



Considerations in the Use of Sign Language with Very Young Children

Ideas provided for team consideration and discussion only
Ideas can be adapted for use with older students and adults.

Before teaching signs:

1. Pointing is universal signing. It is an early developmental communication skill. Children who have not yet learned to point will benefit from being shaped and taught to use pointing. Pointing precedes expressive language in the development of most children. Systematically teach pointing. Gently shape the child's hand to point to a desired object. The child needs to get the idea that when s/he points to an object or person there will be a predictable, pleasant and immediate response. In the beginning, do not ask the child to point just to name or indicate. Help them point to get the things and people that they want to access.
2. When teaching pointing, initially teach children to actually touch the item with their pointing finger tip. (Contact pointing.) When pointing is well established, set up situations in which the child can learn to point towards something or someone without actually touching it (non-contact pointing.) In the beginning of this step, they can point and come within just an inch or two of the object or person.
3. While teaching pointing, signing, or speech, be responsive to ALL of the communicative intentions of young children regardless of which signal is used by the child. For example, if the child looks at the desired object, respond. If the child touches the desired object, respond, even if in that moment you were hoping to elicit speech or a speech sound. The more the child is responded to, the more signals s/he will send. ALL safe communication needs to be honored. You can honor the signal, and then do another trial working for speech or a more desired response. Some children will not ever speak. Some children will develop speech but it may never be sufficient to communicate all messages. We need to develop, nurture and teach many forms of personal expression in addition to targeting the development of speech.
4. Teach pointing with what appears to be the dominant hand. Then teach the child to point using either hand. Remember that some children may not be able to cross their midline so we want them to be able to point with either hand to either the front or sides of their bodies.

5. When the child points to an object or person, say the name of the object or person, instead of saying “this” or “that.” We want the child to know the names of many people and objects both receptively and expressively.

When considering what signs to teach:

6. Choose signs that make something wonderful happen every time from the point of view of the child. The child needs saliency: the knowledge that when s/he makes the sign, a predictable, pleasant and immediate response will occur.
7. Consider the shape of the signing hands. You will need to physically shape the child’s hands to sign. Be sure to choose signs that are “promptable,” signs that you will be able to shape the most easily. Signs in which both hands are in the same shape (“book,” “play”) are easier to prompt than signs in which each hand must have a different shape (“jump.”) One-handed signs (“milk,” “candy”) are easier to prompt than two-handed signs.
8. DO NOT allow the child to shape your hands into the sign to get the desired response. This teaches the child that s/he needs *four* hands to sign. If the child reaches for your hands during signing, go ahead and positively shape the child’s hands and make the associated response happen.
9. When either you or the child signs, be sure to say the word signed aloud. Try to make your spoken word correspond to the timing of the child’s sign production of the sign. Do not insist that the child vocalize during signing, but continuously associate spoken words with signs. Be sure the child hears only the corresponding word when the sign is shaped or made. The idea is to connect each sign with only one word or concept, especially in the initial stages of training.
10. Introduce signs that are conceptually different in early training. For example the concepts of “eat” and “drink” are conceptually very similar, as are “cookie” and “cracker.” “Walk and jump” are conceptually very similar. However “eat” and “tickles” are conceptually very different. “Swing” and “hug” are conceptually very different. Think about the concepts and be sure the child will not be confused by the meaning of the signs.
11. Initially choose signs that are made on different parts of the body on in different parts of the front of the body. For example, “eat” and “candy” are both made on the face. “Milk” and “car” are both made in front of the chest. If the child moves her hand towards her face, we will not be able to distinguish what her intent was and therefore cannot shape the sign or

accurately respond. However, “car” and “cracker” are made in two different places and the child’s intent may be clearer to us when s/he moves to that part of the body.

12. Consider “iconicity” that is, how much does the sign look like what it stands for. The sign for “drink,” for example looks like raising a cup or glass to your lips. The sign for “jump” looks like two little legs (your index and middle finger) jumping up and down on the palm of your other hand. Children may at first best acquire signs that look like what they represent.
13. Keep your signs in front of your body in the “signing space” which is between your shoulders and from the top of your head to just above your waist.
14. It is fine to exaggerate your signs by holding them longer, but resist the urge to make them extend beyond the signing space. The child may not be able to track such large movements and may even be alarmed by it.
15. Signs are not made on the hands. Signs are made by the hands, face and body at the same time and use the signing space. Be sure to keep your hands near your face or chest and hold them and wait for the child’s visual attention to come to YOU. Do not put your hands into the line of sight of the child and “disconnect” your signs from YOU (your face.) This is very important for children who have early signs of difficulty or delays in social interaction and relationship development skills.
16. Keep a dictionary of all signs introduced to the child. Write down a description of how you signed, how the child was prompted (which hand of the adult prompted which hand of the child, etc.) If you can, take some digital pictures of how the sign was made or make a visual recording.

When the child begins to sign spontaneously, write down how the child makes the signs when not prompted. Take a digital photo (or make a video) of the child making his own version of the sign, or record an adult making the sign the way the child does. Give a copy of this signing dictionary in multiple formats to everyone who works with or interacts with the child. In this way, you create a history of all signs taught and teach everyone how to recognize movements that the child makes that may be a sign. Your children may be using the signs you are teaching today for years or decades. They need to be recognized and responded to by all communicative partners, now and later.

17. Don’t try to teach connected language in signs until the child has many labels for people, objects and events. Consider the language development of typical children: they use and understand hundreds or even thousands

- of words in single utterances before they move to connected language use.
18. Only teach signs such as “want” or “more” when the child has many labels of people objects and events. Again we want to parallel typical language development. If children learn “want” or “more” before they can name or sign all of the possible things they may want (and perhaps cannot even point to what they want,) parents and staff may see the child sign “more,” but if the referent is not in our line of vision, we may not be able to understand “more WHAT?” We do not want children to experience frustration while using their signs. This would decrease their use of signs and could interfere with relationship development.
 19. As the child progresses in signing, resist the temptation to insist on full sentences. Again we want to parallel typical development when we can. If a child signs “cookie,” that means, “I want cookie.” If they sign, “swing” that means “I want to swing.” In the beginning just say the word when it is signed (see above.) Over time you can model with your speech an expanded sentence. For example, the child signs “drink” and you say, “I want a drink.”
 20. Be careful what you teach because someone might learn it. Be sure to teach signs and words that will endure and be appropriate at many stages of life.
 21. Have fun signing!