

Excerpt from *Baby Sign Language Basics* by Monta Z. Briant
"Squirrel Story" illustrating attention-getting strategies

Parents who are skeptical about trying signing are often concerned that their babies won't pay attention to them, since their babies' eyes are all over the place and they won't sit still.

If this sounds like your baby, and it probably does, I have some good news: Babies don't need to "pay attention"—at least not as we know it. I once actually saw my daughter learn a sign through her ear. I'm not kidding. (Well, maybe there was some *very* peripheral vision involved, but it didn't seem like it!) Here's what happened.

Sirena and I were enjoying a walk in the park (she was in her stroller) with my friend Cheryl and her baby when a squirrel ran onto the path. This was my baby's first squirrel, so I quickly signed **SQUIRREL** to her, trying to take advantage of this *in-context teaching opportunity*. I signed again and again, but do you think she would look at me? No way! She was craning her head all over the place trying to see around the bush the squirrel had run into.

Cheryl gave me bit of a ribbing. "Oh yeah, sure—she's *really* paying attention to you!"

I gave up, and we continued on our walk. About 20 minutes later, another squirrel ran out of the bushes. Sirena turned around in her stroller, looked right at me, and signed **SQUIRREL**.

Cheryl and I were dumbfounded. "She didn't even look at you before!" Cheryl exclaimed.

"I know!" I said. "What did she do, see me sign through her ear?"

The point of the story is this: Don't stress about whether or not your baby is looking at your signs. Signing often—*whether your baby is looking at you or not*—will give you the practice you need to feel comfortable, and you'll also make signing a habit. At the same time, you'll be surprised by how much of your signing your baby actually *does* see, even when he doesn't appear to be paying attention.

There are some great strategies you can use to increase the chance of your child seeing your signs, many of which have been learned by watching deaf mothers interact with their babies. Just as hearing parents raise the pitch of their voices to get their child's attention, deaf parents modify their signing and use various other attention-getting tactics while interacting with their babies.

Get physical. Videotapes of deaf mothers interacting with their children show the mothers actively seeking their babies' attention by gently but persistently tapping their hands or other parts of their bodies.² Tapping your child's hands when you want him to sign back reminds him that there's something you expect him to do with his hands. You can also stroke or rub him to get his attention—stroking his cheek with a finger, for example, will often get him to turn toward you.

Let your baby see the object and your sign at the same time. At first, you'll find that this is easier said than done. Previously, we instructed you to sign close to your face, in your baby's field of vision. With babies, these two things do not always go together. Children don't appreciate having their play interrupted and their attention commandeered to learn signs. Smart parents learn to adapt their signing so that their children can see the sign and the corresponding object while continuing their play.

Here are some strategies to use while playing and interacting with your child:

Sign on your child's body. With some signs, it's just as effective for your baby to feel the sensation of the sign on his body as it is to actually see the sign. The sign for **PET** or **GENTLE** is a great example: If your child is playing with a cat, you could tell him to **PET** the cat or be **GENTLE** by stroking his arm instead of your own. (Stroking the forearm is the sign for both **PET** and **GENTLE**.) Clearly your child doesn't need to look at his arm to know what's happening, and his attention is allowed to remain on the cat. Some other signs that work well are **BEAR**, **COW**, **DOG**, or **TELEPHONE**.

Put your sign between your child and the object or toy he's interested in. You can either come in from the side or reach around your child with both hands. This works well with signs that only require the use of your hands, such as **BALL**, **SHOES**, or **MORE**.

Read about more great signing strategies in *Baby Sign Language Basics* by Monta Z. Briant!