

Look who's 'talking'

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Sign language helps babies communicate

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Kara Sherman has been talking since she was 14 months old - with her hands.

When Kara was 1, her mother, Dana, began teaching her American Sign Language even though the girl is not deaf. Kara quickly learned the signs for "milk," "more," "eat" and "shoes," and built her vocabulary into almost 50 words. By the time she was old enough to master verbal speech, she was ahead of the game, Sherman says. Kara spoke in whole sentences well in advance of her peers.

"The benefit of sign-language development was that it piqued her interest in communicating," says Sherman, an adjunct professor of developmental psychology at Paradise Valley Community College. "It was such a bonding experience."

Kara, 2, has exchanged sign language for spoken words. Sherman has just delivered her second child and plans to teach ASL to that one, believing her two children will someday sign to each other.

ASL has been one of the primary means of communication for the deaf since the early 1800s, when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet helped to develop the language and went on to found a university for the deaf. Now parents of hearing children are discovering sign language can help them communicate in the year or so before a child can talk.

Among the benefits:

- Children can express their needs.
- Parents and children bond through language.
- Children are less stressed because they can communicate.
- Spoken language is accelerated.

One of the first programs for teaching sign language to hearing children was developed by Joseph Garcia, an educator and independent researcher in Washington. An ASL interpreter, Garcia began researching the use of signs by pre-verbal children in the mid-1980s.

Mastering spoken language is a complex skill requiring the maturity of some 200 muscles in the face and throat, Garcia says. He found children can communicate earlier using sign language, which requires only manual dexterity.

Using sign language does not delay speech, he says. Instead, it lays the groundwork for

communication, and children easily make the transition to spoken words.

"The infrastructure for language is entrenched by the time their ability to articulate speech has matured," he says from his Seattle-area home.

Four years ago, Garcia created a sign-language program called *Sign With Your Baby*, which includes an instructional booklet and video. He says 200,000 people have bought the kit.

Garcia makes clear the proper approach to his program. He does not recommend parents "teach" sign language. Rather, children should be exposed to signs beginning around 6 or 7 months old and then be allowed to discover them as a means of communication.

"What I advocate is augmenting normal communication with signs," he says. "It's a loving process that removes stress from the relationship. . . . It empowers children."

Sign language can alleviate the "terrible twos," according to Garcia and parents who have tried it, believing much of a toddler's frustration comes from having wants and needs but being unable to express them.

Denise Capriola sensed just such frustration from 13-month-old Mike.

"When he was in his high chair and wanted something to drink, he would almost scream," Capriola says. "I could tell he was trying to let me know what his needs were."

Through a family friend, she heard about sign language for hearing children and ordered the *Sign With Your Baby* book and flash cards. She's starting to teach Mike signs and is pleased he's been encouraged to make eye contact.

"That has been the most gratifying," says Capriola, who is expecting her second child in July. "I didn't expect the interest to be so immediate."

Signing can reach all kinds of children. Rachel de Azevedo Coleman, a Salt Lake City mother and musician, has produced three sign-language videos called *Signing Time*. Her daughter, Leah, was 14 months old when Coleman discovered the baby was deaf. Coleman and her husband learned ASL and taught it to Leah, now 6. Their second daughter, Lucy, was born two years ago with cerebral palsy and spina bifida, and seemed fated to live without speech. But she, too, has learned to sign.

After parents of hearing children admired the way the Colemans communicated with their daughters, Coleman and her sister Emilie decided to produce videos to teach children ASL.

The first volume of *Signing Time*, which includes an original theme song by Coleman, came out last April. Subsequent videos, released in November, have been bought for thousands of hearing children and for deaf children and children with Down syndrome and autism, Coleman says.

"It breaks barriers," she says. "I think sign language is the greatest gift a parent can give a child."

Jeanne Wilcox, professor in the department of speech and hearing science at Arizona State University, has long used sign language to reach children who are speech-delayed or have trouble with an oral language. Wilcox, who is also director of ASU's infant-child research programs, says it's logical to communicate similarly with hearing, healthy children using a visual language.

A sequence of skills develops in infants culminating in language, she says. Even newborns can make sounds, though there is little evidence of purposeful communication.

Babies begin associating gestures with meaning at about 7 or 8 months. At 9 to 10 months, they can point to something and indicate a need.

Around a year, most children form their first words, usually simple consonant sounds such as "mama," "baba," "dada." By 18 months, they're beginning to use whole sentences.

Wilcox agrees that signing could relieve the stress pre-verbal tots experience.

"Frustrations with communication are often the underlying causes of behavioral problems in young kids," she says.

Being bilingual is an asset for children and adults, says Caroline Lamoreaux, who was raised by deaf parents and became fluent in ASL. Lamoreaux, who lives in Gilbert, taught her first two children, who can hear, to sign with their grandparents.

Abby, 3, signed "milk" when she was 8 months and had learned almost 40 signs by the time she was talking at 12-14 months. Braiden, 16 months, signs with Abby and is starting to talk. Lamoreaux will deliver her third child in April.

"You can't imagine the confidence it builds in these little ones to be able to communicate," she says.

She hopes her children retain their ASL skills not only to interact with their grandparents but to have a second language throughout their lives.

A common language can unite children and adults. Until Coleman taught ASL in her neighborhood preschools, children often avoided her deaf daughter. Once they had a means to talk with her, however, they were unafraid to approach her.

The National Center for Health Statistics estimates 20 million Americans are deaf or hearing impaired. ASL is considered the third or fourth most common language in the United States.

Sherman teaches sign-language classes for parents of hearing children through the city of Scottsdale. She is on a maternity break but might resume teaching in a few months. Helping parents bond with their children through language is rewarding, she says.

"The coolest thing is to tell parents it's a window into the brain."

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