



SITE SEARCH



HEALTH & FAMILY

PRINT VERSION

E-MAIL THIS

or [Browse by day](#)

REGISTER ARCHIVES

Sunday, November 16, 2003

daw

Marketplace

- Classified ads
- Buy our photos
- Daily deals
- Personals

Sections

- E-REGISTER
- The print edition online
- HOME PAGE
- AT WORK EXTRA
- BUSINESS
- COLUMNS
- COMMENTARY
- EDUCATION
- ENTERTAINMENT
- HEALTH & FAMILY**
- HOME & GARDEN
- INVESTIGATIONS
- LIFE, ETC.
- LOCAL
- MULTIMEDIA
- NATION & WORLD
- OBITUARIES
- REGION & STATE
- SPECIAL FEATURES
- SPORTS
- TRAVEL
- WEATHER
- WINE & FOOD

Community news

Select an area

Noticias en Español

Interactive tools

- Traffic
- Get a map
- Get directions
- Yellow pages
- Discussion boards
- Games and puzzles

Information

- Privacy policy
- User agreement
- About us
- Contact us
- Register in education
- Site feedback



Media partners

Talking hands

Evidence grows that infants and toddlers with normal hearing and speech, and their parents, can benefit from learning sign language.

By **THERESA WALKER**

The Orange County Register

Brody Niksa only started using his first words about six months ago.

The 3-year-old is not deaf, and a trip to a speech therapist revealed to his concerned mom that he had no other problems.

Brody was just taking his time. Besides, he had another way to communicate with his mom that both of them understood clearly.

Mindy Niksa began teaching Brody sign language when he was 7 months old. He quickly learned to use it to his advantage: "He could always tell me exactly what he wanted," she says.

Once Brody did start talking, signing helped decipher the toddler-speak that often confounds parents and leads to frustration for children when they're not being understood.

"He once wanted to tell me about a turtle, and I couldn't understand 'turtle,' so he signed it," Niksa says.

The Niksa family of Westminster can be counted part of a booming trend, fueled by research into the social and academic benefits of teaching sign language to hearing children before they develop speech and by word-of-mouth testimony from parents.

On a recent weekday at a Tustin park, Niksa, along with her two children, was among a dozen parents from around Orange County who sat with infants in strollers and toddlers on their laps for a playgroup gathering hosted by the creators of the popular "Signing Time" videos.

Lori Wright and her son, London, 20 months old, drove over from Anaheim to join her cousin, Mindy Pierce of Westminster, and Pierce's 1-year-old daughter, Liliium. Both say their children learned to talk at an early age thanks to teaching them signs.

"By the time he was 15 months old, he was talking well just by watching the videos," Wright says of her son, who gave his mom the sign for "more" as she fed him a snack. "He doesn't do the pointing so much anymore."



DIGITAL LANGUAGE: Mindy Pierce of Westminster and her 1-year-old daughter, Liliium, work on learning sign language at a play-group gathering. ROSE PALMISANO, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

MORE PHOTOS

RELATED STORIES

- [Resources for teaching young children sign language](#)

- MSNBC
- OCExcelsior.com
- myOC.com
- KPCC
- KOCE

According to studies, teaching a baby to use sign language has been found to:

- Stimulate intellectual development and increase IQ scores.
- Strengthen the parent-child bond.
- Reduce frustration and enhance self-esteem.
- Speed the development of speech.
- Enhance reading and writing skills in the school years.

Barbara Granoff of Newport Beach says that when she started her home-based business, ABC me Sign, three years ago, she was pretty much on her own, at least in California. Now, parents and anyone involved with young children have a wide variety of books, videos, classes and Web sites to choose from. A growing number of preschools and day-care providers incorporate sign language. Pediatricians note its value. And when highly respected children's shows the likes of "Sesame Street" and "Blue's Clues" feature signing for hearing children, you know it has truly arrived.

Granoff has her undergrad degree in special education and used to teach deaf children. She conducts signing workshops in Orange County for parents and caregivers, holds Mommy & Me signing classes, and teaches signing to preschool teachers and early-child-development students at Orange Coast College. The children in her workshops are 10 months to 8 years old.

Granoff started signing with her daughter, Shira, when the baby was 6 months old, because "it just made sense." By the time Shira was 15 months, Granoff planned to stop signing because her little girl was so verbal and knew so many signs. But research convinced her to continue, just as it has convinced so many other parents to start.

SPREADING THE WORD

Children generally don't begin using speech until about 2 years old. But that doesn't mean they don't have a thing or two to say.

Where infants and toddlers don't have control over their speech, they do have control over their hands, and they are highly visual, Granoff says. That's why they can pick up sign language so quickly.

"Babies don't have the ability to say all their words, but they have language. Signing allows them to bypass the verbal part of it and get on with communicating with us."

Granoff cautions against expecting too much too soon: Most children can't sign back until about 9 months old.

University of California researchers Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn produced the best-known research on the benefits of teaching signing to hearing children with two studies that began in the 1980s.

Backed with funding from the National Institutes of Health, the women tracked a group of babies from 3 months old until the children were 3 years old. Some parents were taught simple symbolic gestures to communicate with their children. Acredolo and Goodwyn found that those children ended up with larger vocabularies and understood more words. Parents noted less frustration and more communication with their babies.

A follow-up study conducted five years later found that the children who had signed when they were infants scored higher on IQ tests than those in the control group who had not been taught to sign.

When Acredolo and Goodwyn produced a book, "Baby Signs," in 1996 based on their research and using the gestures they had created, signing found an audience among parents of hearing children eager to communicate with their babies as early as possible.

Joseph Garcia, author of "Sign With Your Baby," popularized the use of standardized American Sign Language as an alternative to symbolic gestures. Garcia, who had worked as an interpreter for the deaf, observed the advanced level of communication between hearing infants and their deaf parents and began to research the use of American Sign Language with hearing babies of hearing parents.

Research by Penn State University speech pathologist Marilyn Daniels underscored the academic benefits of teaching sign language to young children who hear and learn normally. Daniels studied children in preschool and kindergarten classes and found that the students whose teachers included the use of signs in reading lessons scored better on reading and vocabulary tests. Her results held up as the children advanced in school. No research has turned up proving that signing delays speech or hinders vocabulary.

Parents also value the practical side of communicating with sign language.

Granoff likes to refer to the "mom-proven" benefits she discovered, such as being able to communicate without disturbing anyone else in a church or a movie theater, or correcting a child from across the room without raising her voice. "Any parent who has done it with their child; they become the biggest advocates for it," Granoff says. "They get interested in teaching it, or they tell other parents about it."

SEEING IS BELIEVING

The play-group gathering in Tustin illustrates the grass- roots growth of signing. Rachel de Azevedo Coleman, who created the "Signing Time" videos for children with her sister, Emile de Azevedo Brown, says "Signing Time" didn't need any marketing. "It was the soccer-mom effect," she says, "Moms telling other moms."

Close to 40,000 "Signing Time" videos have sold since the debut in April 2001, leading to a series of three videos so far, also available on DVD.

De Azevedo Coleman's first child, Leah, was born deaf. She and her sister, Southern California natives who now live in Utah and Virginia, respectively, came up with the idea for "Signing Time" when Leah was 4 and her mom realized so few other hearing children could communicate with her.

Using their backgrounds in music and theater, the sisters focused on making "Signing Time" engaging for children, with original songs featuring Leah and her hearing cousin, Alex, and words from American Sign Language.

Along with helping children who can hear and speak normally to develop language skills faster and better, signing also has been shown to benefit children who have speech delays and impediments or other disabilities.

De Azevedo Coleman credits the first "Signing Time" video with sparking communication skills in her second daughter, Lucy, who was born with cerebral palsy and did nothing but scream for the first 9 months of her life. Doctors had told Lucy's parents that she would never be able to learn anything, much less communicate.

But shortly after seeing the video starring her older sister, Lucy signed the word for "water." Now Lucy, 3, can sign and speak, telling her mom she was hungry not long after the play group got started.

Dirk De Rooch of Fountain Valley, another parent attending the play group, says sign language has helped his daughter, Anya, 3, who has Down syndrome. Her speech is delayed and difficult to understand, De Rooch says.

"It helped to relieve frustration because she could sign that she wanted to sleep or she wanted to eat."

Her brother, Bennett, 5, watches the "Signing Time" videos, too. He, in turn, helps Dad.

"She'll come up and do a sign that I don't know, so I have to ask my 5-year-old what is she saying. And he'll know."

CONTACT US: (714) 796-7793 or twalker@ocregister.com

Copyright 2003 The Orange County Register | [Privacy policy](#) | [User agreement](#)



Freedom Communications, Inc.