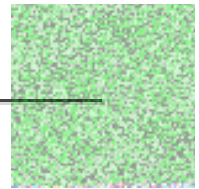


## Turning a hearing ear to sign language



By DeWayne Bartels

Pay attention: Abbey Cook, right, shows Lydia Ellis, and her, mother, Mandy, sign language. Looking on is Stephen D'Sa, with his parents.

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By DeWayne Bartels  
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Peoria, Ill. -

Lydia Ellis can have temper issues at meal time and diaper-changing time. Her mother's solution to a testy baby — sign language.

"We use sign language mainly at meal time and diaper changes. When she gets upset at the table, we sign milk and she calms down. She knows milk is coming," Lydia's mother, Mandy, said.

"At diaper-changing time if she gets squirmy, we sign diaper and dance. She likes the interaction. It distracts her. It keeps her entertained."

Lydia, 6-months-old, has no hearing issues. Yet, her parents trek from Dunlap to A+ Academy in North Peoria every week to get sign language instruction for themselves and their daughter.

They and another North Peoria mother said they see benefits from their children being exposed to sign language, even if they are too young to talk.

## **Why sign?**

Mandy and Lydia Ellis go to classes offered by Communication Junction owner Abbey Cook.

Cook, a speech and language pathologist, is offering sign language to parents of infants because she said it promotes language skills at a much younger age.

Cook said using sign language with children who are not yet verbal teaches a child to enjoy learning and language. Cook said there is research showing typical children exposed to sign language as babies may have higher IQ scores, be better-adjusted socially, read at an earlier age and find it an encouragement to begin talking earlier.

Cook said sign language has benefits for children of any age, but she particularly enjoys working with babies. She said seeing the child's reaction and the reaction of their parents when it clicks is priceless.

"Recently, I had a child sign for the first time. His parent's reaction was incredible. The child was only 13-months-old," Cook said.

Cook said this is more than just a business for her.

She said it is a mission that began when she was quite young herself.

Cook said her mother was a teacher in Peoria for nearly three decades. One year in class her mother had a deaf student. Her mother wanted to learn sign language and Cook tagged along.

"I was in second grade," Cook said.

Something about sign language fascinated her and never let go of her imagination. While a student at Richwoods High School, Cook said, she volunteered in a class for students with disabilities and a love for teaching was born.

"Teaching sign language to babies requires a great deal of patience," Cook said. "But, it's such a great thing for language development. I've seen it with my own children. I started signing with my second child. I was amazed at what a difference it made in his speech development."

Teaching is not the only challenge Cook is facing. Her business is new and there is not a large deaf community in the Greater Peoria Area. So, Cook decided to go after the hearing community.

"A lot of people seem very enthusiastic about it. Most parents are open to trying anything that can promote earlier communication with their infants," Cook said.

"It's a new trend, though. It takes time to catch on," Cook said. "The economy being what it is makes it tough, too."

## **Happy parents**

Mandy Ellis said she has no problem buying what Cook is selling about sign language being a valuable communication tool.

"I'm a special education teacher in Dunlap. I've studied language acquisition," Mandy said. "Children, even at Lydia's age, are sponges. Children exposed to vocabulary of any kind early on have an advantage."

Mandy said what makes sign language so incredible is that Lydia, while still too young to talk, will soon have a way to communicate.

"We do it in our daily lives with her," Mandy said. "It's just natural to Lydia. As I learn more sign language, I wish more people would learn it. It's the one language that crosses all borders."

Mandy said she has begun introducing sign language to the classroom of her special education students.

"They enjoy it," she said. "They think it's like a code."

North Peorian Sarah Flanigan also travels to A+ Academy for classes with her 7-month-old son, Stephen. They have been in classes for a little over two months.

"He is already signing milk and dog. We think we've seen him sign all done, more and daddy, too."

Sarah said she is amazed by what Stephen has picked up.

"He recognizes the sign for book. He gets excited when he sees that sign. I'm impressed with him every day," Sarah said.

Sarah said she has high hopes that sign language may help reduce the anxiety of the "Terrible Two's."

"My sister had experience with sign language with her son." Sarah said. "It allowed him to communicate. It certainly reduced the frustration he felt when he was going through the "Terrible Two's."

For more information, go to [www.communicationjunction.net](http://www.communicationjunction.net), or contact Abbey Cook at 453-3538.

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