

Interview with Rachel Coleman of Signing Time ASL video series -- Part 1

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It's not that we were always unrealistic; we just felt that keeping things appropriate to our child's developmental level wasn't a reason to never leave doors open to the next level. We were *those parents* who talked to their baby while he was still inside mommy. We were *those parents* who talked to their infant as if his thoughts were leaps and bounds more complex than, "This feels good" and "This does not feed good." We were *those parents* who talked to their baby as if engaging in true dialogue. Thanks to the use of sign language, our neurologically disabled son (long before he was verbal) was one of *those kids* who talked back.



We'd heard about [the many benefits of using sign language with the pre/nonverbal](#) -- I admit, relieving frustration on both our son's part and ours, was a biggie for us -- and we'd begun exploring and testing what the possibilities might be for our family. We had a problem, though....as a result of our son's [Sensory Processing Disorder](#), he actually learned **best** from watching videos, because there were fewer inherent sensory distractions than there were with learning directly from people. No problem! There are oodles of 'Baby Sign' videos out there. A friend bought us one as soon as I'd mentioned us thinking about it, and I never even got as far as researching which company's product might be best to try first. Unfortunately, all the videos which our son learned from after that first one, were simply whatever we could borrow from the local library systems. As it turned out, as a result, it wasn't until I wrote out [the striking story of Lil'O](#) for [Prematurity Awareness Month](#), that I encountered and began to covet [the Signing Time! ASL video series and related products](#). It doesn't take long after looking into the company -- whether or not in contrast to the competition -- that you realize it's worth looking deeper. Fellow Special Needs Kids Examiner [Heather Sedlock](#) had the same idea after reading [this](#). She interviewed [Rachel Coleman](#), co-founder of [Signing Time!](#), about [the inspiration behind, the past, and the future of the company and its offerings](#). I decided to tackle a different angle, and asked Rachel for her input on why a parent might choose to teach their child -- any child -- [American Sign Language \(ASL\)](#) in the first place. (Although really, the same insight applies to any [sign language](#), of which ASL is only one.) Below you will find my questions, and her answers.

When we first began talking about doing this kind of interview, you mentioned, "The nuts and bolts of incorporating signs into the raising and education of children with special needs." What are, you would say, those "nuts and bolts"? Personally, I would think they would relate to, in a way, assembling sign use -- or at least the teaching of it -- in different ways, with children who have different (dis)abilities. A child who has a purely physical disability impeding their verbal speech and inspiring sign use....or impeding the formation of the signs themselves....is going to have different challenges than a child whose reason for learning sign comes down to a language processing disorder (which is not the same thing as an [auditory processing disorder](#)), such as often [is an element of Autism](#). What kinds of things should parents of children with varying (dis)abilities keep in mind about how to adapt the learning of sign to their particular situation? In a sense, what is the potential within ASL, for matching teaching style to learning style/needs/limitations?

I think there can be a lot of incorrect assumptions made by parents who have children with special needs when it comes to signing with their kids. You may think your child doesn't have the ability to execute the hand shapes and finger placement. You may assume your child, if non-verbal, doesn't even understand what you are trying to communicate. You may assume that signing will delay their development of speech. You may assume that a child who has issues with vision could not possibly sign. You may assume that a child who is not signing back to you doesn't understand what you sign to him.

There are so many different children with so many different abilities it is difficult to address all of the obstacles that may arise with your little one. I have been signing with children for the past 11 years. I have met countless families and they have shared their experiences with me. I have spent time with so many children who have varying disabilities and I have yet to meet a child who did not benefit from sign language in some way.

My daughter Lucy (who has [Cerebral Palsy](#) and [Spina Bifida](#)) has friends who are non-verbal and have Cerebral Palsy. Though they cannot sign, they are absolutely able to *recognize* hundreds of signs. Sometimes I would sit across the room from them and start signing (not singing) one of [the Signing Time songs](#). Her friends would sit up, smile wide, and start laughing. There was no doubt that they understood what I was doing. They recognized it and responded. Sometimes just having that proof that your child is "in there" can be the greatest gift.

If your child has challenges with fine motor skills, many of their signs may look similar. That being said, a number of signs in American Sign Language look like other signs, just like words are similar in any language you know. As your child develops speech, it may not be clear and some of their spoken words may sound very similar. "Ma-ma" or "ba-ba" or "bye-bye" may easily be confused for one another. When your child has more than one mode of communication, such as speech and sign language, you have so much more to work with! My daughter Lucy would say "ba-ba" and I didn't know if she wanted a bottle, a ball, or me. I also knew that she would get frustrated if I told her I couldn't understand her. So, instead I would ask her, "Lucy, can you show me the sign?" She would then sign what she wanted and the mystery was solved.

It may seem like your child is not interested, especially if they are dealing with something like [Autism](#). Just because they are not looking at you or interacting with you in a way that is typically considered "rapt attention" does not mean they are not taking it in. I can't tell you how many parents have shared that they were pretty sure their child was just uninterested in signing, until suddenly their child began signing everything! They had been taking it in receptively and were finally ready to use it expressively.

Remember that your way is not the only way. When Lucy first started verbalizing at age two and a half, she had already been signing for six months. It was exciting to hear those words, they were so weak, almost a whisper, but we could tell she was trying her best. As we worked on animal names and sounds I would ask her, "Lucy, what does a doggy say?" To which she would sign "DOG" and answer, "Goggy!" (which was her way of saying the word "doggy"). Over and over I asked and over and over she answered the same. I corrected her, "No, a doggy says 'ruff ruff'." Around and around we went until one day it dawned on me to ask her a different question. "Lucy, what says 'ruff-ruff'?" I could see the excitement in her eyes as she exclaimed and signed "GOGGY!"

From your own family's experience, how did -- and/or didn't -- using sign with your [deaf](#) daughter [Leah](#) differ from using sign with [Lucy](#), who has Spina Bifida and Cerebral Palsy? Were there any challenges in how they used it with each other?

We did not realize that Leah was deaf until she was fourteen months old. We began signing with her immediately, and her signing ability skyrocketed! She was eager to communicate and was hungry to be understood. Her frustration had been mounting and now that we had the answer, we felt like we couldn't teach her the signs fast enough and very soon, we were trying to keep up with her signing vocabulary. When Lucy came along, she was diagnosed with Spina Bifida at our 18-week ultrasound. I didn't assume that communication would be difficult for Lucy. When she was nine months old, she was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy (CP) and with that diagnosis, much of Lucy's behavior finally made sense. She spent the better part of those first nine months screaming, her hands in fists, arms bent tight, back arched and head thrown back. Lucy had no fine motor skills and we had been told that CP doesn't change or at least it doesn't improve. Since we were signing with Leah, Lucy was born into a signing environment. I was just as shocked as anyone when we realized that Lucy was signing back to us! Lucy is now nine years old and she still enjoys signing. (She also speaks quite well, which was initially not expected!) Many of her signs are modified because she still has difficulty get the finger placements just right, but it's great because she really works at it. I think that having a deaf sister has helped Lucy develop fine motor skills that she would not likely have developed otherwise. I can't think of a better way to develop the use, placement and control of fingers and hands.

Please see [Part 2](#) for the continuation of this interview, and more additional resources!

For more info:

Just a few links offering information relating to the benefits of teaching sign language to children:

- [The benefits of using ASL with preverbal babies](#)
- [The benefits of sign language for ALL children](#)
- [Benefits of learning ASL](#)
- [The Sign Language Academy](#)
- [Baby Sign Language Research](#)
- [Baby sign language is for everyone!](#)
- [SPD Connection -- Teaching hearing babies sign language](#)

Resources relating to learning ASL:

- www.handspeak.com/
- www.aslpro.com/
- www.lifeprint.com/
- www.masterstech-home.com/ASLDICT.html
- aslbrowser.commtechlab.msu.edu/browser.htm
- www.lesstutor.com/eesASLdictionarylinks.html
- If you find that [video](#), [book](#), or internet-based modes of learning sign language are not for you, consider [taking classes](#)! Your area might offer anything from programs through a school for the deaf, to individual classes through a community

center. Just Google or check the yellow pages.

One place I've heard good things about is the [Sign Language Center](#), which offers year-round day, evening and weekend classes, offer adults, toddlers, and Mommy & Me baby sign focused curriculums of various levels, and serves at several different locations. Check out their [schedule!](#)

The main center is located at:

[Sign Language Center](#)
39 East 30th Street #2R
New York, NY 10016
(212)-570-0075

[This page](#) breaks down the distinctions between different kinds of auditory/speech/language/processing disorders

[This page](#) has collected resources for Autism Language Therapies

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