

The Positive Outcomes of Using Sign Language with Babies
By Dr Rosemary Lyons © 2017
(Psychologist – Ministry of Education – Rotorua – New Zealand)

History of Using Sign Language with Babies

The use of hearing babies using signing to communicate was first documented in the mid 1800s by William Whitney, an American linguist. He had noticed that hearing children of deaf parents used signs, as early as six months of age, to communicate with their parents. He also found that babies using sign language learned to speak at an earlier age than non-signing babies. It was not until the 1980s that baby signing was rediscovered by Dr. Joseph Garcia. He found the same results as Whitney and discovered that signing babies had a substantial vocabulary compared to same age non-signing babies.

In the late 1990's Professor Linda Acredolo (USA), and her colleagues, undertook a series of research projects examining the outcomes for hearing babies using signing to communicate. Acredolo found that teaching signing to babies resulted in less frustration, a closer bond with parents and a larger speaking vocabulary than same age peers. In the last 20 years the use of baby sign in the USA and United Kingdom (UK) has continued to grow and is used by millions of families and many early childcare centers.

New Zealand and Baby Sign Language

Karen Warburton was instrumental in introducing baby signing to New Zealand using her experiences with baby sign from the UK. Baby signing in NZ is based on New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), which is one of the three official languages of New Zealand: English, Māori and NZSL. The signs used for babies have been modified and made easier to use, because babies have less ability to manage their hands and fingers as effectively as adults.

Recent Research Findings on Using Sign Language with Babies

Babies ordinarily use gestures to communicate, such as turning towards a person, leaning in, smiling, waving, nodding or shaking their head. Baby signing can be thought of as an enhancement of what comes naturally to babies. Just as William Whitney had observed in the mid 1800s, the current research findings confirm that signing by babies supports what they do naturally when developing their communication skills, that the benefits extend into childhood and the relationships between baby and adults are enhanced.

Rogers and Milne gave a presentation to the New Zealand Association of Research in Education Conference, 2005, which summarised the research results of baby signing in New Zealand, the USA and UK. Rogers and Milne noted that the advantages of using baby sign fall into three themes: language development, emotional development and relationships. The gains made under each theme are listed below. If you would like more in-depth information about the studies, references are provided at the end of this article.

- Language development
 - ✓ Signing babies showed increased interest in books
 - ✓ Signing babies frequently talked sooner than non-signing peers
 - ✓ Word comprehension was enhanced
 - ✓ Parents spoke to signing babies more than non-signing peers
 - ✓ Language development was accelerated compared to non-signing peers
 - ✓ Toddlers who had signed as babies had larger vocabularies than same age peers who did not use baby sign
 - ✓ Children who used signing when babies, show a greater understanding of language and syntax (i.e., the way in which words are put together to make a grammatically correct sentence), because of their experiences in, and practice of language long before they were able to talk
 - ✓ Signing babies showed enhanced understanding of their world

- Emotional development
 - ✓ Confidence, self-esteem and trust were enhanced due to adults responding appropriately to baby's signals and requests
 - ✓ Emotional expressions of frustration were decreased
 - ✓ Emotional acting out/tantrums were decreased
 - ✓ Episodes of crying by signing babies were decreased
 - ✓ Calmness was increased
 - ✓ Toddlers, who had used signing as babies engaged in more sophisticated play than toddlers who were non-signing babies

- Relationship Benefits
 - ✓ Relationship were enhanced through more responsive, reciprocal, supportive and encouraging interactions with adults
 - ✓ Connection to important adults was enhanced through more successful and positive interactions
 - ✓ There were more positive emotional experiences during communication, e.g., fun, enhanced child-adult relationships

Learning to baby sign will enhance your interactions with your baby. Baby signing is fun, reduces baby's frustration, reduces the guessing you have to do about what baby wants and increases relationship quality between you and your baby. Baby sign is full of advantages for you and your baby.

References

- Acredolo, L & Goodwyn, S. (2000). *Baby minds, brain-building games your baby will love*. United States: Bantam Books
- Acredolo, L & Goodwyn, S. (2000). *The long term impact of symbolic gesturing during infancy on IQ age 8*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Infant Studies, July 18: Brighton, UK

- Berger, K (1991). *The developing person through childhood and adolescence 3rd Ed.* USA: Worth Publishers
- Goodwyn, S., Acredolo, L., & Brown, C. (2000). Impact of symbolic gesturing on early language development. *Journal of Nonverbal Behaviour*, 24, 81-103.
- Hatherly, A., & Sands, L. (2002). So what is different about learning stories? The First Years: Nga Tau Tuatahi. *New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, Vol 4 Issue 1.
- Holinger, P. (2003). *What babies say before they can talk. The nine signals infants use to express their feelings.* USA: Simon & Schuster.
- Owens, R. (2004). *Help your baby to talk. Introducing the new shared communication method to jump start language and have a smarter and happier baby.* USA: The Berkley Publishing Group
- Rogers, C., and Milne, R. (2005). *The impacts of baby sign on communication.* A paper presented to the New Zealand Association of Research on Education Conference, Dec 6-9: Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Volterra, V., Caselli, M. C., Capirci, O., & Pizzuto (2005). Gesture and the emergence and development of language. In M. Tomasello and D. Slobin (Eds). *Elizabeth Bates: A Festschrift.* Mahwah, N.J:Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Warburton, K. (2004). *Baby talk – Baby sign language for hearing children.* New Zealand: Astra Print.