

## Frequently Asked Questions

by Baby Sign Language Basics author, Monta Z. Briant

Below are answers to the most common questions parents have about signing with babies.

### Q. What if I already know what my baby wants?

A. Babies *are* born with an effective means of communicating their basic needs—*they cry*. When your baby cries, you go through a process of elimination: Is she hungry, wet, tired, or in pain? Usually, after a few tries, you'll hit the right one and she'll stop crying. This, coupled with a good helping of "parent's intuition" actually enables you to meet your baby's basic needs pretty well. So why should you sign?

Crying and grunting are fine for expressing a few basic needs, but babies have a lot more that they want to express than that. They can say *anything* with a sign.

Let's say your baby is crying in the middle of the night. You go to your baby and nurse and change her. The crying stops while you nurse, but then it starts right up again. After about 45 minutes of this, you get concerned. Is your baby in pain? Is it an ear infection? Should you take her to the emergency room?

Signing empowers your baby to communicate *specific* things, such as "I have pain in my left ear," "My tummy hurts," or "There's an elephant in my closet!" If your child can indicate to you that she has pain in her left ear, then you could call your pediatrician, who may be able to give you some home-care advice that will ease her discomfort and get you both through until the morning. But imagine rushing your baby to the E.R. in the middle of the night when all you really needed to do was show her that there was no elephant in her closet!

### Q. How long will my baby take to start signing to me?

A. Younger babies will take anywhere from several weeks to several months to produce signs. Older babies and toddlers will often imitate signs immediately and begin signing unprompted within just weeks! In the past decade of teaching these classes, I have observed that even babies who start my class at just 6 months of age will usually begin producing at least a couple of signs by the end of the 12 week series. It is important to note, however, that babies will respond to *your signs* in other ways, long before they can actually produce their own signs. You will see that glimmer of understanding and experience increased communication long before your baby signs back to you.

### Q. What's the point—won't my baby talk soon anyway?

A. Well, this depends on what you mean by "soon." Soon can seem like a long time when your child is trying to communicate with you by screaming, throwing things, and banging his head against the wall. In general, most babies don't even use "Mama" and "Dada" to the right parent until they're at least 11 months old, and a 12-month-old child who uses two more words *besides* "Mama" and "Dada" is considered in the advanced minority.

There is a lot of variation between individual children when it comes to speech development, but the average age for first speech is considered to be at about 12 months, give or take a couple of months. Having said that, there is no way to know in advance at what age *your* baby will begin speaking. In fact, there are many children who have no words until 2 or even 3 years of age, especially boys. Even once your child does begin talking, it takes quite some time to go from "first words" to "intelligible conversation," and signing not only helps your baby communicate what he can't say, but it also helps him clarify the meaning of what he *is* saying once he starts verbalizing. A child who says "Da" to mean "dog," "Daddy," and "done" can make his meaning clearer by signing while he speaks. Children are encouraged to verbalize *more* when they see that their intended meaning is understood. Eventually, as the child's verbalization of "dog," "Daddy," and "done" become clearer, he'll drop those signs and simply say the words.

### Q. Do I have to learn a whole new language?

A. Not at all. As I mentioned before, we call this "baby sign language" because it's the "baby talk" version

of signing. Think about going on a grand European vacation: Would you learn the language of every country you intended to visit? Of course not! But you'd probably try to brush up on a few useful words and phrases for each country you planned to travel to, right? You wouldn't sound very eloquent to the native speakers of those languages, but at least you'd be able to get your basic needs met.

When starting to sign with your baby, I suggest choosing between six and ten words to start with and adding more as you feel you and your baby are ready. Parents of young children are *extremely* busy people, and this is exactly why you need early, effective, two-way communication. By empowering your child to communicate her needs, you can ward off frustration and temper tantrums, creating calm and peace in your household, and actually have *more* quality time left to spend with your baby.

**Q. How do I respond to other family members who tell me I shouldn't sign with my baby?**

**A.** Well meaning family members might be concerned that signing with the baby might be harmful. This might be your spouse or one of baby's grandparents, for example. The best way to combat this is by informing them and including them. If you possibly can, get them to read this book and show them a few simple signs to use with your child. Better yet, get them to come to a signing class with you and your child so you can all learn together! Tell them how important they are in your baby's life, and that it would be fun to spend this special time together. Going to a class together is especially good, because it allows the other person to see that this is not just some harebrained scheme of yours, and that there are plenty of other perfectly normal parents and babies learning to sign together these days.

**Q. Will signing inhibit my baby's language development?**

**A.** Signing won't inhibit your baby's language development any more than crawling will inhibit his learning to walk. As a matter of fact, research shows that babies who sign generally talk sooner and build vocabulary more quickly than their non-signing peers. In their long-term study, Drs. Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn found that by age 36 months, children who signed as babies were talking at the 47-month age level, putting them nearly a year ahead of their non-signing peers.

Once your baby is physically developed enough to walk, he'll no longer crawl, as walking is a much more efficient means of getting from point A to point B. The same is true of signing and talking—once your baby can say a word clearly enough to make his meaning understood, he'll stop using the sign for that word. Once a child's vocal apparatus are sufficiently developed, plain talking is a lot easier (and you can even do it with your hands full!).

**Q. A friend of mine told me that one of her co-workers signed with her baby, and now the two-year-old boy signs, but won't talk! She thinks I'm crazy to consider signing with my child!**

**A.** Within the population as a whole, about 10 percent of children will have a speech delay, so, it is quite possible that a baby who signed could later be diagnosed with a speech delay. This would simply be due to the fact that out of every 10 babies, one will have a speech delay, whether they signed or not.

Pediatricians refer children diagnosed with a speech delay to a speech- language pathologist (SLP) for treatment. Most specialists in this field will employ *signing* with your child as a method of treatment to *encourage* speech development and reduce frustration.

Now obviously, they would not prescribe signing to children with speech delays if it would further delay speech. Signing does just the opposite—it *encourages and accelerates* the development of spoken language while reducing the frustration of not being able to communicate verbally. Signing does not cause speech delays anymore than it causes deafness or cancer.

**Q. Aren't American Sign Language (ASL) signs too hard for babies to make?**

A. Babies have limited small motor coordination, so in the beginning they won't produce the signs exactly as adults do. Just as your baby hears you say the word *water* but first only manages to say "wa-wa," he'll approximate the gestures he sees you make to the best of his ability. He may, for example, clap, bang fists together, or bring his index finger to his palm in an approximation of the sign MORE, rather than managing the precise handshape. Just as you understand when your baby says "wa-wa," you'll also learn to recognize his signed approximations.

**Q How does signing effect early brain development?**

A- The most amazing fact about how sign language effects brain development, is this: Human beings who sign from infancy develop an *additional* language center on the right side of their brains. The area that handles ordinary spoken language is located on the left, so this is actually *extra hardware* that develops only in signing babies!

In addition, when you have a signed interaction with your baby, your baby receives the message not only auditorially, as with normal speech, but also visually and kinesthetically (physically, through movement or touch), so your baby is actually receiving the message in triplicate, through three of their senses. When babies receive information in this way consistently, their brains build a more extensive network for dealing with language stimulus and they tend to learn language better and faster. This can have a long-term effect on all future language-related learning, including foreign languages, reading, and writing skills.

**Q. We have a bilingual family. Will adding signs confuse our baby?**

A. This is an excellent question, and one that comes up often with families attending my classes. The addition of signing will absolutely not confuse your baby. In fact, signing will do just the opposite—it will act as a language bridge, showing your baby that words mean the same thing in both languages. For example, let's say mom is offering the baby milk and says "leche" (Spanish for "milk") while making the sign for MILK. Later that day, it's Dad's turn to feed the baby. He says "milk" as he signs MILK. Because both parents use the same gesture, the baby learns that "milk" and "leche" both mean the same thing. Children who are raised bilingually will often develop spoken language more slowly, because they have much more information to process. Signing can actually help bilingual babies learn both languages better and faster.

**Q. Although we live in the US, my side of the family is originally from Mexico and we speak mostly Spanish at home. Is sign language pretty much a universal language, or is it different for each country and if so, should we be using Mexican sign language when we speak Spanish to our baby?**

A. No, there is no universal sign language, just as there is no universal spoken language. This is because sign languages evolved independently within the Deaf communities of each country and/or region. (There was never a "World Sign Language Summit" where all the Deaf were able to get together and decide on signs for things and create a universal language). Contrary to what many people would assume, American Sign Language is *not* "Signed English". In fact, the US, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and S. Africa-- all English-speaking countries-- all have their own separate sign languages. When choosing which sign language to use with your baby, it makes the most sense to go with the one that's in use in the region you live in.

So, if you live in the US, you would use American Sign Language, no matter which spoken languages you use at home.