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Getting beyond baby talk

Young children can learn to sign that they're cold, tired or hurt -- saving their parents a lot of guesswork

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Your **baby** cries, so you change her diaper.
Your **baby** cries more, so you feed her.
Your **baby** keeps crying, and you wonder if you will ever figure out what she wants. But she can't tell you, of course. She's only a **baby**.

Unless you know **baby** sign language, which could have saved you both a lot of frustration.

Adapted from American Sign Language for the deaf, but intended for hearing infants, **baby** sign language allows children from 9 months to 3 years to communicate their basic needs.

With a single hand motion, youngsters can easily communicate whether they are hot, cold, scared, having an earache, or want some milk.

Monta Briant of San Diego learned about **baby** sign language after her mother learned it in a community college class in Santa Barbara. She started signing with her daughter Sirena when she was 6 months old.

"I kind of became like a **baby** sign language evangelist," said Briant. "I was chasing people down on the street and saying, 'Are you signing with your **baby**?' "

Now Briant is the only teacher of **baby** sign language in San Diego County. Since October, she has been traveling to women's clubs, libraries, hospitals and preschools spreading the word.

At a recent class in La Mesa, Briant showed a dozen moms, dads and grandparents some of the basics: the motion for "hot" is akin to spitting out a hot piece of food and throwing it to the ground. "Cold" is

communicated by wrapping your arms around yourself and shivering.

"Bird" involves moving your fingers near your mouth to mimic a beak opening. "Milk" is moving your hand as if milking a cow.

Sometimes the communication isn't simple. But when parents have at least some chance of figuring out what their **baby** is thinking, it gives them insight into their children's minds that they would never otherwise have. Consider this anecdote Briant tells her classes: Her daughter Sirena would cry and cry at bedtime, and they could not fathom what was troubling her.

Sirena repeatedly made the motion for "elephant" and her parents finally understood that every time she heard a car alarm or siren, she thought there were elephants outside her open window.

"She was afraid of elephants, and I realized that she must think our neighborhood is just full of elephants at night," Briant said.

Window closed, problem solved.

Sirena is almost 2 years old now, an age when most children have just a few spoken words. "But she literally can tell me anything," said Briant. "It really cuts down on a lot of frustration, a lot of crying."

"If you couldn't communicate with the only person who could help you, you'd probably resort to banging your head against the wall, too," Briant said.

The **baby** sign language system was created by Joseph Garcia, an early childhood development researcher, who began studying the age at which infants can engage in communication for his master's thesis in 1987. He studied 17 families and found that with repeated exposure to sign language, **babies** could begin signing by 8 or 9 months of age.

Garcia's book, "Sign With Your **Baby**," was first published in 1999, said spokeswoman Linda Easton. The Washington-based company now sells kits that include the book, a video and easy reference chart. The kits can be purchased online through the sign2me.com Web site, or at some children's stores, including Right Start, for \$50, not including taxes or shipping charges. Easton said the **baby** sign language program has caught on quickly and become an international phenomenon, with people calling from foreign countries asking to have the materials translated. The company now has about 130 authorized presenters in the United States,

Canada and Britain, who are mostly parents, speech and language therapists, or early childhood educators.

Baby sign language classes and book sales are especially hot right now in New York, Minneapolis, Seattle and Los Angeles, Easton said.

In other areas it's been slower to catch on, including San Diego County, where Briant is the only authorized **baby** sign language teacher. Her two-hour classes -- \$65 per person or \$70 per couple -- include the book, video and chart.

Though some who attend her classes bring their newborns, Briant tells them not to expect a response until their **babies** have some control over their hand motions and sufficient memory development.

"If you start between 6 and 7 months and show them the sign over and over again, within a couple months they'll start showing that sign back," she said. "As **babies** get older they start mimicking you, anyway."

Even if your child is already a toddler, it isn't too late, Briant added. "Sure, **babies** start to **talk** in the second year, but it's going to be a long time before your **baby** speaks clearly."

The best way to start is with only a few words, and parents need to remember to give the sign for a particular word whenever they say it, so the **baby** can make the association.

Briant said the seven "life saver" signs that all **babies** should know are: fear, pain, help, hot, cold, no touch, and stop.

"It's not like a foreign language, where you have to learn the whole language before you can teach it to your **baby**," she said. The children need only learn pertinent words, not connecting words and grammar because they won't be using it to form complete sentences.

Briant said some parents express the fear that if their **babies** learn to communicate using sign language, they will delay speaking. But, she said, research has shown that the opposite is true. "They actually start talking sooner," she said.

What's more, Briant said, one study showed that **babies** who learned sign language actually have higher IQs than those who didn't.

The study, funded by the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development, tracked 140 families for several years and found that children who started using sign language as infants had larger vocabularies

and scored, on average, 12 points higher in intelligence tests. The findings were published in 2000 in the Journal of Nonverbal Behavior.

"Every point your IQ is lowered, you can expect to lower your earning potential by about \$1,000 a year," Briant told her class. "So you can give your child a \$12,000 raise right now."

Briant's next class will take place Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. at the Scripps Well Being Center in Chula Vista, and there will be another one scheduled in Encinitas at the end of April. She can be contacted by phone at (619) 235-6246 or e-mail, babysigns@att.net. The Sign With Your **Baby** Web site is <http://www.sign2me.com>.
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