

Ask Monta!

Monta Z. Briant, author of *Baby Sign Language Basics*, answers your signing questions

Q- Which are the best signs to start with?

A- This is probably the number one question I'm asked, and the answer I give often surprises parents.

The signs parents start with can make all the difference between their baby beginning to sign rather quickly, or waiting months and months for signing to begin, until many parents give up in frustration.

For this reason, the most important first step is to get your baby to understand that they *can* communicate with a sign-- *any* sign. Which sign your baby uses first is not the most important thing. The important thing is for them to experience the power they can wield with a single gesture-- and then they will become interested in learning the signs for everything. To get your baby on the fast track to that first sign, I recommend that parents start with two kinds of signs, what I like to call **Routine Signs** and **Motivating Signs**.

Routine Signs-

Most parents assume that the most important signs to start with are the ones for things that their baby would normally cry for-- usually things that go with daily routines, such as MILK, MORE, EAT, CHANGE, and FINISHED. These *are* important signs to use, because they will eventually help your baby to express their basic needs, and they also help your baby begin to realize the connection between your signs and various concepts, by seeing the same signs and concepts paired, repeatedly, during daily routines.

However, *because* your baby can already cry for these things, and because the crying is *effective*, they may not be as motivated to try an alternate method of communicating these concepts for basic needs. That's where the next group of signs comes in-- the Motivating Signs.

Motivating Signs-

The Motivating Signs, are signs for your baby's favorite things. Things that they would just love to ask about, tell you about, and get their little hands on. If they could talk, these are the things that your baby would like to have a conversation about. Things like KEYS, PHONE, DOG, CAT, AIRPLANE, MUSIC, BALL, CEILING FAN, and LIGHT all make great Motivating Signs.

Motivating Signs give your baby a way to express things that are powerfully interested in, yet have no other way to communicate! Imagine your baby is sitting in his/her highchair as you hustle around the kitchen preparing a meal. Suddenly, your baby notices the sound of a dog barking in the distance. You don't notice the dog barking at all, but your baby does, and is excited to share his/her observations with you. Your baby makes the sign for DOG by patting his thigh, and at first you are puzzled, because there is no dog in your kitchen, but then you listen, and YES, you *do* hear a dog barking down the street! You acknowledge your baby, "Yes, honey, I hear a doggy outside-- let's go see!" You are proud of your baby, and your baby is very proud of himself that he could get his message across and get real results!

Even if your baby's first sign is DOG or KEYS, signs like MILK and MORE will soon follow as baby realizes the power to communicate that's right in his/her little hands.