

ASDC Snap Shots: Sign Language Use for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Hearing Babies: The Evidence Supports It

Drawing from a large body of research, there is a clear argument favoring the use of sign language with *all* children, regardless of their hearing status. This argument is based on three basic points:

- Early language learning experiences affect other areas of development and are critical to children's future success.
- Sign language provides the earliest possible mode through which children can learn expressive language skills.
- All children can benefit from the use of sign language, with no risk to other language skills.

This includes:

- Hearing children
- Deaf children
- Hard of hearing children
- Any children benefiting from technological auditory assistance

Early language learning experiences affect other areas of development and are critical to children's future success. Language is necessary to many other aspects of development, including cognitive, social and psychological development. A lack of language skills can have devastating effects. Poor language skills are often linked to academic difficulty, behavioral problems, poor self-esteem, and social immaturity. Researchers have long known that poor communication abilities can be linked to high levels of delinquency, violence, and incarceration. Even the "terrible twos" stage of child development is thought to be caused by children's frustration at being unable to communicate with their caregivers. On the other hand, study after study has shown that early development of language skills brings many advantages. For instance, those who learn their first language early have an easier time acquiring skills in a second language. Also, children with strong language skills consistently outperform their peers on tests of intelligence and other measures of success. All this is true regardless of which language a child learns first—It can be English or other another spoken language, or it can be sign language, and the research tells us the results will be the same: The earlier a child learns his first language, the greater his success will be in acquiring language skills and meeting other important developmental goals.

Sign language provides the earliest possible mode through which children can learn expressive language skills. Use of sign language with young children (of any hearing status) is known to promote early communication. The reason for this is that children begin to learn language long before they are physically capable of reproducing speech. While the organs of speech are still maturing, children struggle to find ways of expressing themselves. Given exposure to a visual language of signs, children are able to master language at an earlier stage. Signing children can communicate, while their peers are still in frustrated fits over the inability to tell caregivers what they need/want.

All children can benefit from the use of sign language, with no risk to other language skills. There have been concerns about exposing young children to sign language, but research has now proven there is no need for hesitation. Sign language offers great benefits to all children, with no risk of impeding their progress in developing other (especially spoken)

languages. For babies with normal hearing, sign language can prevent the tantrums that are caused by poor verbal communication skills. It gives a head start in language learning, and can lead to higher achievement in measures of intelligence and academic and social development. The hearing children of deaf parents (who learn sign as their first language, and frequently receive little or no spoken language input at home) suffer no ill effects when they later learn spoken language, and are very often have--not just average--but *better* than average language skills. Used in classrooms with hearing children, sign language has even been shown to help in reducing the achievement gap between underprivileged classes and their peers.

For deaf infants, sign language exposure is a critical first step to communication, and the key to eventual development of literacy and spoken language skills. It provides the only accessible venue for natural language learning in the early years, and it serves to prevent deaf children from falling prey to the staggering language delays and other negative outcomes often associated with deafness. Deaf children who learn sign early as their first language generally learn to read and to write better than those who are exposed only to spoken language, and we know that expressive language ability (in any mode) is often a good predictor of better speech ability later. Beyond the enormous advantages to deaf children's language, social and cognitive development, children's knowledge of sign language opens the door for them to begin communications with a strong and supportive community of other deaf individuals.

Hard of hearing babies and their parents often fall through the cracks of the systems that should be helping them. Even hearing losses so minimal that they fall within "normal" limits have been proven to have significant impacts on children. Sadly, the smaller the loss a child has, the smaller his chances are of having the loss identified early. After a hearing loss is identified, no amount of technological assistance or added speech training can fully compensate for a permanent inability to fully access spoken language. For these children, sign language provides the only bridge to full language access. It also serves to supplement educational experiences by providing access to incidental learning, which many deaf children do not have.

Technology, for all its usefulness, is flawed. Maintenance issues render nearly half of all children's hearing aids inoperable, programming and adjustment to sound cause problems for children wearing cochlear implants, and there are restrictions on when and where various technologies can be conveniently--and safely--used. Children can generally learn *some* language skills despite these difficulties. But is it fair to ask children to put forth more effort--and to get lesser results than their peers get--when there is another option available? Sign language is a viable solution to the problem. Sign language can be taught even before most audiological supports can be properly fitted and/or programmed for children. After children have developed spoken language skills, use of signs can be continued to supplement spoken language--especially when the need for communication is immediate, and spoken language becomes inadequate due to difficulties with the technology, or due to poor acoustics in the environment.

Is sign language the right choice for every child? Only the child's family can make that decision. The intent of this paper is to provide the information and research that will facilitate families (and the professionals who assist them) in making the best choice possible for each individual child, based on the families' own goals and values, and on the circumstances of each child.

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The full version of this paper is available from the ASDC web site, www.deafchildren.org, or by calling the ASDC office

at 717/334-7922.

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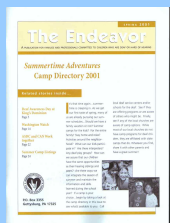


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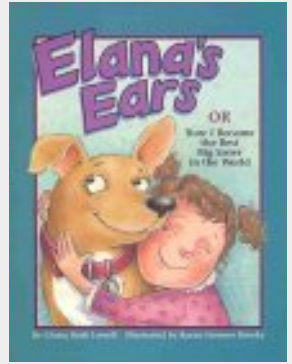
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