



Child Abuse Prevention & American Sign Language (ASL)

Problem:

It is well accepted that incidents of child abuse are commonly triggered by high frustration levels when adults interact with infants and toddlers. This elevated frustration is often due to the inability of the adult and child to communicate clearly with each other.

Situations:

Infants and pre-verbal toddlers generally act out in certain ways in order to get the attention of their caregivers and to satisfy some need or want. Most infants and toddlers accomplish this act by crying, screaming, hitting/biting, throwing uncontrolled tantrums, or other aggressive and stress-inducing actions. If the infant's message is not quickly conveyed, frustration for both parties can grow rapidly and exponentially. This can potentially cause a severe strain on the adult caregiver and result in a reaction that might be abusive to the child.

Solution:

Give the infant and adult the ability to clearly communicate their thoughts, needs, wants and desires through the medium of genuine ASL sign language. Enabling clear communication has already been shown to dramatically impact the stress levels of both children and their caregivers! Take away the stress and at least one abuse trigger is eliminated!

Results:

The following insights are the results of research in the field of signing with babies and toddlers, testimonials from families who have used programs that teach ASL to their children, and feedback from early childhood educators who have used signing within their classrooms.

- Signing empowers children because they can communicate successfully with those around them. This sense of empowerment significantly contributes to babies' happiness.
- Children spend less time crying and adults spend less time playing "the guessing game," allowing more time for positive interaction.
- Signing reduces stress and frustration for both the infant and adult.
- The use of ASL gives special-needs children the ability to interact with typically-developing children in a meaningful way.
- Nearly every child, starting around 6 months, has the ability to communicate using ASL signs, including children with severe autism, ADD, ADHD, delayed speech, Down's Syndrome or other challenges.
- The ability to communicate between the child and adult can build a much stronger bond between them.
- Preverbal signing, when used in combination with spoken words, has been shown to accelerate the development of a child's use of spoken language.



The Impact of Signing on Identifying Sexual / Physical Abuse

A True Story

This case was shared with our Sign2Me[®] staff by a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner at a recent AANP (American Academy of Nurse Practitioners) conference:

Situation:

According to the California-based Nurse Practitioner (we'll call her Julie) who shared this information with us, she had been working with a "family" of four consisting of a mom, a 10-year old girl, an infant girl, and the mom's live-in boyfriend. Unfortunately, the boyfriend happened to be a two-time convicted felon in the State of California.

On one home visit, after Julie had finished working with all four family members in the same room, the boyfriend exited the house and drove off. It was at this time that the 10-year old girl signed to Julie that she was being continually sexually abused by the boyfriend.

Analysis:

In this situation, the boyfriend had threatened to kill the baby sister if the young girl "said" anything to anyone about the terrible abuse that was ongoing. Julie explained that, at a young age, children tend to look at the world much more literally. In this case, in the 10-year old's mind, she never "said" anything to anyone about the boyfriend's abuse. Through the use of American Sign Language however, without speaking so much as a single word, she was able to clearly communicate information about the abuse that was taking place!

Julie also explained that in cases of sexual abuse, it is often extremely difficult for anyone, much less children, to verbally discuss the details of the abusive acts. She explained that signing offers the victim the ability to much more easily communicate to others important information about the crime without having to say the words that are so difficult to speak or to hear.

The Good News:

This young girl's ability to bring awareness of her abuse through the use of ASL signing led directly to the arrest and conviction of the boyfriend for perpetrating that horrific abuse! Since California is a "three strikes and you're out" state, that boyfriend is now serving a life sentence in prison without any possibility of parole.