

Silent speech speaks volumes for families

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When Jennifer Norton's autistic daughter was four years old, she couldn't speak. After discovering that some nonverbal children respond to learning sign language, Norton decided to give it a try.

"Within a week, my daughter called me 'Mommy' for the first time," Norton said. "It broke me up."

Alena is now six, with a verbal vocabulary of about 500 words, and can sign 1,500 words using American Sign Language.

"This is something I was told she would never be able to do," Norton said as a happy Alena chirped away on the sofa in their Milroy Drive living room.

"For a child who's functionally non-verbal, she never fails to get her point across."

The key to Norton's success was a DVD from the Signing Timeseries. Produced by the Utah-based Two Little Hands Productions, Signing Time teaches ASL through music and dance. The movies are Alena's favourites.

Signing Time inspired Norton, 27, so much she's using it in her new business, Big Heart, Moving Hands.

A professional ASL instructor, Norton offers sign language training for all ages, particularly children, whether they're deaf or not.

Teaching hearing infants to sign can decrease tantrums and help children develop better communications skills, Norton said.

"Some studies have shown that learning ASL can boost IQs," she said.

In business since November, Big Heart, Moving Hands offers sign language training to individuals or groups.

Participants also receive Signing Time DVDs and training materials, including flashcards.

"It's a vocabulary course," Norton said.

"I don't focus on the grammar and the syntax. It's about learning the words."

Other programs use their own sign language systems, Norton said, but she prefers to work with ASL.

NOTE: Visit www.bigheartmovinghands.com for more information.

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