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COURTESY OF RACHEL COLEMAN

Rachel Coleman, above left, taught neighborhood children sign language so they could communicate with her daughter Lucy who was born deaf. The Colemans clockwise from top are Aaron Coleman with daughters Leah and Lucy. | Inset: Rachel's sister Emilie Brown took up signing as well to communicate with her nieces.

Sign language is not only for the deaf

By Nancy Arcayna
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Rachel Coleman is no stranger to parental pain. She learned when her daughter Leah turned one, that she was deaf.

"One in 1,000 babies are deaf. There was no reason for Leah's deafness. She was the one in 1,000," Coleman said.

In spite of adversity, Coleman, who grew up in a musical family, sought possibilities. She gave up guitar and took up sign language.

Two years later, she and her husband Aaron received more bad news when an ultrasound confirmed that their second baby, Lucy, had spina bifida. "The same statistics hit me that day. One in 1,000 babies are born with spina bifida. The little girl I was carrying was that statistic."

Lucy was also born with cerebral palsy that doctors believed would prevent her from being able to communicate with her deaf sister.

"But, at the age of two, Lucy had mastered hundreds of signs and could sing the ABC's."

To expand her daughters' world, Coleman began teaching children at a neighborhood preschool how to sign. "I was amazed at how quickly very young children pick up sign language," she said. "Some as early as nine months."

Rachel and Leah will be in Honolulu tomorrow for a playgroup event that will allow signing families to get together to play games, learn new signs and sing.

Although many assume "sign language" is only for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, Coleman said hearing children can benefit from learning also. It helps to speed infants' development.

She said that infants know what they want long before they have the ability to talk. Once babies are able to make gestures and focus on your actions, sign language can provide an alternate means of communication. Signing can limit the frustrations felt by babies and caregivers who are otherwise unable to communicate. The process can be as simple as pointing to an object or an action and showing the baby a sign associated with it.

"We wanted our family to have a genuine, communicative relationship with Leah. The only way to do that was to learn to sign," said Emilie Brown, Rachel's sister.

"Alex (Emilie's son) and Leah have been best buddies since their

toddler days. Alex's foundation in sign language has helped him to maintain that friendship," she added.

"My younger siblings also transferred out of their Spanish classes and signed up for ASL as their foreign language. It's wonderful that Leah is able to have meaningful relationships with extended family, because they took the time to learn her way of communicating," said Coleman.

The sisters decided to make educational "Signing Time" videos for parents to share their experience with sign language. The videos are geared toward both deaf and hearing children. "We teach the basics in three 30-minute shows."

ACCORDING TO BROWN, the benefits of learning sign language include: Fewer tantrums and frustrations, enhanced cognitive development, more bonding with parents, and strengthening linguistic and literary skills. "Alex's signing was a blessing for his own development," she said. He started making the sign for milk when he was a mere 10 months old.

The two sisters saw the dramatic benefits of teaching babies and toddlers, not just deaf children, how to sign before they can speak. Both Leah and Alex were reading and writing words by age two. "The terrible twos don't have to be so terrible," said Brown.

Brown's youngest child, 17-month-old Zachary, signs "eat" and "potty" at the appropriate times. Zachary also knows the signs for milk, airplane, sheep, go, finished, thank you, ice cream and more. "It melts his dad's heart every time he comes home and Zachary signs 'dad,'" said Brown.

"Signing Time" video, DVD and audio sets can be ordered at www.signingtime.com or at www.amazon.com.

Sign language play group

Where: All-Star Sports & Therapy Center, 418 Kuwili St.

When: 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. tomorrow

Admission: Free. Bring a picnic lunch; dessert will be provided by Alex and Leah (stars of "Signing Time" videos)

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