

## Sign language helps babies communicate

Peorian launches business offering groups of parents lessons to get tiny ones talking

By **JENNIFER TOWERY**  
of the **Journal Star**

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**METAMORA** — Abbey Cook has little trouble convincing parents of infants to start using sign language with their babies.

Where she struggles is convincing those parents not to stop signing when their babies become toddlers and children.

"Everybody wants to sign with their babies," Cook said. "They don't understand why they should continue doing it when the kids are older."

The "why" is evident in Cook's 2 1/2-year-old son, Owen, to whom she and her husband have been signing since birth.

Owen can sign about 300 words. Think it's hurt his verbal skills? Think again.

"I think that signing really encouraged speech for him," she said. "When he started talking, he was talking in three-words sentences. Now he speaks in seven- or eight-words sentences. He has an amazing vocabulary."

"I thought Owen was smart. I know people look at me and think, 'Well, you're a speech therapist. That's why he talks,'" she said. "And then I started talking to other moms who have been signing with their kids, and they're having the same results. It's the signing."

A Peoria native, Cook moved back to Peoria last September from Virginia Beach, Va., where she was a speech pathologist for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Shortly after moving, she earned the highest certification available from Signing Time.

A full time employee of the Special Education Association of Peoria County who is based at Elmwood schools, Cook teaches signs to parents, children and babies in her free time through a company she started called Communication Junction. She also offers private speech therapy.

Melissa Wolven of Metamora signs with her daughter, 3-year-old Grayce. But she was interested in learning more to teach her son, 7-month-old Ethan.

So Wolven asked Cook to teach a class in her home. The first session also included Molly Redenbo of Metamora, Carrie Tate of Washington and Jody Huff of Peoria and their babies.

The first class, Cook always focuses on food-related terms: Cup, drink, juice, milk, eat, cracker, more, all gone.

Grayce signed along with Cook as each sign was introduced.

"We've signed with Grayce since she was itty bitty," Wolven said. "She was about 4 months old."

At each class, Cook discusses with parents not only how to sign, but why parents should sign and even when.

"The best time to sign is when they're in their high chairs," she told them. "They're contained. You've got both hands. And you've got their undivided attention."

She asked the parents to bring taking pictures of family members with items that are common sign, such as "milk" or "bed." The pictures can go into a photo book to give the babies a sign book.

Sarah Flanigan, her husband Kevin D'Sa, and their son, 8-month-old Stephen are about to start their fourth session of classes with Cook. The parents have been thrilled to see Stephen pick up signs.

"Within a couple weeks, he started signing 'milk,'" Flanigan said. "It's just progressed from there. We're working on 'more.' Right now, he's still reaching for the mug, but we've seen him sign it a couple times."

Stephen also signs "dog," which was the first word he said. He recognizes more signs than he can do right now, but the progress has been steady.

"He's always been very excited when we sign 'book,' from a very early age," she said. "He hasn't done it himself yet, but he clearly recognizes it."

The couple are both engineers, so fostering communication doesn't come as naturally as technical skills do.

"We want to encourage as much communication and bonding as possible. This is one way to do that," Flanigan said. "And it's really fun. We're having a great time."

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