

Signs of the times: Hearing toddlers learn to communicate before they can talk

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Carson Briggs toddled down the stairs one night last month with a frightened look on his 22-month-old face.

"He made the (American Sign Language) sign for 'afraid' and then he did the sign for 'spider,'" said his mother, Leslie Briggs of Logan.

So Briggs took her youngest child upstairs, got rid of the creepy crawler and then put her son back to bed.

Most 2-year-old babies would scream and cry or throw a fit before their caregivers could possibly discern what was bothering them and remedy the problem.

"They wouldn't figure it out until maybe they saw the spider," Briggs said. "But we have given our baby the power to communicate so he does not have to get so upset."

Parents in the United States and around the world are catching on to the new trend of teaching their hearing babies to use sign language before they can talk. Parents claim their babies pick up signs when they are as young as 8 months, and continue to use them before -- and even into -- their speaking years to communicate with family members.

Carson Briggs can only speak two words -- "mommy" and "SpongeBob." But he, like many signing children his age, knows 250 signs and uses 50 of them constantly, his mother said.

Signing children have fewer tantrums, sometimes learn to speak earlier than their peers and have the advanced foundation for gaining a second language, some experts say.

Other parents and experts have found ways that signing in later childhood affects children's literacy, their academic performance and attention spans.

As the trend picks up, more organizations in Utah County are offering classes in baby signing, and local companies are creating products to teach parents and their babies to use this second language.

When Orem resident Nancy Cadjan had her baby four years ago, she looked for an instructor in Utah County to teach her how to sign with her infant. When she couldn't find one, she taught herself and then started teaching her friends, who had asked her for help after watching her son sign effectively.

"It is really powerful when you see a 14-month-old that can say, 'I want a banana,' " she said. "My friends wanted that for their kids."

Aside from communicating his needs, Cadjan said, her son can tell her what he wants and what he likes. From age 1, he signed "stars and moon" just about every night.

"He loves to look at the sky, so every night he did those signs, and we took him outside and he loved it," Cadjan said.

After teaching 40 local families to sign, Cadjan started making flashcards and other learning aids for American Sign Language. She started the company Sign Babies and is now certified as a baby sign language instructor by Sign2Me, an organization in Washington state.

Cadjan teaches a free starter class at Babies R Us in Orem on the last Thursday of every month at 7 p.m. Parents who come to the class learn some of the first signs babies use and a few tips on how to sign so babies will learn. They also get a list of products and services that are tested and approved by Cadjan and her friends.

Baby signing time

On the top of the list, aside from her own products, Cadjan recommends the locally produced "Signing Time" video series, which uses children of all ages to show families how to use signs. "Baby Signing Time," another series by the same company, deals specifically with babies.

Most signing videos are "boring" and made for adults, Cadjan said, but "Baby Signing Time" speaks to both adults and children, and is "one of the best products on the market."

The "Baby Signing Time" and "Signing Time" videos are created by sisters Rachel de Azevedo Coleman and Emilie de Azevedo Brown.

The de Azevedo families started signing together about seven years ago, when Coleman discovered her daughter Leah was deaf. The sisters started the company Two Little Hands to help other children learn to communicate with Leah.

They were impressed with how fast both Leah and her cousin Alex, who is nearly the same age, learned sign language. Leah had no communication or language skills at 14 months when her parents started signing to her. By the time she was 18 months old, her communication "completely blew away her typical hearing peers," Coleman said.

Both Alex and Leah were throwing fewer fits than their friends because they knew they could get their

thoughts across without crying, she said.

"Children throw tantrums at 2 or 16 for the same reason, they do not feel understood," Coleman said.

The two children, who are now ages 7 and 8, are the stars of the "Signing Time" videos.

Sales of the videos jumped by 400 percent from January 2004 to January 2005, and dozens more videos, CDs and books for the series are in production.

Coleman said what started as a means to teach neighbors and family members how to communicate with her deaf daughter has turned into a productive activity for babies, moms and families.

A majority of people who buy the videos are family folks from English-speaking countries around the world.

Children are going to watch T.V., Coleman said, and many moms are looking for quality videos and DVDs to help control what their children and babies see on the screen.

Meet the signers

Wendy Pickren, from Northern California, said she does not believe babies or children should watch TV. Young people should spend that time "learning from and interacting with their family members," she said.

But, she said, the "Signing Time" videos proved to be an educational resource that her twin sons enjoyed watching and using to practice the signs she taught them.

Aside from being able to communicate and learn language faster, their signing abilities landed them a role in the Hollywood sequel, "Meet the Fockers."

In the film, Spencer and Bradley Pickren play 18-month-old little Jack. In his first scene, little Jack motions five signs in a row, which his on-screen grandfather translates as, "I want to eat more, please. Then take a nap and then have a nice poop," Wendy Pickren said.

The twins also have several cameo appearances in the "Signing Time" videos.

Just like any parent, Pickren started teaching her twins one step -- or sign -- at a time. When they were just weeks and months old, she signed simple words to them like "more" and "eat." Later she started taking their hands and helping them form the signs. When they were 10 months old, they began signing on their own.

Any one can do it

Pickren's background in pediatric occupational therapy helped her get involved in signing, but she said any parent can pick it up easily and start teaching his or her children.

"I knew they had a lot on their mind, and I wanted to know what it was," she said. "Any parent can just start learning."

Experts differ in their approaches to baby signing. While many say parents should stick to authentic signs

from American Sign Language, others like Linda Acredolo, the author of "Baby Signs: How to Talk to Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk," says parents should feel free to make up signs as well.

But Leslie Briggs, who teaches baby sign classes in Logan, said if parents are going to start teaching their babies a language, they might as well give them a skill they can use as they grow up.

"Made-up signs don't work outside of your home," she said.

While starting to sign to babies, parents or caregivers should hold their hands close to their face and mouth and use simple signs in context, Briggs said.

Coleman, however, said it is not as important for parents to sign near their face as it is to be consistent with signing. When babies are very young, they care mostly about milk or food, she said.

"So before you nurse or feed them, sign to them," she said. "They will start to know what is coming, and they will be able to ask for it, too."

Signing in the classroom

Babies are not the only hearing children who benefit from sign language. Briggs, who is also a school teacher, said she was shocked by what happened when she started to teach her middle and elementary school students come basic ASL signs.

"The classroom got quieter," she said. "They paid better attention, and then their test scores started going up."

Later, she read "Dancing With Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy" by Marilyn Daniels, which she said supported all of her observations about sign language in the classroom.

"I read this book and the light bulb went on in my head," she said. "This is what I experienced."

Daniels said the average student who signs at school has a 12-percent increase in IQ scores against other hearing counterparts that do not sign.

Children learn and store information differently, Briggs said. Those who develop both sign and spoken language have two databases of knowledge to choose from as they learn.

"This gives them an advantage," she said. "If they can not think of the word or the fact in spoken words, they may remember the sign."

Students who learn the sign language alphabet before they learn to write are more familiar with the letters and their sounds, so reading and writing sometimes comes easier, she said.

Aside from teaching parents how to sign with their babies, Briggs travels through the Logan area and trains teachers to incorporate signing in the classroom.

"I realized I can't sit back and not let other teachers know about this," she said. "The children deserve it."

While thousands of parents and teachers scramble to buy videos and books to help teach hearing children

to use sign language, a smaller group of people are doing everything they can to teach deaf children to speak.

Teaching deaf babies to talk

Hearing children start to understand language in their first year of life. They learn 50 to 150 words in their second year, and can express almost all their thoughts verbally by age 3 and a half, said Angela Stokes, director of onsite education services for John Tracy Clinic in Los Angeles.

Stoke's said today's technology has made it so deaf children can learn on the same timeline as hearing children.

With digital hearing aids and cochlear implants, there is no reason why a deaf child can not hear speech, she said.

"If we can get a child amplified (with aids or implants) by 6 months, there would be only a very small gap in the timeline," Stokes said.

At John Tracy Clinic, an organization started by Hollywood screen star Spencer Tracy and his wife, parents of deaf children are given everything they need to make decisions about how to raise and teach their deaf children.

The clinic has services for parents and children that start when a child is just 6 weeks old. Like a parent teaching a hearing child to sign, parents of deaf children teach their babies speech by interacting with sounds and verbal language in the home and in everyday life, Stokes said.

"Parents want to share their world with their children," she said. "This is their inspiration, and hearing or deaf -- that never changes."

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If you go

Introduction to Baby Sign

When: The last Thursday of every month at 7 p.m.

Where: Babies 'R' Us at 106 E. University Parkway in Orem

RSVP: Call 802-8200

Cost: Free

Related Web sites with products, information, books and videos:

www.signingtime.com -- signing videos, products and information

www.signingtime.org -- a non-profit started by the owners of Signing Time

www.sign2me.com -- a network of people involved with baby sign language

www.signbabies.com -- information and products from a local parent

www.signbaby.com -- products and information out of Florida

www.oremlibrary.com -- search for the popular book and video series "Sign With Your Baby"

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