

# Start the Conversation

## A Lesson on Baby Sign Language

### Playgroup #16

#### Materials Needed

- Your two hands

#### Handouts

- Baby Sign Language Basics (2 Pages)

## Introduction

When Alex was 14-months old, he and his mother sat down for lunch. She had prepared some great finger foods for him including his favorite, bananas. However, Alex did not want to eat what she had for him. His mom was surprised because she knew he was hungry. When she tried to feed him, he became very fussy and upset. Finally, Alex's mom asked him, "What do you want to eat?" His eyes got bright and he signed APPLE. His mom looked on the kitchen counter and noticed that Alex was looking at the beautiful apples she had bought earlier in the day. Because Alex could sign APPLE, he and his mother were able to communicate and understand each other. Alex knew what he wanted, but could not say the word. Because his mother had taught him about 25 signs and had used them with him since he was about 6 months old, he could let his mother know that he wanted the apple.

We all use language to understand what is said to us (*receptive language*) and to express ourselves (*expressive language*). *Language* is how we communicate with others using words, signs, or writing. Language includes the types of words we use (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs), how many words we use, how we put the words together to form thoughts and so on. *Speech* is how we pronounce words and shows the language we have acquired. Interestingly, we have some language before we have speech, meaning that we can communicate with others before we can speak by using gestures, grunts and visual cues. This is the predicament that babies are in—they have things (language) to express, but very few ways to express them.

Baby sign language is a way to communicate with your baby before she can speak. It uses your baby's natural abilities and tendencies to increase the clarity of your daily interactions. Babies naturally try to communicate their wants and needs. As a part of their attempt to communicate, they naturally use their hands. Who hasn't seen a baby raise her arms to show that she wants to be picked up? Or, what mom hasn't had her child emphatically gesture to grab something that she wants but which is out of reach?

Baby sign language taps into these natural tendencies to empower your baby to communicate needs, wants, and even complex thoughts. It bridges the gap between the time when your baby can't communicate with words and the time when she can be clearly understood. There are additional benefits to signing with your baby.

## Lesson Plan

#### Lesson Objectives

- Learn what baby sign language is
- Understand the benefits of signing with your child
- Learn the basic steps to signing with your child

## What is Baby Sign Language

Wonder what your baby is thinking or what she is interested in? Want to ask her what she likes to eat? Want to know if that cry is because he is hungry, needs a diaper change, or is hurt? Want to stop that tantrum? Would you be surprised to know that a few hand signs can help you achieve all this and more?

Over 20 years of research shows that by using baby sign language, you can take advantage of your baby's natural inclination to communicate with her hands to create better communication. Children naturally gesture to obtain things they want—like putting their arms up to be picked up. Using basic American Sign Language (ASL) signs can give your child more ways to communicate using this natural, in-born instinct. And when babies can communicate their needs, they are less likely to have tantrums.

Don't stress out. You and your baby don't need to learn a new language. You are just borrowing some basic ASL signs and adding them to your conversations. These signs give your baby a way to communicate back to you since babies as young as 6 months have the manual dexterity needed to make signs with their hands. You can learn as few as 5 signs or as many as 100-300 signs to enrich your relationship. And don't worry that signing will slow down a baby's ability to speak. Studies conducted over the past 20 years show that this is not true. Babies who sign generally speak at the same rates as babies who do not. However, during the time when they cannot speak, babies who can sign can still communicate. For example, Tricia's son Dallin came to her one day and signed "medicine" and pointed to his teeth. He was teething and could tell his mother that he needed some pain relief. No screaming. No guessing what was wrong. No stress. Tricia quickly solved Dallin's problems and Dallin went on playing happily.

## Benefits of Signing with Your Hearing Baby

Hearing babies who sign with their parents and other caregivers have a unique opportunity to learn to communicate their needs and wants and thoughts long before the average hearing child can. Besides the ability to communicate, there are added benefits.

- Babies and parents are less frustrated because they spend less time in the guessing game trying to figure out what baby needs.
- Babies speak at a normal rate or sooner than their counterparts who do not sign.
- Babies have larger vocabularies when they do begin to speak.
- Babies have more interest in reading.
- Babies have better skills in spelling and reading.
- Babies score higher on verbal and language tests than non-signing counterparts and have higher IQ scores even as old as age 8 (see Table 1).
- Babies have a better sense of self-confidence since they can get their needs met.
- Babies have a start on a second language, which develops more of the brain earlier and promotes life-long language learning abilities.
- Babies develop both sides of their brain recent brain scans show that babies who sign have increased activity on both sides which may occur because signing is visual, motor, and linguistic in nature.
- Babies who live in bilingual households have an easier time transitioning between both languages when the same signs are used with both languages.

- Babies and parents who sign have a closer bond with each other because there is less frustration and they can spend more time communicating with each other.

Signing has short-term benefits—the reduction in frustration and the ability to communicate—that are really important. Signing will make a difference in your life with your baby right now. It also has long-term benefits for your baby—increased vocabulary, IQ and interest in reading—that will help your child as she grows and matures. What you are doing now will help lay an important foundation for your child’s educational mindset. She will enjoy learning and will develop the necessary skills to learn well.

In addition to the benefits for your child, signing with your baby will help you have a more enjoyable relationship with your child. You will be less stressed out and will be able to understand her specific needs instead of guessing what that cry at 3:00 a.m. means. As your baby grows, you will have less of the “terrible twos” to deal with than other parents. This is because most of the tantrums come from your baby’s inability to specifically tell you what she needs. Without this skill, she is left with what she knows—crying. If you teach her to sign, she will have another tool to use to let you know what she needs and that means fewer tantrums.

## Seven Simple Steps Baby Sign Language!

(Note: This information is included in the Baby Sign Language Basics Handout and can be given to all mothers)

Here are some simple steps to get started signing with your child.

1. **Start Simple:** Start with 5-10 Signs like MILK, MORE, EAT, BATH, SLEEP, and DIAPER CHANGE. Start signing when your baby is between 4 and 8 months and your baby holds your gaze for a few seconds. If your baby is older, start right away. Based on age, you will see your child sign within a few weeks to a few months. Then, the conversation begins!
2. **Talk as You Sign:** Since your goal is to get your child to speak, you need to speak with your child as much as you can. When nursing or giving a bottle, say “Do you want some MILK?” and sign milk. Then, as you feed your child, open a dialog about the milk: “We’re having MILK. MILK is good!”
3. **Make Eye Contact:** Make the sign directly in your child’s line of sight so your child can see your eyes, the sign, and your mouth. Then, speak with your child, emphasizing the word you are signing. For example, you might say, “Do you want some MORE apple?”
4. **Be Patient:** If your baby is between 6-9 months, it may take 2 months for your baby to make the first sign. That gives you time to learn more signs. If your child is older, you might see results sooner. But remember that babies recognize the signs long before they can make them.
5. **Look for Signs:** Babies adapt signs to their physical abilities, so they don’t always look exactly right. Similar to speech development, babies’ abilities to sign will improve as they sign more. In the mean time, encourage any attempts your child makes. If you think you see a sign, say: “Oh, you’re signing MILK. Do you want some MILK?” Continue to make the signs correctly and your child will learn to make the sign correctly.

6. **Add Signs:** As your child learns the signs and begins to sign back, start adding other signs. If your child is older, add signs quickly so your child can learn the signs that she needs to communicate. Check out *Baby Signing 1, 2, 3* or the *Sign Babies ASL Flash Cards*.
7. **Sign Often (the key to success)!** Signing is not something you stop to do with your child—just incorporate signing in to your daily activities. Sign as you talk with your child, sign as you read books, sign as you sing, sign as you and your child interact.

Soon, you will see results and a decrease in the number of tantrums. Your bond you're your baby will be strengthened as you enjoy getting to know your little one.

## **Activity**

Teach the mothers in your group the following basic signs so that they can go home and start signing with their kids today:

- MORE
- MILK
- FINISHED
- EAT
- BATH
- SLEEP
- DIAPER CHANGE
- BOOK
- PLAY

Copy and pass out the Baby Sign Language Basics Handout for mothers to take home.

## **Suggested Reading**

*Baby Signing 1-2-3: The Easy-to-Use Illustrated Guide for Every Stage and Every Age* by Nancy Cadjan

*More Please!* (Board book) by Nancy Cadjan

## **References**

*Baby Signing 1-2-3: The Easy-to-Use Illustrated Guide for Every Stage and Every Age* by Nancy Cadjan