

Baby signs may give a small boost

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Since the 1980s, there has been a great deal of attention paid to the idea of teaching babies who can hear how to use sign language.

There is nothing quite as cute as an 8-month-old baby who cannot talk, but is able to sign to his mom that he wants some milk.

Everyone agrees that when parents speak and read to their children, they contribute to their development of language and communication skills, and many people believe that using sign language early can speed up the process. Is it beneficial, detrimental or a waste of time to teach sign language to your hearing baby?

In the news recently, there was a baby able to read at the age of 18 months. Her parents were both speech pathologists, and they said that they had stimulated her language growth by using sign language when she was young.

They stressed that her amazing progress was not completely due to what they did, as they believe she has special innate abilities. Yet, could there be a relationship between teaching babies sign language and their development of language?

There are numerous programs available through books or courses which help parents teach their children sign language. These programs claim improvement in language, vocabulary, literacy and cognitive development, as well as an increase in parent-child bonding and a decrease in infant and parent frustration, as children are able to communicate their thoughts and feelings

It should be noted that some of the language and cognitive improvements did not last more than two years, and some reviewers feel that the studies are not conclusive as to why the children were advanced.

When children are not able to express their thoughts with words, they may be able to express themselves with their hands. This is done naturally between parents and children when waving "bye-bye" or pointing while saying "no." You can expand on this natural process by teaching your baby sign language.

Heather Arnt, speech language pathologist from Red Door Pediatric Therapy in Bismarck, says that they are huge fans of sign language for babies.

"We use this all the time at Red Door, for kids who are verbal and nonverbal. Our opinion, which is backed by ample research, is that sign language is a great bridge to expressive language, and by no way replaces verbal language in typically developing kids."

Most researchers agree that there are no detrimental effects from teaching your child sign language at an early age and that it does not interfere with their development of speech. Most people also will agree that being able to sign does reduce frustration and increase bonding between parents and children.

If you decide to teach your baby sign language, there are many programs and books available to help. Some use "real" signs and others encourage you to make up your own.

There is a fantastic program on Prairie Public called "Signing Time" which teaches American sign language. Many cities offer workshops and courses.

Children can begin to learn signs as early as 6 months of age, although 9 months is more typical. Parents simply use the signs in front of children, while using words at the same time, and babies will copy them. Keep in mind that it takes a great deal of repetition and it may take months for them to use their first sign.

There are a few suggestions to keep in mind when teaching your baby sign language. Most importantly, be sure not to ignore their development of speech and always speak slowly, clearly and naturally at the same time that you sign. Use simple signs and use only one sign per sentence. Follow your baby's lead and notice what he or she is interested in.

In everything that you do with your baby, surround him with language in every way you can. It may not make him a "super child," but it is a fun and rewarding way to add richness to your child's language experience.

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