

Sign Language Can Help Your Child

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What is sign language?

Sign language is a means of communication. People using sign language make movements with their hands to communicate.

How is sign language used in speech therapy?

Sign language is often used with traditional speech therapy as part of a program of total communication. Sign language can help many children learn to talk. It is easier to learn new things when we are shown as well as told. A child can see an adult sign the name of an object or action while hearing the corresponding word. This helps the child understand and remember the word and its meaning. The process develops listening skills and visual attention. Both skills are important in the development of spoken language.

Signing helps the child learn a word's meaning and how to communicate it effectively. Many children who begin to communicate by signing soon learn to say the corresponding words. Then they learn how to use the words in phrases and sentences.

What are different types of sign language?

The *speech and language clinician* or special teacher working with your child will select a signing system for the child. There are many different systems of signs which vary from country to country. For instance, you may read or hear terms such as "ASL" (American Sign Language) or "SE" (Signed English).

In general, ASL is often used with children who are just beginning to develop communication skills. Many programs for preschool-level children with communication problems tend to use ASL. SE is a system of signs which more closely correspond to written English. It includes signs for many language forms including plurals and different kinds of verb forms. Programs for school-age children with hearing problems often favor the use of SE or other systems which closely correspond to written English.

How does a signing program work?

1. The first step is to develop a vocabulary which is:
 - Meaningful and useful for your child
 - Within your child's physical abilities to sign
 - Appropriate to your child's learning level

Your speech and language clinician, working with you and your child's teacher, can choose a vocabulary of signs for your child. The following signs are often included in introductory programs:

your child's name	"go"
"eat"	"all done"
"drink"	"Mommy"
"Daddy"	"more"
"bathroom"	"milk"
"car"	"sleep"

names of other family members, pets, and favorite foods

2. The second step is to teach these signs to your child. Teach the meaning of each sign by using it together with the object or action it names. It is helpful to give as many examples of its meaning as possible.

To teach your child the sign for "cat," use the appropriate sign each time the child points to, watches, or approaches a cat. While saying "Look at the cat!" make the sign for cat. Then help your child to make the sign as well. Later on, the same series of steps is used to teach simple phrases.

During speech and language therapy sessions, the clinician may use pictures or sets of toy objects to teach the meaning of signs and to practice their use. As your child masters new signs in therapy, you may be asked to help the child practice them at home.

How can I help my child develop total communication skills?

1. Remember: parents are a child's most important teachers. You are the very special people who help your child use new knowledge in the real world. Take time to practice often with your child. Praise your child's efforts.

2. Know the signs your child is learning and use them frequently while talking.
3. Encourage your child to use signs and words instead of just gesturing.
4. Become familiar with how your child makes different signs so that you will understand what the child is trying to communicate.
5. Encourage your child to make sounds while signing.
6. Accept signs that are not exactly made. Some children will have trouble making some signs.
7. Continue to tell your speech and language clinician what additional signs would be useful for your child to learn.

Summary

Signing can give the communication-handicapped child success in conversing with others. This reduces the frustration that often accompanies speech and language disorders or delays. As a result, social behavior often improves as well. The child who can tell you that the soup is too hot is unlikely to push it over to communicate discomfort. The child who can sign "car" to ask to go for a ride has learned that signs and words can convey information and influence others. Used as part of a total communication approach to speech and language therapy, sign language has helped many children to become successful communicators.

Vocabulary

Speech and language clinician—A person who is qualified to diagnose and treat speech, language, and voice disorders.

Total communication—Use of additional ways of communicating, such as sign language or communication boards, to expand the conversational abilities of the child with severe speech and language disabilities.

For more information:

Ricekehof, L. 1978. *The joy of signing: The new illustrated guide for mastering sign language and the manual alphabet*. Gospel Publishing.

Refer to:

7.1 Help Your Child Use Gesture to Communicate

