

Signing Success

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Recently I observed a little girl in a pre-school setting sitting on a sofa singing to herself. There was nothing unusual about the scene- except that she was using what looked remarkably like sign language. I wasn't aware that anyone in the setting had either a hearing loss or needed to use signing to support their additional language learning needs. Perhaps she came from a signing family, due to a parent, brother or sister having a hearing impairment?

In fact, this was not the case.

Furthermore this little girl was a very competent communicator; she had good pronunciation, excellent grammar and an enormous vocabulary. So why was she signing? She attends Ashcroft and Ramridge Children's Centre (ARC) in Luton, where all children and staff are encouraged to use British Sign Language. ARC's decision to use signing didn't emerge because there was a child with a hearing impairment or language learning needs, but because staff believe that signing benefits *all* children's language and communication skills. They don't use sign all the time at ARC, but they do hold a 'Sing and Sign' session together every morning and afternoon, and are particularly keen to develop signing with babies.

It was truly wonderful to see an 11-month-old baby sitting in her high chair at ARC, with a bowl she had just emptied, spontaneously signing 'more'. It was equally interesting to join in a lively sing and sign session in which the children and adults join in with songs, accompanied by a DVD showing signs, displayed on an interactive whiteboard. It was clear that all the children involved in the session loved it, and particularly those with additional language learning needs, and those at an early stage of learning English as an additional language. The children later used a karaoke machine to sing their favourite songs from a sing and sign CD.

Building children's confidence

Using sign with children and adults with additional learning needs, to promote communication and develop language, is now standard practice in most special schools, with MAKATON being the sign system most frequently used. It is now widely recognised that using sign helps to build children's confidence as their language emerges, as well as, in some cases, being an alternative to spoken language. The debate about whether using signing will inhibit language development seems to have subsided. In fact MAKATON is so popular that it now has a dedicated TV programme for its use on BBC CBeebies called *Something Special*. If you ask most pre-school children about the main character on the programme, a clown called 'Mr. Tumble' they will be likely to spontaneously show you some of the MAKATON signs he uses. Signing appears to be becoming part of children's lives, whether they have a hearing impairment, additional learning needs or not.

But using signing with babies is a controversial area. If you use your favourite search engine to look up 'baby signing' you will find literally hundreds of invitations to baby signing classes throughout the UK. Many of them are based on the work of Dr. Joseph Garcia, a child development specialist from Alaska, who pioneered the use of signing with very young children.

Seven main benefits are quoted extensively by the several organisations in the UK promoting signing with babies. Paraphrased, these are:

- signing provides your baby with the ability to communicate his wants, needs and observations before they can talk
- signing reduces frustration for both you and your baby, and reduces the number and duration of tantrums, and offers you a whole new insight into your baby's world.
- signing strengthens the bond between you and your baby, increasing self-confidence for both of you.
- signing accelerates your baby's language development so that when speech begins, the content is more sophisticated. It also fuels intellectual development.

Much of this seems 'intuitive'. If parents try out new ways of communicating with their babies, there is likely to be a growth in the bond between parent and child. It seems to make sense that if babies can communicate via a physical movement before recognisable speech emerges, then this could reduce upsets and crying. But is this really the case, and does signing with babies before they can speak make them better talkers and lead to increased intellectual development? This is where the core of the debate lies.

Research

The author Marilyn Daniels makes a strong claim for signing's power to stimulate brain growth in her book *Dancing With Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy* (Bergin and Garvey 2001):

'Verbal language is processed by the left side of the brain and speech is produced in the frontal left lobe (Broca's Area). Sign language as a visual and kinaesthetic language is received by the right hemisphere and processed in the left. Signs are produced by activity in the Broca's area. Hence the activity in the speech part of the brain is commenced much earlier than if the baby did not sign.

'Sign language instruction, with its prerequisite visual component, creates an increase in brain activity by engaging the visual cortex and presenting an additional language to the young learner. The heightened cerebral action occurs in both the right and left hemispheres of the brain. The increase in language activity stimulates the development of the brain by stimulating the formation of more synapses or connections among brain cells. Using sign language and English in tandem provides a much richer language base for brain activity and brain growth and development.'

Baby Signs: how to talk with your baby before your baby can talk (McGraw-Hill Contemporary, 2009) is a key piece of research cited by most

organisations promoting signing with babies. The study involved 140 children and their parents. The children were divided into those involved in signing ('baby signers') and those not ('non-baby signers'). At 24 months the baby signers showed an average increase in language development of three to four months beyond the non-baby signers, and were using significantly longer sentences. At three years of age they showed an average increase of 11 months above the norm. When followed up at eight years of age there were signs of increased IQ among the baby signers. The researchers concluded that signing with babies helps them develop both their language and cognitive skills.

There are very few studies about the effectiveness of signing with babies, but it is easy to see how such positive results would generate enthusiasm and debate. Such a debate took place in the pages of *Bulletin*, the magazine published by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT). This sparked an event called 'The Great Baby Sign Debate', held at University College London, as part of the 2007 Festival of Social Science, organised by the Economic and Social Research Council. The arguments, as summed up by Dr Chloe Marshall in her article 'Continuing the baby signing debate' (*Bulletin*, November 2007) centred on two main points: 'Does baby signing make any difference and can the claims in its favour be substantiated?' and 'Parents who assume that their baby is trying to communicate encourage that communication'.

The RCSLT then issued a statement making clear that while research supports the use of gestures to help babies focus on what they hear, as part of 'normal' parent-child interaction, "...it is not necessary for parents to learn formal signing such as British Sign Language for children with have no identified risk to speech and language development." The concern here seemed to be that parents might be encouraged to focus on children's hand movements rather than their vocalisations, and this could in turn lead to slower language development.

ARC's inspiration

So why do staff at ARC use sign? The reason given is that Katja O'Neill, European Coordinator for the Sign2Me Network for signing instructors, inspired them to do so. According to Katja O'Neill, 'The key to inspiring your own baby's signing is to pick up a few gestures for the things your baby is most inspired by and enjoys. Sing and Sign songs are all about familiar routines like bath time, bed time, meal time, or about exciting things like animals and vehicles. As your baby starts to take interest in and learn about the world around her, you can ask yourself, "What does my baby like to do: what does my baby point at and seem interested in?" Above all signing needs to be fun, and there are huge rewards for baby and parents.'

One important point is often missed in this debate. Parents can often learn to 'tune in' to their children's communication efforts, even when these are unclear- thus reducing 'miscommunications' and the resultant frustration on both sides. Staff in pre-school or day care settings may also be able to adapt

better to children's communication styles if signing is used as part of everyday activities.

Anne McMaster, manager of ARC, summed up the process: "We were very interested in the concept of reducing children's frustration at not being able to communicate, while improving their confidence. Becoming a signing environment has made a big difference to all of the children, as well as the staff. Children learning English as an additional language find it useful as a means of understanding what is said, as well as giving them the opportunity to express their needs. This is very reassuring for them, and has the effect of building their confidence to speak in English, and especially at the early stages."

"We feel that the improvement in children's confidence is just as important as the improvement in language. Equally, signing has helped the adults to be better communicators. Parents of children with additional needs have also commented on how the use of sign has helped children at home."

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Baby signing contacts

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