



Does Baby Sign Make a Difference?

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If you Google “baby sign”, you’ll probably find claims that teaching some sign language to a typically-developing baby helps the baby to speak sooner, develop a larger spoken vocabulary, have stronger cognitive skills, and feel closer to his or her parents. Most baby sign websites talk about research that backs up their claims. But a review of this research by experts in Ontario, Canada revealed that there were many problems with the scientific methods used in these studies [1]. Therefore, many of the baby sign claims were not supported.

The controversy around baby signs can be puzzling for parents, who might wonder:

- “Will baby signs promote my child’s language development?”
- “Will baby signs help me to bond with my baby?”
- “What is the best way to encourage my baby’s language development?”

A recent study about baby sign

A controlled study in 2013 by researchers in Hertfordshire, England used better scientific methods in order to determine the effects of baby sign on language development and on the mother-child bond [2]. Dr. Elizabeth Kirk and her team wanted to study this topic in order to provide sound evidence regarding the usefulness of baby sign products and classes. They studied forty babies (and their mothers) from age eight months to twenty months. The babies were randomly divided into groups, and the mothers in each group were instructed to either:

- model signs (while also saying the corresponding word)
- model target words (but no signs)
- interact as they normally would (no focus on signs or target words)

The babies in the first two groups were exposed to the same twenty target signs or words, such as “food”, “more”, “drink”, “hat”, “duck”, “flower”, “where”, “more”, “all-gone”, “hot” and several others. Mothers in the signing group and the target word group were instructed to use the signs/words as often as possible during everyday interactions with their babies.

The babies were assessed when they were eight, ten, twelve, sixteen, and twenty months of age. Kirk and her team found that:

- the babies in the signing group learned some of the signs (ranging between two to seventeen signs)
- the babies in the signing group didn’t learn to say any more target words than children in the other two groups
- the overall language of the signing babies wasn’t any better than the children in the other two groups

Therefore, previous claims that encouraging gesturing with infants speeds up their language development was not supported [2]. However, the authors also found that:

- signing seemed to benefit three boys who had low language scores at the beginning of the study, and who made some language gains during the study. While this was only noted with these three children, this could mean that signing is beneficial for children with weaker language abilities.
- there were subtle changes in the mother-child interactions in the signing group. Signing mothers were more responsive to their babies’ nonverbal cues (such as noticing changes in the direction of their infants’ gaze, and their infants’ actions with objects). They also encouraged more independent action by their babies (such as encouraging the baby to go and get a ball while gesturing and saying “you get the ball”). The authors explained that using signs may have changed the mothers’ perception of their infants, and encouraged them to notice their babies’ nonverbal attempts at communication [2].

The final verdict on baby sign

The study above can answer some of our questions about the usefulness of teaching signs to typically-developing babies:

“Will baby signs promote my child’s language development?”

No. “There is little evidence that it can ‘improve’ typically developing infants” [2, p. 586]. This study provided some evidence that it may help children with weak language abilities, but this was only found in three children (too small a number to draw any widespread conclusions).

“Will baby signs help me to bond with my baby?”

Perhaps. The mothers in the signing groups did notice more of their babies’ nonverbal cues and they seemed somewhat more “tuned in” to their child. This can promote bonding because it improves parent-child interaction and communication. The more parents tune in to their baby’s messages, the more they can respond to their baby. This builds the baby’s confidence and motivation to communicate and interact.

“What is the best way to encourage my baby’s language development?”

While taking a baby sign class or purchasing baby sign products may not be necessary, there are some simple things you can do at home to promote your baby’s language development:

- **Notice your baby’s nonverbal messages** –try to observe your baby’s actions and what she is attending to. Listen to your baby’s sounds. Pause often when interacting with her, and give her a chance to send messages by making eye contact with her and waiting without speaking. You might realize that your baby is sending more messages than you thought!
- **Be your baby’s interpreter** – when your baby notices something, reaches for something, points, or sends another message, say the word(s) that match her message. When your words correspond to your baby’s message, it will help her understand those words and eventually use them.
- **Use natural gestures with your baby** – you don’t need to model formal sign language with your baby, but gesturing while you speak is a natural part of communication. Gestures (as well as facial expression and tone of voice) add information to our spoken messages, and children need to learn to understand and use these forms of nonverbal messages. So, use everyday gestures with your baby, such as pointing, shaking and nodding your head for “yes” and “no”, gesturing to come with your hand, finger to lips for “quiet”, etc.
- **Avoid gestures/signs that represent broad concepts** – like “more” or “want”. These gestures/signs are easily “overgeneralized” by children. This means they use the gesture/sign to represent too many things instead of learning a variety of individual concepts. For example, children who learn the sign for “more” sometimes use this sign to ask for everything they want (food, activities, toys, etc) instead of learning a number of specific words or gestures.
- **Consult a speech language pathologist if you are concerned about your baby’s communication development** – our article “[When should you seek help?](#)” provides guidelines to help parents identify key developmental milestones expected at different ages.

- **If your child has an identified language delay** – signs are sometimes recommended by speech language pathologist to provide nonverbal children who have language delays with an alternate means of communicating. These signs are carefully selected by the speech language pathologist and do not follow a baby sign program. Consult your speech language pathologist if you are wondering if signs would be helpful for your child.

References

1. Johnston, J. C., Durieux-Smith, A., & Bloom, K. (2005). Teaching gestural signs to infants to advance child development: A review of the evidence. *First Language, 25*(2), 235-251.
2. Kirk, E., Howlett, N., Pine, K. J., & Fletcher, B. C. (2012). To sign or not to sign? The impact of encouraging infants to gesture on infant language and maternal mind-mindedness. *Child Development, 84*(2), 574-590.

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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