



The Importance of Gestures

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It may come as a surprise to hear that speech language pathologists think a lot about gestures. The words “speech language” in our job title sometimes gives the impression that we are focused on how children express themselves verbally. However, a very important part of communication development takes place well before a child says his or her first word – and that is the development of gestures.

Below, you’ll find some answers to questions parents often ask about gestures.



When Should I Expect My Child to Start Using Gestures?

Children can begin to use gestures as early as 8 or 9 months of age. Here are some important milestones in the development of gestures [1,2]:

- **At approximately 10 months, children begin to draw attention or point to objects or events** – first children learn to *show* (by holding up an object), then *give* (by giving an object to someone), and finally *point* (toward a specific object, location, or event) [3]. These types of gestures are used before children start to talk.
- **Between 9-13 months, children start to make requests using gestures** – such as reaching with an open-and-closed grasping motion, putting an adult’s hand on an object, and pulling an adult’s hand towards a desired item or action.
- **Before a child can say 25 words he has usually developed some “iconic” gestures** – these gestures demonstrate the meaning of the word they represent. Blowing to indicate bubbles

or flapping one's arms to represent a bird are examples of iconic gestures. Some iconic gestures are specific to certain cultures, such as thumbs up to mean "good job".

- Between 12 and 18 months, children rarely use gestures and spoken words at the same time
- **At around 18 months, children begin to combine gestures and words** – at first, when children use a gesture and say a word at the same time, both the gesture and the word mean the same thing (e.g. child points to a dog and says "dog"). Soon after, children use a gesture and say a word at the same time, but the gesture and the word mean *different things* (e.g. child points to a dog and says "big"). When a child starts to use gestures along with a word, but the gesture has a different meaning from the word, this usually means that the child will soon start to combine words.

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So you can see that the gestures a child uses – even before he says his first word – tell us a lot about how his communication development is progressing.

If I Encourage My Child to Gesture, Won't It Hinder His Speech Development?

No it won't. Quite the opposite!

There is a strong link between gestures and speech in communication development. Not only are gestures used before spoken language, but studies have shown that the use of gestures predict when certain language milestones will emerge. For example [2, 4]:

- Children who produce more gestures early on have larger expressive vocabularies later in development.
- A child who points to or shows an object will likely learn the word for that object within 3 months.
- Children combine gestures with words before they combine words together.
- Children who often combine gestures and words together that have *different meanings* (e.g. point to the dog and say "big") early on are likely to use relatively complex sentences a few years later.
- Children's gesture use predicts their story telling abilities later on.
- Children with expressive language delays have greater language gains when their parents use gestures and words at the same time during interactions with their child.

Therefore, gestures and speech go hand-in-hand. By encouraging gestures, you promote your child's overall communication development. Gestures provide a child with a way to express himself before he is able to verbally. And when a child uses a gesture, his listeners respond by saying something about what he has communicated, providing language he can learn from.

How Can I Help My Child Use Gestures?

There are many ways you can promote your child's use of gestures [4]:

- **Point to or hold up objects** in your everyday interactions with your child.
- **Use gestures that demonstrate the meaning of the word** ("iconic" gestures) – The most helpful iconic gestures for learning words are those that show the shape or function of the object [4]. For example, holding your hands in the shape of a ball while you say "ball" or doing a throwing action while you say "ball" are helpful gestures.
- **Be sure to use the gesture and the word at the same time** – This helps reinforce the meaning of the word for your child.
- **When your child uses a gesture, acknowledge it** by copying it and saying the word that matches the gesture.
- **Make gestures part of your everyday interactions with your child** – There's no special time or place needed to use gestures with your child. Using simple gestures while you talk with your child throughout the day will help build his communication skills.

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Should I Teach My Child Baby Signs?

The information above relates to natural gestures, not sign language. For most children, there is no extra benefit to being taught specially developed baby signs [5]. Some populations of children, such as children with Down's Syndrome, benefit from exposure to signs. But for the majority of young children, pointing and gestures that demonstrate the meaning of the word are very helpful. For more information about baby signs, read our article ["Does Baby Sign Make a Difference?"](#)

What Should I Do If My Child Isn't Using Gestures?

If you are concerned about your child's development and he isn't meeting expected gesture milestones, talk to a speech language pathologist or your child's doctor. You may also want to read ["When should you seek help?"](#) for a list of several communication milestones.

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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