

What Sign Language Can Teach Your Child

Did you know there may be a way to improve your child's reading before he even begins to read? In the past decade there's been a lot of talk about Baby Sign. Teaching babies sign language for communication before they can talk started out as a fad and has grown to be a phenomenon. But if your child is already walking and talking, you haven't missed your chance. The benefits of teaching sign language to preschoolers are just as powerful.



For years researchers have known that hearing children of deaf parents who learn sign language as a first or concurrent language have less difficulty learning to read, speak earlier than their non-signing counterparts and have richer vocabularies. Of course, these findings beg the question: Does teaching sign language to all hearing children have the same effect?

According to researchers, it does. In her book *Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy*, Marilyn Daniels, Ph.D., tells us that sign language improves vocabulary, spelling proficiency, self-esteem and a child's confidence in expressing emotion. In 2000, the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development conducted a study that concluded children who learn sign language alongside their spoken language tend not only to speak sooner, but also to have a larger vocabulary. The study discovered that signing 2-year-olds knew, on average, 50 words more than their non-signing peers and, by age 3, their language skills were a year ahead of where they were expected to be.

Sign language is also utilized as a classroom tool to help children with expression and learning. Many preschool teachers incorporate sign into the daily routine, teaching children basic signs to accompany songs, using sign as a subtle way to indicate the need for the bathroom, or simply as a way to capture their students' attention. Interestingly enough, even the most basic use of sign seems to help young children acquire verbal language skills. How is that possible?

Laura Berg, a certified teacher and founder of My Smart Hands--an agency that offers information and sign language classes for hearing toddlers and parents--explains that sign language helps to bridge the two hemispheres of the brain. This gives children two ways to access a word and its meaning. "Signing is different than learning spoken languages," notes Berg. "We take in language on the left side of our brain as a sound and we take in sign language on the right side of our brain as an image--something that spoken languages don't do." Additionally, she says, using sign with verbal language meets the needs of all different types of learners: auditory, visual and kinesthetic.

It's the kinesthetic and visual learners who are reaping the benefits in terms of literacy. In one study, hearing children experiencing significant difficulty with spelling were taught the ASL alphabet to learn to spell words. This tool allowed the students to jump from about 25% of the words correctly to nearly 90% of them correctly. That's a huge difference!

Berg uses reading and signing the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See?* as another example of increasing literacy. When you're reading the book, she says, you can ask your child to point to the animals. If you're reading and signing you can not only ask them to point out the animals, but also to make the sign for the animal. "The child is more engaged in the learning because they are more involved," points out Berg. "You are also exposing them to more language because you are repeating the word more times than when you are simply reading to them."

So, how can you begin to sign with your preschooler? Berg suggests taking a class, if possible, since the peer support for both children and parents helps to encourage the continued use of sign. But, she says, a DVD or book, such as of the PBS show *Signing Time*, can work just as well. It's the interactive learning that's important. Of course, don't be surprised if your child picks it up more quickly than you do--preschool is a prime learning time for languages!