

COMMENTARY

Sign Language for Hearing Babies: Fact, Fiction or Fad?

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This past summer's film, *Meet the Fockers*, comically raised the profile of employing sign language to communicate with infants. Burgeoning growth of websites, books and other resources dedicated to the topic provides the timely impetus to investigate this relatively nascent field.

Let me begin with a word on development as a basis for further discussion. First, in children gross motor development precedes fine motor development. Some might argue this potentially encourages manual gesturing among infants compared to the complexity of executing speech. Furthermore, word formulation occurs as a normal developmental milestone around 1 year of age, whereas sign language and gestures can be learned by and observed in children as early as 8 months. So what's the controversy all about? Here are the key questions.

Will using sign language delay speech development? Turning to Daina Kumaranayake, registered speech language pathologist, she acknowledges that one concern of parents she has encountered is a fear that, if they teach their child to sign, the child may not want to speak. While parental concerns need validation, the fear is unfounded. As Mrs. Kumaranayake explains, "Successful communication using sign language is in fact motivating for further expressive language development using the most efficient means of communication we have, being speech." In other words, sign language has the capacity to accelerate and facilitate spoken language. Renowned pediatric specialist, Dr. William Sears, writes, "Between eighteen months and two years, children may say little, but they understand all (all brief, simple sentences, that is)."¹ He further explains, "Prior to eighteen months toddlers seldom follow verbal warnings unless accompanied by action. Shouting 'Don't pull the cat's tail' is meaningless unless you get up, cross the room, pry his fingers loose from the cat's fur, and show the child."² Verbal and non-verbal communication reinforce each other.

Will using sign language increase intelligence? Of all questions asked on this topic, none is more hotly debated or inconclusive. There is a tendency to romanticize links between early signing and long term intelligence. Anecdotally, parents pursue baby sign language because of a perception that sign language enhances intelligence. One Canadian study³ provides one of the most comprehensive summaries of evidence to assess whether teaching pre-lingual infants sign language advances language, cognition and social development. Findings directed at parents suggest that while most products claim higher IQ's as a result of following their program, measuring intelligence as an outcome is incredibly controversial. Instead, according to the study's summary, parents are advised to make sign language product purchases more for enjoyment and learning than for any serious attempt at boosting intelligence. So, what about the role of parents?

Will using sign language encourage better parenting skills? Most parents want to know what their developing babies are thinking and feeling. According to the aforementioned study, sign language proponents and signing product manufacturers almost unanimously support such claims as improved early communication, infant-parent bonding and reduced frustration. What has arguably contributed to the success of signing (and invariably to retail success) is the argument that signing improves the relationship between children and parents as they are better able to understand each other's needs, wants and observations.

Will using sign language require training? Persistence, patience and consistency are critical tools for effective communication with developing children. Nonetheless, the type of signing employed is another area of debate. While sign language training is not necessary, the pioneer in this area of research, Dr. Joseph Garcia, explains his rationale for promoting American Sign Language (the language of North America's deaf population) over home-made signs: consistency, accessibility and ease-of-use. Many parents may not realize that they regularly convey non-verbal cues and gestures that children in turn can readily interpret. According to the school of thought endorsed by Garcia's website,⁴ learning and teaching ASL is easy because he recommends only 20-30 signs as a foundation for further communication (signs like: more, milk, no, etc); the goal is not fluency. The abundance of resources for learning and teaching sign language makes this phenomenon less like a fad of popular culture and more like a permanent fixture of child development.

So why should we care about this growing phenomenon? First, it confronts existing notions about the developmental capacity of infants as well as how and when we can communicate productively; the challenge remains not to underestimate a child's cognitive abilities. Second, the topic transects numerous disciplines from pediatrics to psychology to linguistics so that the issue will be discussed by multiple schools of thought in coming years. Physicians may come to recommend signing as a means of early communication intervention, exploration or bonding between parents and children. Third, if nothing more, signing is a tool in the armamentarium of parenting to decrease frustration for the guardian (and for the baby!) and to engage parents and wee ones in closer communication and collaboration. †

REFERENCES

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3. Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network Program Catalogue and Review of Evidence: Training hearing infants to use sign language. Available: <http://www.cllr-net.ca/Docs/Programs/GraduateStudentResearchReviews/2003/CRR.pdf> (accessed 24 October, 2005).
4. <http://www.sign2me.com> (accessed 01 November, 2005).

Author Biography

Kevin Byron is a second year medical student at McMaster University and father of two girls. He taught his children some basic signs; some years later, they enthusiastically recall the signs.