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Some babies are learning to talk with their hands

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Jennifer Pollock uses sign language to help her 2-year-old daughter Sophie communicate. Sophie kisses a toy as mom Jennifer uses the sign for "kiss." T.J. Salsman/The State Journal-Register

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER
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If you've ever been to a country where you don't speak the language, you have some idea of the helplessness an infant may experience when he or she is unable to communicate.

Equally frustrated parents and caregivers have turned their eyes skyward, pleading, "If only Baby could talk and tell me what's wrong."

Jennifer Pollock, a Springfield child speech-language pathologist, says these wishes may at last have been answered. Instead of screaming, some small children are learning how to tell their mothers they are finished eating and ready to get out of her high chair by using a form of sign language.

Over the past decade, child development specialists and sign language experts have been refining a communication technique known by various names, such as "baby signing" or "sign with your baby." The technique evolved after sign interpreter Joseph Garcia noticed that babies of deaf parents were able to communicate their needs much earlier than children of hearing parents.

Garcia began researching how American Sign Language could be used with hearing babies and parents. His research, published in *Toddler Talk* in 1994, revealed that babies as young as 6 and 7 months old who witnessed others using signs consistently began using signs to communicate by 8 or 9 months old.

That is well before most toddlers are able to speak clearly. Children are usually close to 3 years old before they gain vocabularies large enough to converse.

The use of signs was quickly adapted to help parents of toddlers experiencing disabilities or developmental delays.

Pollock, who works at Memorial's Kids at Koke Mill, initially used signs with toddlers in her clinical work as a child speech pathologist. Children learned how to make signs for words such as "eat," "drink," "sleep," "more," "done," "change" and "potty."

She later used the idea when she became a mother.

"Since infants develop physically before they develop verbally, it makes perfect sense to communicate kinesthetically and visually using the hands," she says. "... Signing with baby offered such a higher level of communication that I was eager to use my knowledge of baby signing when my own children came along."

"I started using the signs along with the words in front of my kids pretty much as soon as they were able to focus visually on hand gestures," Pollock says. "They started using the signs back to me almost as soon as they could master the gestures."

Subsequent research has shown babies who can express themselves get frustrated less often, which averts tantrums.

"Signing empowers children," Pollock said. "This sense of empowerment significantly contributes to a child's happiness."

Children spend less time crying and parents waste less time guessing. Because they can communicate successfully, the parent-infant bond is easier to build. And research shows children with strong parent-infant bonds have high self-esteem.

Although many parents initially worry that teaching their infant signing will inhibit verbal development, research shows that babies who sign usually begin to speak sooner and develop larger vocabularies than non-signing babies.

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For more information:


- A number of My Baby Can Talk learning and teaching aids are available at retail stores, including Toys R Us and Babies R Us.
- Several Web sites, including www.signingbaby.com, offer picture or video dictionaries of the most common baby signs you can learn at home.
- To review the results of several studies and to see Joseph Garcia's book and DVD programs, go online at www.sign2me.com.

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