

Gaining a Window into Your Baby's Mind

By Linda Acredolo, PhD. and Susan Goodwyn, PhD.

There's nothing more heart-wrenching than hearing your baby cry and not knowing what's wrong. Unfortunately, until they can talk, babies are literally "at a loss for words" when it comes to telling us what's going on with them and how best we can help. At least that *used* to be the case. Now, thanks to a new approach to infant communication we call the Baby Signs® Program, children don't have to wait until they can talk to let us know what's on their minds.

What Is On Their Minds?

Just because babies can't talk doesn't mean they don't have lots to say. Especially as they approach their first birthdays, babies understand a good deal about the world and even a great many of the words adults use to talk about it. "Go get your diaper, Taylor," and 12-month-old Taylor happily toddles off and grabs a diaper. "Time for your bath, Mason," and 13-month-old Mason heads to the bathroom as fast as his wobbly legs can carry him.

But ask Taylor or Mason why they are crying, and although they understand the question and know full well what the answer is, all they can do is cry harder. The problem is with the painstakingly slow development of the ability to produce words. To say even a simple word like "milk" or "juice" requires the intricate sequencing of a complex assortment of tiny muscles. The task is particularly challenging because at birth, Taylor and Mason's vocal tract more closely resembles that of a chimpanzee than an adult human's!

The Baby-Created Solution

Fortunately, babies are a good deal more adept at controlling the movement of other parts of their bodies – and they know it! As our research studies in the mid-1980s documented, in their desperation to communicate, many babies *spontaneously* create gestural symbols or "signs" to stand for the things they want to talk about. They may emphatically blow-blow-blow when their food or bath water is too hot, delightfully pant-pant-pant to let you know they see a dog, or even combine the pant-pant-pant with a knob-turning gesture to tell you the family dog wants to go out! All of these are self-created "signs" we saw babies using in their desperation to find a way around the frustrating barrier of not being able to talk. In fact, the very first baby we saw do this was Linda's own 12-month-old daughter, Kate, way back in 1982. The sniff-sniff-sniff she adopted to label flowers was what set this whole signing movement in motion!

Making It Easy for Babies

Once you know that babies are eager to use simple gestures to stand for things, the natural next step is to make it easy for them by purposefully modeling signs for things they are likely to want to talk about -- like they are hungry, thirsty, or want more; like their bathwater or food is too hot; like they hear a dog barking or an airplane flying overhead. Providing sign suggestions and tips for teaching is what the Baby Signs® Program is all about. Drawing on simple signs from American Sign Language (ASL), as well as a few baby-created suggestions, we've designed wonderful resources and fun classes that can make learning signs a breeze for everyone in the family.

But Will They Learn to Talk?

“If you encourage a baby to use signs, won’t that slow down learning to talk? If she can get what she wants with signs, why bother to learn words?” It’s the most common concern we hear parents voice and it’s the specific question we have worked very hard over many years to answer. With the help of a grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), we carefully compared signing babies to non-signing babies from the same communities on standardized tests of verbal language development. What did we find? In test after test the signers were *more* advanced than the non-signers in language skills. They were learning to talk sooner, not later! Here’s how we like to explain it: Just as crawling doesn’t slow down walking, signing doesn’t slow down talking. In fact, it adds to a baby’s enthusiasm for doing so. We’ve even discovered that the children who had used signs as infants scored significantly higher than the non-signers on IQ tests at age 8!

More Important Benefits

As glad as we were to discover that signing had such positive effects on learning to talk and on intellectual development, we believe *very* strongly that the most important benefits are emotional ones. As you will soon discover for yourself as you open this window into your baby’s mind, when you truly understand and communicate with someone, you feel more connected. Here are just a few of the specific ways this sense of connection benefits families...

Using signs with a baby....

REDUCES tears, tantrums, and frustration

ALLOWS babies to express needs and share their worlds

ENRICHES interactions between adults and babies and strengthens the parent-child bond

REVEALS how smart babies are and increases parents’ respect for them

HELPS BUILD babies’ self-confidence and self-esteem

Who wouldn’t want these things for their baby? Who wouldn’t want to make even sweeter this magical time when babies are discovering the wonders of the world around them? That’s why all of us at Baby Signs® are so dedicated to helping families experience these joys – and more – for themselves.

For more information about Baby Signs® Programs and resources available to make signing fun and easy, visit us at HYPERLINK "http://www.babysigns.com" www.babysigns.com. Locally, you can contact:
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