your baby will probably be fussing and looking for the source of milk. This is a great time to say, slowly, while varying the pitch of your voice, “Eat . . . eat . . . eat.” This first sign will be the hardest one for you since you are learning the sign and your baby is totally focused on eating, but hang in there. As you get ready to feed your baby, keep repeating “eat” by saying and signing it. Soon your baby will see you signing. You will notice within a few weeks that when your baby fusses and sees you sign “eat,” your baby will actually stop fussing because he has learned that the sign means food is coming. This will reinforce trust as well.

The other sign I think you should start with is "finished." Use this sign each time you finish something like changing a diaper, a bath, eating, etc. There are two reasons this is a good sign to use. One is that it teaches the concept of being done, which is great for controlling behavior later. Some parents tell me they cannot get their baby to sign, yet they know their baby understands the signs. If you introduce the sign "finished," you can always use it to train your child to sign. For instance, if you cannot get your baby to sign "eat" when they want more food (or you have introduced the sign for "more"), start to remove the food and say, "Finished?" If your baby is truly *not* finished, you will get an outburst. At that time you reinforce the sign you want your baby to do. "Oh, you want to 'eat'?" You can help your baby make the sign as you repeat, "Eat... eat... eat" once again.

These are two great signs with which to begin. When my son finished the fourth grade, he had 400 signs; he had 600 when he finished the sixth grade, and we learned them one at a time. I cannot imagine any child without some sort of language. A report came out in the spring of 2011 that compared eight-year-olds who were taught sign language as infants to those who were not. The children who used sign language actually had higher IQs. Part of that study suggested that more intelligent parents were likely to introduce and use signs with their baby. In any event, signing will help babies make sense of their world a lot quicker than not using it all.

Does signing keep a baby from speaking? This idea has been proven false. In fact, findings show babies talk sooner when they have been taught to sign first.

I could never understand why *all* babies from birth to three have no formal educational program like a baby who is born with a disability. Think about your personal activity with your baby. Do we not usually try to make them happy? We feed them and diaper them, but does anyone think about language? Experts say the first six months are the most important for language development, yet there is little focus on it.

You can start signing today the very next time your baby wants to "eat." Try it. Watch what a difference it will make. Your baby will love you for it!

Marsha Peterson and her son Chad live in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. Chad was born with Down syndrome and autism and learned American Sign Language when he was a year old. Marsha published a book to help parents learn American Sign Language at the same time they introduce literacy to their baby. *Come Sign with Us: The Adventures of Potts and Friends* was published in June 2009 and received a Mom's Choice Award for Educational Products in February 2010. For more information, visit www.TalkingWithBaby.com.



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