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## Class teaches sign language to parents, infants

By Jessica De Vault  
Staff writer

Anna Risinger laughs, thinking about the time when her daughter, Grace, was fussing in her crib. When Risinger approached the crib, she was startled by what she saw.

Her daughter was signing the word for "help." When Grace was an infant, Risinger had taught her a handful of words in sign language with the help of the nationally acclaimed Signing Time Academy - a line of products and classes that teach babies American sign language.

"It was pretty cool," Risinger says, recalling how her daughter remembered the sign.

The Signing Time Academy was created by sisters Rachel Coleman and Emilie Brown in 2002. When Coleman discovered that her daughter was born completely deaf, she and her husband scrambled to learn sign language. Coleman also taught her second daughter the language after the child was diagnosed with spina bifida and cerebral palsy.

Brown was encouraged to teach her son, who wasn't deaf, the basics of signing so he could communicate with his cousins. As a result, the sisters created The Signing Academy.

Quelling temper tantrums, improving confidence and possibly even IQ scores are among the benefits that the Academy boasts.

Now, Signing Time Academy classes are offered at Fascinate-U Children's Museum in downtown Fayetteville.

"The main benefit is better communication," said instructor Pat Thompson. "A child is able to understand your speech and use their hands long before they can speak themselves. Even as early as 6 months old, they can sign and let you know they want milk or juice, or if they're sleepy."

Parents can teach their children sign language starting at birth. The infants aren't able to speak, but they can understand the hand gestures early on. The key is for parents to take what's learned in class and repeat it at home, Thompson said. In addition to classes, the program offers learning tools, such as home videos and flash cards.

"The class is just as much for the moms as it is for the child," she said. "The children will learn a lot from the class, but mom is interacting with the child during class and using the signs at home."

Thompson has taken courses at Fayetteville Technical Community College in sign language along with her recent training with the Academy. She said she wishes she had taught sign language to her eldest daughter, who was diagnosed with a speech delay at the age of 4.

"I wish I would have known sign language and was teaching her back then," she said. "It would have taken a lot of frustration away from her to express her needs, even though we couldn't understand her speech."

Last week, about eight women and 15 children attended the first class in the Fascinate-U Museum's Tots playroom. Many of the mothers heard of the class through e-mail and word of mouth.

Lyndsay Beaulieu was curious about teaching babies sign language and brought her 8-month-old daughter Taylor to the class.

"We just wanted to find out what it was all about," she said.

With a little work, she said, Taylor could pick up the new language in no time.



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