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A whole world of childcare



## The Benefits of Signing with Babies & Young Children



## Contents

Signing with babies & young children

The benefits of sign language

What age to start?

Where do we go to learn to sign?



Kathy Robinson is the originator of award-winning child development programmes which use sign language as a visual gestural clue to advance children's development and learning. Inspired by her own two deaf daughters, she created the BTEC Level 2 & Level 3 "Signing with Babies and Young Children" distance learning course which is studied by parents and child-care professionals throughout the UK and abroad with phenomenal results for children aged 0-6 years.

In this short article, she describes the benefits of sign language for babies and young children, at what age to begin introducing signs and where to go to learn sign language.

## Signing with babies & young children

British Sign language (BSL) is the language of the British Deaf Community and was recognised as an official language by the European Parliament in 2003. As a visual gestural language, it has a powerful impact on the growing brain and the spoken language development of hearing babies and children because it "clues" infants into the **meaning** of words long before they are able to speak.

Many signs are iconic, that is they look like the word they are meant to represent. For example, "sleep" indicates a closing of the eyes and "drink" indicates drinking from a cup. Other signs have strong associations; 'red' is associated with 'lips', 'rabbit' with 'ears', 'walk' with two fingers 'walking'.

At a later stage these same memory clues (signs) together with fingerspelling (the spelling out of words on the hands) support the speedy development of children's reading, writing and spelling skills.

Today, thousands of children in the U.K. are exposed to signs alongside speech in normal every day activities through trained parents and carers. A signing revolution is happening in the home and early years settings and children are loving it!

## The benefits of sign language

### Signing is fun! It's quick and easy to learn for both you and your child

By introducing key signs alongside the spoken word and using them in everyday activities (e.g., singing, story-times, meal-times, outings) you and your child will communicate on a deeper, fuller and more satisfying, level.

Research has highlighted the following benefits of signing with babies and young children:

### Reduced frustration

Through signs, babies and children are able to express their emotions, needs, and wants before they are able to speak. For example, by modelling the sign for “milk” every time you give your baby milk, they will learn to make the sign themselves. When you see the sign, you know what your baby is asking for - and you give them milk. This way, baby doesn't have to cry for milk or experience the frustration of not being understood.

“I could understand him and he could understand me.” Carole, mother of Tre

### Language acquisition

Sign language gives meaning to spoken words and as a result, babies often learn to speak from an earlier age. Young children exposed to sign language have broader vocabularies which lay the foundations of literacy.

“I signed to Isaac from when he was born. At 10 months he could sign ‘milk, food, please” and “thank you”. By 12 months he was signing “hat, duck, orange, milk, eat, please, thank you, Mummy, Daddy. “ I also believe that signing has helped to develop his spoken language as one of his first consistent words was “thank you”, not a typical start to spoken vocabulary, but I had signed and said it every time I gave him something. It's so exciting to be allowed into his world and to have this connection.”

Erica, mother of Isaac

### Cognitive development

Using sign language alongside the spoken word supports your child's learning by stimulating the right **and** left hemispheres of the brain. The meaning of the word is reinforced through hearing the spoken word (auditory), seeing the sign (visual) & making the physical movement of the sign (kinesthetic). This creates additional avenues in your child's brain to connect the word with the concept which aids learning and development.

“The power of sign is amazing, our children are very young and many do not use their voice. Sign somehow unlocks their speech, they recognise the signs almost instantly and somehow are able to say the word”. Teresa Kitto, Playgroup leader



### Behaviour Management

Babies and young children who learn to sign are more successfully able to convey their needs which results in less aggressive behaviour (e.g. biting, hitting, tantrums). In a recent study, three-year old children were 61% more engaged during signed activities than the control non-signing children.

## What age to start?

Ideally, parents and carers start learning sign language before the baby is born. This way, they can introduce signs in spoken phrases at appropriate moments, “milk” when they are about to give the baby “milk”, “walk” when they are about to go for a walk, “dog” when they see a dog.



The consistent repetition of signs as you speak will help babies to understand words. They will be filing them in their brain, ready for the moment when they begin to use their hands to sign and their voices to speak. Many parents however, start introducing signs to their little ones from about four or five months or much older. It is never too late to learn.

“Martha signed ‘Mummy’ yesterday. It was such a thrill. She also signs ‘octopus’ and ‘duck’.”

Joanne, mother of 9 month-old Martha

## Where do we go to learn to sign?

- [www.signsforsuccess.co.uk](http://www.signsforsuccess.co.uk) offers signing programmes for parents and health-care professionals
- Ask your library about local baby signing groups in the area; they also may loan signing books and signing DVDs
- Contact your local authority for a list of local colleges offering sign language courses (often part-time/evening)
- Sign language books and DVDs are available to purchase from major book stores and through internet websites

This resource has been written in association with **Signs for Success**.

For further information on the Signs for Success programmes, which can be carried out in the home with your children and members of the family, please visit the Signs for Success website:

[www.signsforsuccess.co.uk](http://www.signsforsuccess.co.uk)

Free signs are available for you to try out and practice with your little one!

Alternatively contact Kathy Robinson by email: [kathy@signsforsuccess.co.uk](mailto:kathy@signsforsuccess.co.uk)

### **Sandra Valmary began using signs when Celeste was seven months old:**

“The Signs for Success™ programme doesn’t teach sign language as such (though there are hundreds of signs to learn), it shows how signing with babies and children can help you to achieve specific goals such as expanding a child’s spoken language or building a strong positive relationship. There are numerous tips and clues and paths to follow. And all the behaviour management signs together with the philosophy espoused in the course helps me raise my child in a positive way, avoiding punishment, bribery and time out. I don’t think I’m the same mother I would have been.”



All information and advice contained in this resource are meant as guidance only