

## Idaho Statesman

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**Memo:** 1770 State St., No. 344, Boise. Call for dates and times. Call Marilyn Collins, 340-9700 for more info.

Baby signing workshop

Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, 1055 N. Curtis Road, Boise. 6:30 to 8 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 23.

### No more baby talk

*Sign language for babies helps bridge communication gap*

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Babies can burble, goo, burp - and cry - but they can't talk. This leaves parents and other caregivers in a constant guessing game: Is she wet? Hungry? Are her clothes pinching? Is the sun in her eyes?

Sign language to the rescue. A handful of baby sign language teaching and learning options are available locally for parents and their babies, including classes, videos and a locally broadcast television show.

"Interest is growing in Boise," said Patricia Vandervelden, a speech pathologist. Vandervelden has been teaching a quarterly, one-session (\$20) baby signing class at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center for four years. "It's sort of a wave coming across the country and it's finally hitting Boise."

Deaf parents have been communicating with their children for decades using American Sign Language. And both deaf parents and those who can hear often have kept close watch on their babies' body language. Babies can communicate with gestures. If a baby is crying and thrashing at his covers, he may be telling you he's too hot. If a baby looks at and reaches for a ball just out of his range, he probably wants the ball. Sign language is an extension of this - it allows parents to tap into their child's natural gesture system.

Vandervelden uses a method called Signing Exact English, which follows the natural grammar of American English. She said whatever you use is fine, as long as you use it.

"Most signing children begin communicating at an earlier age - around seven months," Vandervelden said. "Non-signing children begin communicating at around 12 months."

And when you sign a word to your baby, Vandervelden said it helps to sign it near your face to help your child focus on you. It also slows parents down in the communication process, helps them naturally give more simple word models.

And for babies who are developmentally disabled or learning challenged, learning sign language can be a godsend, Vandervelden said.

"It gives them a vocabulary they may not be able to express verbally, or it gives them a bridge to begin verbal communication."

Sign language also is becoming a communication tool at many child and day-care centers and preschools. In Vandervelden's last class, about half of the students were childcare providers.

The key, Vandervelden said, is to make sure everybody who takes care of a signing child knows the sign language. "If a child is using the sign for 'more,' and no one knows what that means, it can lead to a frustrating situation."

Toddlers and babies pick up sign language quickly because it's easier than talking, Vandervelden said. "To say a word takes

a huge amount of energy to use the fine motor skills necessary to form the word, to say it. With signing, it gives your child the ability to communicate using gross motor skills."

Vandervelden suggests that parents begin signing with their babies as soon as they want. Start with three signs that are meaningful, like "more," "milk," or "all done," then build on those. Don't overwhelm your child, try three sessions of five to 10 minutes a day.

"Mealtime is a great time because they're focusing on you," she said.

Reinforce. Be positive. Be patient. Give lots of praise and make it fun. And be sure to use signs for language you would expect your child to understand.

"Parents just want anything that's going to help," Vandervelden said.

Mark and Pattie Hennequin are hoping to learn sign language so they can communicate with 9½-month-old Owen. "We want to learn to help us help him so we could understand what he wants, to help him tell us what he needs," Pattie said.

Other options

Marilyn Collins is a retired speech therapist. She moved to Boise two years ago to be closer to her daughter, Sasha Collins, and her 17-month-old grandson, Jack Collins. She said she was skeptical at first about teaching babies sign language.

"You don't have to have a degree to know when a baby needs a diaper changed - he cries, you change it - so I questioned the relevance," she said.

Then Marilyn attended a baby sign language class.

"As I watched what the instructor was doing, I watched the parents and children and I was amazed how they were picking up on the signs," she said. "It's natural for children to use their hands."

Marilyn, who earned a training certification for teaching baby sign language, said the real advantage is for children from about 10 months to three years.

"It gives parents that opportunity to start developing those language skills. The better we communicate with each other, the better life is."

Jack learned sign language and uses it. "If I'm fixing dinner and Jack comes in and tugs at my leg and is making sounds, but not words - but he is signing 'ball,' he wants help in finding his ball," Collins said. "It lowers that level of frustration and prevents a potential meltdown."

Collins teaches a baby sign language workshop. It's called Baby Signs, and it includes a 45-minute to one hour session each week for six weeks of socialization with other babies, playtime, videos and supplemental training materials, including Beebo, the life-size puppet bear who helps show signs to the kids and parents.

"You sing with your child, you dance with your child, you play with your child and you sign with your child," Collins said. The six-week course is \$125 and includes all training materials.

Christina Babin of Eagle and her 4-month-old daughter, Eliza, watched as Collins and Beebo demonstrated baby sign language at Stroller Strides, a fitness group for young mothers that met Nov. 2 at Julia Davis Park. Babin is interested in learning to help communicate with Eliza. She's also a parent educator at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center.

"We're planning on using it, for toddlers especially. Their language is underdeveloped and they get easily frustrated. They can't say, you know, 'That was really frustrating when you took my toy.' I talk about (sign language) in my parenting class and plan on showing my classes, too. The most important signs, I think, are 'more' and 'all done.' "

There's also a sign language program on Idaho Public Television, "Signing Time!", which airs at 7 a.m. Saturdays on KAID.

The show focuses on teaching baby sign language. Ron Pisaneschi, director of broadcasting, said the show, currently in its second season, will likely continue into the next season. Repeats of the first and second seasons also will be shown.

"I wouldn't say it's a ratings hit, but we've had a number of people who've called and asked about it," he said.

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