

## Signing up: Family discovers a way for their 2 young children to communicate

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When Leah Coleman was a year old, her parents found out she was profoundly deaf.

It was a world-rocking discovery, to say the least. Her mother, Rachel, had grown up as the fifth of nine children in the boisterous, musical De Azevedo family, where she was rather shy and reserved until she learned to express herself through music. She taught herself how to play the guitar, began writing songs and started a band.

And when she met and married Aaron Coleman and had Leah, music continued to be a part of their lives. They sang and told stories to their little girl; they took her to concerts and band practices. But they began to notice she didn't respond to noise.

"One in a thousand children is born deaf, for no apparent rhyme or reason," says Rachel. Leah was simply a victim of the odds.

Rachel's priorities changed; she put down her guitar and picked up sign language.

"We looked at all the options for a deaf child — cochlear implants, oral training, sign language. We talked to a lot of experts. We decided we wanted to go with sign language. She may eventually learn to speak. But for now, this has given her a language."

They were blown away at how fast Leah picked it up. At 14 months, she had no communication skills. "By 16 months, she had surpassed what children her age could do. She could tell us what she wanted; she had the ability to negotiate. While other kids would point and whine, she could tell us exactly what she wanted." By age 2, Leah had a vocabulary of hundreds of words and was learning to read.

At the time Leah was diagnosed, Rachel's sister Emilie, who lived next door, had her first child, Alex. As the two cousins grew up, Rachel began teaching Alex to sign, even though he is not hearing impaired, so that he could communicate with Leah. She also began teaching children at her neighborhood preschool some of the basic signs. "I was amazed at how quickly very young children — some as young as 9 months — picked up sign language," says Rachel.

The Colemans began noticing something else. Leah rarely had tantrums. "We noticed the same thing with Alex. Because they had communication skills, they could tell us what they wanted." They began looking into research on other benefits of sign language for all children. "One study followed baby signers for six years and found their IQs were 12 points higher than non-signers."

There were disappointments, there were frustrations. "I remember feeling totally overwhelmed," says Aaron. "It was like looking at a mountain you had to climb, wondering how you would ever get over it."

But gradually, the Colemans made peace with Leah's deafness. Then, they found out fate — and statistical odds — had another kick in store.

When Leah was 2, Rachel became pregnant again. "We thought that compared to Leah, this would be easy," she says. But when they went in at 18 weeks for a routine ultrasound, the baby was diagnosed with spina bifida. "No one in our family had that. Again, there was no rhyme or reason. One in a thousand babies are born with it."

It was heart-breaking news. "But what are you going to do? We had just become comfortable with one realm we thought we'd never have to know, and here was another."

But at least, she says, they knew how to do research, and in their research they came across Vanderbilt University, which was pioneering in-utero repair. At 22 weeks into her pregnancy, Rachel's unborn child became the 82nd child to undergo fetal surgery to repair her spine.

Then Rachel was relegated to complete bed rest for 10 weeks; one of the side effects of the surgery was that the uterus wanted to go into labor. Try that with a deaf 3-year-old, she now laughs. "Luckily my sister lived next door, and all the neighbors came to help." The Colemans were still living in California at the time.

But Lucy was born early — at 32 weeks, weighing 4 pounds and 11 ounces. After a few weeks in the premie ward, "they told us to take her home and treat her like a normal child," says Rachel. But it was not to be.

"For the first nine months, she screamed her head off the whole time." Lucy was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, which impacted the ability of her muscles to bear weight, and which also meant she had to be supported or in a wheelchair at all times.

"When I first got pregnant with Leah, I prayed for patience," says Rachel. "After she was diagnosed with deafness, and we were trying to learn sign language, I prayed for patience. After Lucy, I quit praying for patience. I figured I had it."

Raising two children with very different special needs is a challenge. By the time Lucy was 2, doctors thought she was also mentally retarded. "Her hands were tight and curled up, and she didn't speak."

About that time, Rachel and Emilie, who were still trying to teach family and friends how to communicate with Leah, decided to do a simple video. Rachel went back to her music and wrote a few songs, and the video starred Leah and her cousin, Alex.

And an amazing thing happened, says Rachel. "Lucy watched the video, and began signing and talking. In six months, she totally opened up. She went from being considered retarded to doing things other 2 1/2-year-olds can't do. She can finger-spell her name and Leah's. She can ask for water and knows her colors. What we were doing for Leah ended up being an awesome gift for Lucy."

Since then, the video project has taken on a life of its own. After moving to Utah last June, the Colemans have added two more videos (Alex, who now lives in Virginia, flies in to do his part) and are working on two more.

"We didn't mean to start a business; we just wanted to make a video," she says. But there just was nothing comparable out there, and they found a niche. "The response has been awesome. Moms telling other moms. We took the videos to the national Deaf Expo last fall, and I didn't leave the booth the whole time, we had so many people coming by." They have set up an office in Draper to handle production and distribution, "and every day someone calls to talk about how this has changed their lives."

Some people, she says, think that signing to your hearing children is one of those parenting fads. "But it works on so many levels. It works with all kinds of disabilities — deafness, Down syndrome, autism, late talkers.

And with hearing kids, too, it's the only thing they are developmentally ready to do. All kids use signs — they point, they hold up their arms to be picked up. This just gives them a language."

American Sign Language is used by millions of people, adds Aaron. "What's nice is that it is face-to-face, one on one. It's not going to go away."

There are times when the Colemans still feel overwhelmed. "I will go into a grocery store," says Rachel, "and listen to all the sounds that Leah can't hear: the sound of the cash register, the sprayers in the vegetable section, the squeaky wheel on a cart. And I realize it's our responsibility to add all these things to her world. And then to have Lucy come along and just pick things up; it's awesome."

And if Leah has taught her patience, "Lucy has taught me to celebrate every little thing; to throw away timelines and just live life."

Because life is unpredictable; the Colemans know that as well as anyone. But they also now have a sense that they can handle whatever comes along. "People say, 'Oh, I never could do that,' " says Aaron. "But when it's your child, you just do it."

### **Why sign?**

Research shows that children who learn sign language experience:

- Reduced frustrations and fewer tantrums
- Enhanced cognitive development and increased IQ scores
- Increased bonding with parents
- Increased interest in books
- Quicker development of speaking, spelling and reading skills

Two Little Hands, the production company founded by Rachel de Azevedo Coleman, Emilie de Azevedo Brown and Jon Pierre Francia, now has three 30-minute videos, "My First Signs," "Playtime Signs" and "Everyday Signs." With the help of music and animation, Leah, 5, and Alex, 4, and others demonstrate simple, useful signs.

The videos cost \$14.99 each or three for \$34.99; DVDs are \$19.99 and \$39.99. For more information, contact Signing Time at 801-571-2445 or [www.signingtime.com](http://www.signingtime.com). They are also available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

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