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Language of Learning

Program uses sign language to aid children's verbal skills

By [LISA KIM BACH](#)
[REVIEW-JOURNAL](#)



Rachel de Azevedo Coleman teaches children sign language Monday at the Lone Mountain Creative Learning Center.

Children know what they want to say before they actually have the ability to say it.

At the Lone Mountain Creative Learning Center, 177 toddlers and preschoolers are learning how to sign their wants and desires in a program called Talking Hands.

Program coordinator Sandy Markham said Talking Hands is geared for all children, hearing and deaf, and actually makes learning spoken language easier.



Four-year-old students, left to right, Elliott Callahan, Sean O'Conner, Anthony DeGravino, Alex Lugo, and Preston Brayfield sign the word thirsty with classmates and teachers. Photos by [Clint Karlson](#).

"I have two children and they're both hearing," said Markham, a certified instructor of American Sign Language. "They've both been signing since they were 10 months old. It's really opened up the world for them."

Markham said it's something that deaf parents long have known: Babies can master finger play before speech. But now, across the country, a growing number of day-care centers are beginning to integrate signing into their programs with favorable responses from parents.

Markham said she works with four day cares in Clark County that are following the Talking

Hands program, including the Lone Mountain center at 6863 Lone Mountain Road, near Rancho Drive.

"The key is repetition," she said. "We incorporate it in lessons throughout the day, and the children do it on a daily basis."

At the Lone Mountain center, children focus on learning about a different letter, number and color each week. Learning the appropriate sign for each one is now part of the lesson. Teachers also have learned to sign with their classes as

they go through the day, repeating the signs for "please," "thank you," and "share."

Reigna Blythe, director of the Lone Mountain Creative Learning Center, said she's already noticed the difference learning sign language can make for a child. Classrooms are quieter, tantrums caused by misunderstandings between toddlers and their caregivers are fewer, and the children are enthusiastic about learning what they believe is a secret code.

"This is giving them the gift of communication long before they're able to talk," Blythe said. "I've seen a 9-month-old making the sign for milk."

Christine Pinar, whose 5-year-old daughter Kelsey goes to the Lone Mountain center, said she thinks learning sign language has been a good experience for her daughter. She doesn't always understand the signs her daughter makes, but Pinar said she's been in situations where knowing it would have been useful.

"We were at a soccer game last weekend and we were told not to talk or yell," Pinar said. "It would have been handy then."



Markham said one of the challenges in implementing the program has been finding materials that are aimed at young children instead of adults. One tool she uses is called Signing Time, a series of videos made by a Salt Lake City mother whose own daughter is deaf.

Signing Time's Rachel de Azevedo Coleman visited the Lone Mountain facility Monday to observe how the tapes were being used in the classroom. Her appearance before 11 preschoolers in the center's Orange Room prompted whispers of recognition as the children looked at Rachel on the screen and Rachel on the carpet in front of them.

Coleman said thousands of the videos have been purchased through her Web site, a project she undertook so her 6-year-old daughter Lucy wouldn't be isolated in the world. Lucy, who appears in the videos with her hearing cousin Alex, was diagnosed as profoundly deaf when she was 14 months old.

"I'm doing this so that people can talk to my daughter," Coleman said. "I'm giving her language to the rest of us."

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