

Interview

with **Monta Z. Briant**, author of
“Sign, Sing, and Play” and ***“Baby Sign Language Basics”***

1. *It seems everyone is publishing baby sign language books these days. What makes this book different from the rest?*

These days, it seems like there’s a new baby sign language book coming out every time you turn around. Unfortunately, many of the other books out don’t show accurate signs, have difficult to decipher illustrations, or make the entire subject seem much more difficult than it needs to be.

Baby Sign Language Basics was one of the very first baby sign language books published and to date it’s been the best selling book on the subject. Parents just love the book because it makes signing so easy. I wrote *Baby Sign Language Basics* as if I was talking to a good friend who just had a baby. Everything from the text, to the activities, to the clear photos of signs is fun and easy to understand so parents won’t come away feeling like they need a Ph. D. to sign with their baby.

Another thing everyone loves about the first edition is its small size. The new expanded edition is a full size book with over 300 signs. Many parents will want the new version for at home and the smaller original version to throw in the diaper bag.

2. *What is the purpose of this new expanded edition of Baby Sign Language Basic?*

The first edition had *Basics* in the title for a reason—it gives families the “basics” they need to get started signing with their babies, including 60 of the most fun and useful signs. Once babies start signing back in earnest however, many parents will find they want more than the signs 60 found in the original book. Publishing this new expanded edition has also given me the opportunity to add some additional information that didn’t make it into the book the first time around.

3. *What is Baby Sign Language?*

Baby Sign Language is the practice of using symbolic gestures to enhance your verbal interactions with your baby. Using symbolic gestures is something that all human beings do naturally. Imagine your baby lifting their arms to be picked up or pointing at something to draw your attention to it. As an adult, imagine trying to give directions to someone without using your hands. You would probably have to *sit on your hands* to keep from gesturing, and you would very likely find your head or entire body jerking or leaning in the direction of the turns as you described them (“Turn left at the Shell station” and “Turn right at the 7-11. By using certain gestures to enhance certain words when interacting with your baby, your baby will learn to use the same gestures you do, and communication will come along a lot better.

In my classes I prefer to use American Sign Language signs as the gestures. Some other methods advocate making up your own gestures. Either method works equally well for the intended purpose of preverbal communication (providing you don’t forget what you made up!!!). Proponents of using ASL signs do so for a variety of reasons, among them, ready availability of teaching resources and the fact that using ASL signs does indeed give your baby a head start towards later learning of the actual full language of ASL. Imagine your baby being the only person in second grade who can communicate with the only deaf child in class. What a special friendship!

While conducting research studies with the *hearing* children of deaf parents, it was discovered that some of the children had acquired as many as 75 signs by 9 months of age. In comparison, the average normally developing child of *hearing parents* is usually only able to comprehend around 5 or 6 words, and generally says nothing at all. Now of course the children of deaf parents were in a total-emersion signing environment. We wouldn't expect the children of hearing parents to sign 75 signs by nine months. However, the study clearly illustrates that children have the ability to communicate effectively in this way long before they can talk.

4. *How did you get involved with Baby Sign Language?*

When I was pregnant with my daughter, my mother attended a baby sign language class through her local community College. I was intrigued by the idea of being able to communicate with my baby before she could talk. What would she say? There was no such class in my community at the time, and my mother brought me the materials from her class the next time she visited.

Signing with my daughter has been the most amazing experience for our family. We don't know what we would have done without it! Of course signing with your baby reduces frustration by taking the guess work out of parenting and helps you meet your child's needs more easily, but there's so much more! The best part is getting to know your baby on a level that would not be possible, otherwise. Who doesn't want to know what their baby is trying to tell them? Once my daughter began signing back, I became a 'baby sign language evangelist', chasing down anyone I saw with a baby to tell them about signing with babies; In the supermarket checkout, on stroller walks, at the playground. I wanted to share this incredible gift with every new parent.

I have since found a more efficient means of spreading the good news than accosting anyone pushing a stroller. In order to stay at home with my daughter I decided to try offering baby sign language classes. My company, Baby Sign Language Workshops, offers parent/teacher focused workshops and parent/tot signing classes throughout San Diego County.

5. *What's the point? Don't babies learn to talk soon anyway?*

Well, this depends on what you mean by 'soon'. Even soon can seem like a long time when your child is trying to communicate with you by screaming, throwing things, and banging their head against the wall. In general, most babies don't even use 'Mama' and 'Dada' to the right parent until they are 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.

Another point to consider—about 25% of all children will have a speech delay for one reason or another. That's one in four kids, so it never hurts to sign just in case. Signing today could possibly head off a lot of frustration of few months down the road! Even for early talkers, getting from 'first words' to 'intelligible conversation' takes some time, and signing not only helps babies to communicate what they can't say, it also helps them to clarify the meaning of what they *are* saying once they start 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 will drop those signs and simply say the words.

6. *What if I already know what my baby wants?*

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 baby hungry, wet, tired, in pain? Usually, after a few tries, you'll hit the right one and your baby will stop crying. This, coupled with a natural helping of 'parents intuition' actually enables you to meet your baby's basic needs pretty well. So why should you sign?

First of all, signing with your baby saves you a *lot of time and lost sleep*. Let's say your baby is crying in the middle of the night. You go to your little angle and nurse and change her. The crying stops while you nurse, but starts right up again. After about 45-minutes of crying you are getting pretty concerned. Is your baby in pain? Is it an ear infection? Intestinal blockage? Her appendix? Good heavens! 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", "I have pain in my tummy", or "There's an elephant in my closet". If your child can tell you she has pain in her left ear, it is possible that you could call the pediatrician on-call and they may be able to give you some homecare advice that will ease discomfort and get you all through until the morning (Give Tylenol, put warm wash cloth on ear until Tylenol kicks-in, bring baby in for 10:00 am appointment.). 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!

7. *Do parents have to learn a whole new language?*

Not at all. We call this 'baby sign language' because it is the 'baby talk' version of signing. Imagine you were going on a grand European vacation, the 23 countries in 24 days super-package tour. Would you learn the language of every country you were planning to visit? Of course not! But you would probably try to brush up on a few useful words and phrases for each place you planned to get off the train.

You wouldn't sound very eloquent to the native speakers of those languages, but you'd be able to get your basic needs met (except in France, where they would pretend they couldn't understand you anyway).

When starting to sign with your baby, I suggest choosing between 6-10 words to start with and adding more signs 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 their 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.

8. *Is it realistic to expect busy parents to find time to teach this to their babies?*

'Teaching' your baby to sign can be compared to teaching your baby to talk. You don't need to put special time aside for signing lessons any more than you would for talking lessons. As a matter of fact, it is absolutely essential that your baby doesn't suspect that you are trying to 'teach' him something 'special' or 'extra'. Signing should be incorporated naturally into your normal day-to-day routines and playtime.

Let's say, for example, that you are giving your baby a bath. **WATER, WASH** and **DUCK** might be words that pop up frequently at bath time.

How *not* to sign with your baby-

Mom- "*Look sweetheart, this is WATER, okay? When you want WATER, do this for mommy. Sweetie, look at Mommy; look here, over here sweetie! WATER!*" (Mom anxiously, pleads with her daughter to look at her signing. Baby tunes Mom out. Mommy's game is not fun.

Now here's a better idea-

Mom, smiling and relaxed- “*Oh, my goodness! Look at all this **WATER!** Should we splash the **WATER?** Look- here comes your **DUCKY!** What does your **DUCKY** say? **QUACK!** **QUACK!** Can you **WASH** your **DUCKY?**”*

In the latter example, Mother and child are interacting happily and naturally with each other. Mom engages her child enthusiastically in what she is talking and signing about, integrating learning into playing.

9. Does signing inhibit babies' language development?

Signing will not inhibit your baby's learning to talk any more than crawling will inhibit their 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 a long-term study, at UC Davis funded by the National Institutes of Health, Drs. Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn found that by age 2 children who signed as babies had an average of 50 more spoken words in their vocabularies than their non-signing peers. By age 36 months, they 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 will no longer crawl; 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 will 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!

Even when your baby is very young, signing enhances their language development by enhancing word recognition. Imagine looking at your 6-month-old baby and asking them “Do you want to eat?” Now imagine doing the same thing, but this time you *sign* **EAT** at the same time you *say* “eat”. The sign for **EAT** is made by miming putting something small into your mouth. Even at 9 months of age, children generally recognize only about 5-6 spoken words. Can you see what a powerful hint your baby is getting when you sign *and* speak at the same time?

10. 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.

11. Aren't American Sign Language signs too hard for babies to make?

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

12. Is Baby Sign Language just another passing fad?

That's a great question. There are so many products, books and classes these days that promise to make your baby into a 'super-baby', and sometimes it just gets to be too much. Baby Sign Language, however, is not a passing fad. There is a lot of solid research behind signing with babies and the long and short term benefits are clearly documented. Many hospitals are now offering baby sign language classes as one their women's education offerings, right alongside the Childbirth and Breastfeeding classes. Libraries have baby sign language story times (I do 6 of these a month in San Diego). Childcare programs are making extensive use of Baby Sign Language in their infant/toddler programs and thousands of new parents are experiencing the delight of finding out what their babies are trying to tell them. Baby Sign Language is here to stay and my fondest wish is for every person who has contact with a pre-verbal child to have the opportunity to sign with their baby!

ⁱ Baby Signs, Linda Acredolo, PH.D. and Susan Goodwyn, PH.D.