

Baby's first words

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At 3 months old, Regan Finn started signaling to her parents when she needed a diaper change. At about 5 months, Katie Mingus could tell her parents when she needed help with something. And when she was 8 months old, Andelyn Boothby could ask clearly and politely for more milk.

Child prodigies?

Hardly.

The babies' parents attribute their children's early communications skills to the use of American Sign Language, or ASL. Neither the children nor their parents are deaf. But these Pierce County parents say learning sign language helped boost their children's language development, both in sign and in spoken words.

"I went into it skeptical," says Jim Finn, Regan's dad. "But I've been blown away by the results."

Finn and his wife, Jody, who studied ASL in college, began signing to Regan from birth.

Every time they changed her diaper, for example, they made the sign for change. Eventually, Regan, who is now 20 months old, started making her own version of the sign.

"It probably saved us untold diaper rashes," says Finn.

Rebekah Mingus, mother of Katie, who is now 17 months, says that learning to sign with her daughter probably sidetracked many tantrums.

And Michelyn Boothby, Andelyn's mom, says she was astounded at how fast her daughter, now 18 months, began stringing words together in sign language. "It floored me," she says. "Before she was even a year old, she was putting words together."

EARLY ADVOCATE

None of the children's achievements surprises Joseph Garcia, the Bellingham educator who helped pioneer the use of sign language with hearing babies two decades ago. His first book on the subject, "Toddler Talk," was published in 1994. He hopes to have a new book on baby signing published this year.

Garcia first learned sign language in the 1970s. Years later, while working on a master's thesis, he observed how hearing children of deaf parents could sign fluently by age 1. He began studying the phenomenon and soon became convinced that the skills could be taught to any child.

Garcia says parents taught through his methods learn to introduce the signs in a gentle, loving way by integrating the signs into daily life. "We don't force it on them," he says. "We model it. They see the motion with the (spoken) language."

[Enlarge image](#)



Andelyn Boothby signs the word "baby" for photo for her mother Michelyn.

[Enlarge image](#)



Katie Mingus can tell her mother when she is "finished" eating in sign language, or when she needs to wash her hands.

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Katie Mingus, 17 months, works on the word "drink" with her dad Russ.

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Garcia says that when he first published his ideas, they were seen as "unorthodox, kind of crazy." But his ideas have been tested by others. A study published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* in 2007 by researchers from the University of Kansas concluded that signing could replace crying and whining among babies ages 6 to 10 months.

REDUCES FRUSTRATION

Kristy Davies, a New Jersey speech-language pathologist and ASL instructor, conducted a research study last year while a graduate student at La Salle University in Philadelphia. She compared hearing children who learned ASL to their nonsigning peers.

She followed 20 children between 6 and 8 months of age for nine months. At the end of the study period, she found that the signing children, when compared to national norms, used more words at a younger age than their peers who didn't sign. "They were talking more and with a larger vocabulary," says Davies.

Although it wasn't a formal part of her study, Davies says parents also reported that teaching their babies sign language did much to reduce their children's frustration. "The moms were so pleased that their children could tell them what they wanted," she says.

Garcia says helping young children communicate earlier in life promotes self-esteem. "When they get a response, and get feedback – that is the propeller that flies that child's spirit forward," he says. "They become more curious, more engaged."

SIGN AND SPEAK

Judith Karman teaches baby sign language classes at Bates Technical College, using Garcia's methods and his materials, published by Mukilteo-based publisher Northlight Communications, under the brand Sign2Me.

Karman, a former public school teacher of deaf children who has operated an in-home preschool, started teaching baby sign classes in 2002. She uses songs and games to teach ASL to both parents and babies.

Parents say that makes the classes fun for both them and their babies. Karman says it's never too early or too late to begin with a child. But she says most parents start when their child is about 6 months old.

She instructs parents who want their babies to learn ASL to make eye contact with their child, say the word and make the corresponding sign at the same time.

Rather than hinder verbal language development, says Karman, ASL enhances it by engaging the same brain mechanisms that children in bilingual homes use. And by using sign and spoken language together, she says, children receive both auditory and visual stimulation.

"The notion that if a child signs, he won't talk, is archaic," says Garcia. "That's like saying that if you learn Norwegian, you can never learn Swahili. Sign language is a mode of communication."

"By talking as we sign," says Karman, "we are also teaching language. When the baby gets older, he will start verbalizing along with the signs."

AMERICAN SIGN STANDARDS

How can children who are too young to speak learn to sign?

Garcia says that children can use their hands long before their vocal mechanisms mature. "A child can open and shut his hands weeks after birth," says Garcia.

And in ASL, many of the signs are iconic; the sign for "milk," for example, resembles a hand pulling on a cow's udder – or perhaps a mother's breast. It comes easily and naturally to a child whose parents make the sign and say the word milk before every feeding.

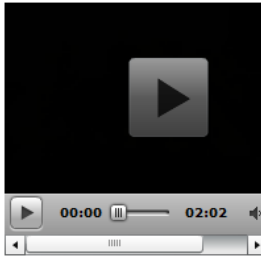
Babies will often start with their own approximation of the parents' sign, but with practice they can improve.

"She doesn't have the motor control to do all the signs perfectly," says Michelyn Boothby of her daughter Andelyn. "But she uses it even when she's upset. She signs 'please,' even if she's crying."

Rebekah Mingus says her daughter Katie has put her own stamp on signs for "more," "eat" and "nurse."

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Buzz up!



LEARNING TO SIGN

Judith Karman will offer classes on baby sign language this month. Parents and babies are welcome.

What: Introductory class

When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Bates Technical College South Campus, Building E, Room 116

What: Follow-up series of four classes

When: 6:30 p.m. March 10, 17, 24 and 31

Where: Bates Technical College South Campus, Building E, Room 116

Cost: \$53

Information: 253-474-5302 or www.sign2me.com (see instructor listings)

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Don't make signing a task. Incorporate it into your daily life.
- Make eye contact whenever you sign with your baby.
- Say the word you're trying to teach out loud, along with the sign.
- Take advantage of teachable moments. Sign "eat" and "milk" at meal times, for example.

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"She likes to use 'finish' when she's in her high chair," says Mingus. "She can tell me when she's finished eating."

By the time they begin talking, the babies have learned not only individual words, but also the grammar and syntax of ASL. They may combine verbal and sign languages, as Andelyn Boothby did.

"She started talking at 10 months," her mom says. "By 11 months, she would say 'pretty' and sign 'flower.'"

Andelyn's grandmother, Jacquelyn Holmes, says she had a lot of fun learning to sign with her daughter and her granddaughter. "I love when she says 'please,'" Holmes says. "That just melts me."

While some parents might be tempted to make up their own signs, Karman believes it's important to learn and use standard ASL. "Making up a sign, or continuing to use a baby's approximation of any sign, would be the same as teaching a baby to use baby talk instead of speaking correctly with them," says Karman.

Learning ASL has other advantages as well, Karman says. In day-care settings, caregivers may use it to speak to children. And ASL can also give young children a way to communicate with other kids, who may be hearing or deaf. "It's standardized, and can be understood," Karman says.

VERBAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children are able to learn between 20 and 50 signs before verbal speech is established.


As the children grow older, they begin to use verbal language more and sign less. "Between 12 and 18 months, vocabulary is starting to blossom," says Mingus.


But parents of signing babies say using sign language was a key to sanity as their children entered their second year of life – often a time of great frustration for pre-verbal babies who resort to screaming, hitting or biting to make their wishes known.


"The most moving thing to me was being able to honor her," says Jim Finn of daughter Regan. "When you can respond to her, she is making a connection. It opened up her world a lot sooner."

Debbie Cafazzo: 253-597-8635

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Comments:  14 Showing: Newest first



Cricket412 wrote on 03/13/2009 04:12:45 PM:

We have been using the Signing Time videos with our son, diagnosed with Apraxia of Speech, for 5 years now and ASL has been our saving grace! Isaac has very few clear words and uses signs to reinforce what he is saying or feeling and has given us insight to our child's personality which we would never have seen otherwise.
Frustration was a huge factor before we started signing!


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teechrmom7 wrote on 03/12/2009 08:49:18 PM:

Teaching babies and young children to sign using American Sign Language is an amazing way to start communicating with children long before they can effectively communicate verbally. My family discovered the beauty of communicating with sign through the Signing Time! series developed by Rachel and Emilie Coleman (www.signingtime.com) and I have used it in my classroom for several years. Not only has Signing Time! helped my grandchildren and my students learn to communicate, it has also increased their vocabularies and helped their reading skills and self-confidence.

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JenML17 wrote on 03/12/2009 06:16:04 PM:

Our family uses ASL with our little babies and the results are wonderful!! The best product out there to teach signs is SigningTime!, which is a series of about 28 dvd's, grouped according to a common theme. Signing Time! has many many models of the signing, great graphics, catchy songs, and it's just fun to watch. My children would watch them again and again, and they got so good at signing their wants and needs. Check out Signing Time at www.signingtime.com. I highly recommend this series for learning signs to communicate with your babies!!

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JaneIB wrote on 03/12/2009 05:39:53 PM:

Our family has also experimented with different products to teach sign language but in the end I felt it was best to learn the real thing ASL. Like a few of the other replies we too came across Signing Time and was just really impressed with the talent on the dvds. It took our ASL learning to a whole new level of fun. My son ended up having some speech delays so it was good to know he had already been able to communicate by using ASL.

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alymillertx wrote on 03/12/2009 01:36:20 PM:

We love ASL in our house! It has saved us so much headache and heartache. We use the "Signing Time!" videos to help us all learn, and they contributed to my daughter's reading ability as well as speech and communication. We know beyond a doubt that the best way to encourage all forms of communication is to give a baby a way to communicate early!

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staceyhay wrote on 03/12/2009 08:28:58 AM:

My family uses sign to communicate with our children. We taught sign to our older 2 children and then our 3rd child was born with a brain disorder that has effected her speech. We needed to give her another way to communicate and sign was the natural way to go. There are now 5 children in our family and we continue signing because it helps with the frustration of not being understood. I think this was a terrific article to let parents know of the benefit of signing. I found books and videos to teach sign, but the best program by far is Signing Time!. Signing Time! is ASL and is presented in a fun and engaging way. There are 4 Baby Signing Time! DVD's and more than 26 DVD's for older children. Check it out at <http://www.signingtime.com> You will love it.

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thefootmom5 wrote on 03/12/2009 05:42:54 AM:

This is nothing new to my family. I have a daughter with Downstndrome she started early intervention at 3mo. sign language was introduce right away and proved to be very succesful. Since speech is delayed it helped her communicate with us which avoided a lot of fustration for her. When she started to speak some words are very diffacult to pronounce properly and hard for us to understand the word she is trying to say she then resorts to her signing. She 16yrs old now and still use it when needed. My 21yr old is going to school to be an interptitor to the deaf and my 16yr old is helping her with her homework.

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ASLdoula wrote on 03/04/2009 02:05:37 PM:

As an early childhood educator, former ASL student and parent who used the "Sign With Your Baby" program by Sign2Me, I would like to contribute a few facts to this discussion.

First, the "Sign With Your Baby" program is firmly based in ASL. The vocabulary used in the program is actual ASL. The program does not encourage the use of homemade signs.

Second, longitudinal research studies have borne out the benefits of signing with pre-verbal children. Research has also shown a link to increased early literacy success. One example is the work of Marilyn Daniels in her book "Dancing With Words".

Finally, while I cannot speak to other programs, Sign2Me's "Sign With Your Baby" program has NO negative impact on sentence formation, grammar, syntax or any other component of spoken English. The reason is that rather than teaching ASL per se, this program encourages parents to use correct spoken English and only augment certain words with signs.

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smallones wrote on 03/03/2009 02:18:20 PM:

I have never heard of patting an elbow for "want a cookie." This sound like another program where American Sign Language is not always used and made up signs are used instead. Used correctly, combining ASL with the spoken word gives the child more exposure to the correct structure of the English language, while building good language habits. The complete sentence spoken by the adult around the one sign the child has given gives the child auditory exposure to the correct sytanx and flow of the English language. Proper language structure and acquisition is actually accelerated.

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AmandaDaniel wrote on 03/01/2009 07:28:23 PM:

It's NOT "useful stuff". I don't know about deaf people, but I've had experience raising children, including children who were fed a diet of this signage stuff. And you know what it does? It teaches children a completely false method of "language"- it's the linguistical equivalent of a bike's training wheels. When a child "learns" with signage, they don't get ANY of the important building blocks of the english language- structure, syntax, composition. Teaching a child to pat their elbow in the equivalent of "want cookie" gives them NONE of the actual language practice that forms good language habits, it's simply a crutch that, later in life, HARMS THEM. You heard me right. The children I've seen that "signed" their way into language have MORE TROUBLE understanding sentence formation when they get older because they haven't had the experience of actually BUILDING the linguistical skills. But all you people will roll over and go "Awww, that's so cute" at this article...

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