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## Gifted Education 101: The benefits of sign language

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In our article on [Multi-Sensory Reading Enrichment for Gifted Children](#), we suggested that a boy or girl who really wants to delve into a beloved book might try learning [sign-language](#) as practiced by one of the most gifted children and adults of all time, Helen Keller.



One year old signs "Again!"

But the pleasures of sign language aren't limited to school-age youngsters. In fact, some of the greatest benefits have been noted among those who aren't even speaking yet.

The NY Gifted Education Examiner spoke with Lora Heller, MS, MT-BC, LCAT, Founding Director of [Baby Fingers](#) in New York City, and author of [Sign Language for Kids: A Fun and Easy Guide to American Sign Language](#), and [Baby Fingers: Teaching Your Baby to Sign](#), about the advantages of learning sign-language for children.

**Examiner:** What is the evidence that shows teaching young children sign language boosts their IQ and reading scores?

**Lora Heller:** In the 1980s, research was done by two women in California ([Acredolo & Goodwyn](#)) who followed a group of 103 signing children from eleven months old through their eighth year. These kids were found to have an average IQ of 114, compared to 102 among their non-signing peers. These babies also developed larger vocabularies, displayed more self-confidence, and engaged in more sophisticated play than their non-signing peers.

[Dr. Marilyn Daniels](#), a Penn State Speech/Language Pathologist and Professor of Communications, found that preschoolers who were taught sign language scored significantly higher on the Peabody Vocabulary Test when compared to preschoolers who did not learn sign language. Daniels concluded that a preschooler's vocabulary can be improved if words are presented visually and kinesthetically as well as verbally. She is the author of [Dancing with Words](#), [Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy](#), and has spent much of her career teaching early childhood educators how to use sign language in their reading instruction. In her work, she discovered that young students were motivated to read when sign language was incorporated in the process of instruction and practice, and that reading levels improved at a faster rate in sign-supported classrooms.

Working as a sign language interpreter in the 1970s, [Dr. Joseph Garcia](#) noted that the children of his deaf friends and clients could communicate much earlier and more completely than the children of his hearing friends. Exposure to and use of sign language was the main ingredient. Garcia is generally regarded as the world's leading authority on baby signing.

As a music therapist and teacher of the deaf, I have discovered the benefits of sign language coupled with music to benefit the overall development with children who have a variety of special needs. Over the last 10 years, through [Baby Fingers](#), I have found exposure to sign language key in language and overall development for typical and gifted children as well. My own children began signing at the tender age of 6 ½ months. They were using full sentences - expressing complete thoughts - with signs even before speaking. By 9/10 months, they were combining signs! When they did begin to speak, of course they labeled things with one word here and there, but they more often used more complete sentences, descriptive words, and emotions. We always signed as we read books to our

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children; They in turn spent time on their own "reading" aloud by signing whatever they saw on a page while sitting with a book---this truly aided in developing their love of books and interest in reading. The print, otherwise abstract, was given meaning through the incorporation of the signs. Participants have been overjoyed with the results - infants using signs and toddlers clarifying their new spoken words with signs so that everyone could understand.

**Examiner:** Speech is an oral-motor issue that has nothing to do with intelligence. Could teaching gifted children sign at an early age facilitate communication and help keep them from getting frustrated?

**Lora Heller:** Teaching and using sign early on significantly decreases frustration. Children who have developed receptive language, or understanding of language coming in to them, can then use a true language (ASL) to communicate regardless of their oral-motor abilities. When a signing child begins to speak/attempts to use words that are difficult to produce, incorporating signs helps the caregivers to understand what the child is trying to say.

**Examiner:** Is American Sign Language (ASL) considered an official foreign language and what are the benefits of learning a second language at any age?

**Lora Heller:** ASL is a sophisticated language distinct from English, with visual equivalents of phonology, morphology, syntax, and grammar. ASL is an official language, and [considered a "foreign" language by many educational institutions](#). It is offered to fulfill language requirements around the globe. The English-speaking student who learns ASL instead of German (Spanish, French, etc.) cannot compare the relationship of sound and graphic symbols (spoken and written language forms) in the foreign language to his native tongue. However, the student learns how signs combine to produce a passionate, complex language, where the signer becomes vulnerable through the highly emotional, personal nature of a language that must be signed face to face. Knowledge of Deaf culture is necessary to fully grasp the language. Through learning a second language, we improve cognitive abilities and learning skills, we challenge our brain and more completely develop the linguistic hemisphere of the brain. Learning a second language builds creativity in children and develops their literacy skills; school-children who study a second language are found to perform better than their monolingual peers. ASL has a positive effect on intellectual growth. According to the National Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, learning a second language: enriches and enhances a child's mental development; leaves students with more flexibility in thinking, greater sensitivity to language, and a better ear for listening; improves a child's understanding of his/her native language; gives a child the ability to communicate with people s/he would otherwise not have the chance to know; opens the door to other cultures and helps a child understand and appreciate people from other countries; gives a student a head start in language requirements for college; increases job opportunities in many careers where knowing another language is a real asset.

**Examiner:** Does learning ASL help with the acquisition of other languages down the road?

**Lora Heller:** Learning ASL sets the foundation for the acquisition of other languages. It bridges the gap between two spoken languages, allowing a child (in a bilingual home) to "see" the word and to understand through sign that the two very different sounds mean the same thing.

You can learn more about sign language for children at: [www.mybabyfingers.com](http://www.mybabyfingers.com).

Or come and see for yourself!

Lora is offering Examiner readers a **free trial class** at [Central Park's Turtle Pond](#) in New York City on September 15th at 10 AM. E-mail Lora through her [website](#) for more information!

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