

Babies First Signs

My great niece is gorgeous. She was about 11 months old when I managed to get to California to see her family and she was an energetic, happy baby. I got to play with her while she was eating her finger food in the high chair and I was surprised to see the hand gestures she made when she had finished her meal. Her mother wasn't. She smiled and said, "I know, Jolie is ready to nurse" and Jolie enthusiastically smiled back. Jolie, too young to use words to express her needs, had been taught another way to communicate—sign language.

What is baby sign language?

About five years ago a psychologist published her research results on teaching hearing babies how to use sign language. These babies were taught a combination of American Sign Language and modified signs that took into account the limited fine and gross motor control of toddlers. Most babies were taught signs as they neared their first birthday. Dr. Acredolo's, a professor at the University of California-Davis, believed that babies are wired to communicate, even before they can coordinate the muscles to vocalize words. Not only did Dr. Linda Acredolo find that babies wanted to use sign to communicate with others, but as she continued to follow these infants until they finished second grade, she also found that children who were signing as infants had higher I.Q scores than a control group of non-signing children.

Is there a down side?

Babies sign with their parents all the time. Waving "bye-bye" to daddy, raising hands to say "all gone", banging on the refrigerator to tell us they want their bottle, opening their fists while you sing the classic baby song "Open Shut Them", are examples of the signs most of use already. Some are imitative and were coached by parents and others are deliberate and reflect intentional communication. Finding ways to play with your baby, and to communicate creatively and successfully with each other, is a great thing. Organizing daily signing lessons is not so great. Developing modified signs that make sense in your family works for lots of kids. Pushing for the hand proficiency to do complicated signs may not work at all.

Some parents were worried that perhaps using signs would keep their children from talking. There is little hard research other than the original work published a few years ago, but hearing parents tend to use words and signs together, encouraging vocalizations in their children. And there are children that are already using words by a year. They can use signs to express the longer phrases that might still be out of their reach in vocalizing.

So if you want to find out more about baby signing, you can go to your library or do some research on line. Remember to keep this a fun activity for parents and children to do together, and can give your toddler another way to let you in on his world.