



## sign me up!

START TEACHING YOUR BABY SIGN LANGUAGE AT SIX MONTHS AND BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM AT NINE. IT MAY SOUND FAR-FETCHED BUT SIGN LANGUAGE IN INFANTS AND TODDLERS HAS BEEN PROVEN TO WORK

WORDS TATYANA LEONOV

**M**y son Lachlan was communicating with me at 11 months using sign language,' says mum Jenny McConnell, 'and at 14 months, he was signing words like "milk", "all gone", "finished" and "bed". If he ever grizzled for anything I'd encourage him to use sign language instead. I taught him Auslan, which is used by the deaf community in Australia.'

McConnell, who has a hearing impairment, became interested in signing when she met with a deaf group at her church in 1996. A teacher, she went on to complete a Masters of Special Education in 2002. Four years later she started the Tiny Hands Talk baby sign language system.

'Lachlan is three now and is speaking well,' she says. 'I still sign when singing songs, telling stories, and introducing him to numbers and the alphabet, and every so often I've told him to say "thank you" or "please" to someone, which would prompt him to say it, without me "saying" a thing. Sign language can be used as little or as much as you like, so there's no need to pull your child out of their natural environment to "teach" signs.'

### WHY SIGNING FOR BABIES?

Babies learn to talk during the first two years of their life. 'Oohs' and 'aahs' may occur in the first month or two, and by 10 to 14 months babies usually utter their first word. Although there is a huge variance in the rate that speech develops in a child, generally an infant will start uttering sentences at 18 to 24 months. But imagine your baby being able to express their hunger, pain or discomfort before their first birthday?

'Communicating with children before they've mastered the art of conversation can be pretty frustrating,' says Jackie Durnin, who developed the *Australian Baby Hands* guide to sign language after

realising there were few baby signing resources available to Australians. 'Throughout the world, the use of baby sign language is increasing in popularity, in the home and child care environments, because it helps pre-verbal babies and toddlers to develop their early communication skills and reduce the frustrations of the "terrible twos".'

Durnin, who has studied sign language in both Ireland and Australia, explains baby sign language is not new. 'Parents of deaf children, and deaf parents of hearing children, have long known that young babies can learn to communicate in basic signs before they learn to talk. Experience tells us that babies easily learn to copy grown-ups and wave goodbye, play peek-a-boo and clap their hands,' she says. 'They learn through repetition in context, encouragement and praise. The path to learning baby sign language is no different.'

There are two main categories of signs when teaching baby. Need-based signs are those where the baby can express something they require such as 'milk', 'sleepy', 'hungry' and 'change me'. Motivating signs focus on interesting things to bub, for example 'friend', 'play' and 'fun'. Generally it is advisable to teach need-based signs first so you'll be able to grasp what your baby is trying to say.

### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Some experts are concerned that using baby sign language with an infant could take priority over parents talking to their kids. Others worry that children may not feel the need to communicate with words as quickly since they can get what they want through sign – possibly stunting the development of speech. This, however, is not the case.

Babies readily acquire symbolic gestures, and proponents of signing say it gives them a way to communicate their thoughts and needs. Because they are able to acquire the ability to express

### HOW TO BEGIN

Try these tips from Jackie Durnin, author of *Australian Baby Hands*, on teaching your baby how to sign:

#### START SIMPLE

Introducing signs to your baby one at a time works best. Start with no more than five words. Once your baby has begun to respond to those words, you can introduce more.

#### BE PATIENT

Signing won't happen overnight. Be assured that your baby is learning from you, and will – when the time is right – let you know that they understand through signing. This learning process introduces invaluable interaction with your baby.

#### BE CONSISTENT

The key is to incorporate sign into your everyday life. Each time you use a word, develop an automatic reaction to sign and say the word out loud.

#### ENCOURAGE YOUR BABY

When your child attempts to communicate by signing something they need, don't worry if it is only somewhat correct. Praise them, then say the word and repeat the sign correctly. Then give your child what they have asked for. This positive feedback will encourage your baby to continue signing.

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their needs early on, their mind develops a rapid interest in increasing communication. It can also reduce frustration for both parent and child.

Research into sign language for hearing infants and toddlers began in the US in 1982 with Professors Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn. A 2005 study found that when using baby sign language and talking to your baby at the same time, on average the children in the studies at 36 months were speaking at an equivalent level of non-signing 47-month-olds. So signing not only helps you communicate with your child but helps to fast-forward their speaking abilities.

Encouraging your baby to sign may also assist with other developmental aspects. Another study found that signing babies have more advanced mental development, improved cognitive skills, improved relationships and larger spoken vocabularies. They say that just as crawling motivates a child to walk, so too does signing motivate a child to talk.

### WHY AUSLAN?

The term "Auslan" was coined by Associate Professor Trevor Johnston in the early 1980s, though the language is much older. Auslan was recognised by the Australian government as a "community language other than English" and the preferred language of the deaf community in policy statements in 1987 and 1991. Today there are courses teaching it as a second language in schools and even a diploma at TAFE. Though baby sign is normally only temporarily used, it makes sense to use a system already in use Australia-wide.

Both Tiny Hands Talk and Australian Baby Hands use 100 percent Auslan. 'This is important because you are offering the same vocabulary that is used by the deaf community within Australia. In essence, you are offering children a bilingual setting, developing a foundation that may initiate an interest in different languages and cultures,' says McConnell.

In some cases there are a number of signs for the same word. This is why Durnin thought it would make sense to use only Auslan signs, picking the easier options to mimic for baby. 'By utilising an established set of signs, unique to our country, it makes it easier to transition your child to different settings such as child care, as there is a chance these children too will be using Australian sign language,' she says.

### GROWTH WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Baby sign language has grown quite rapidly in Australia. Google "baby sign language" and you will find pages of information. Parents want to communicate with their child and these resources make it all the easier. You can also purchase books, CDs, DVDs, posters and more.

One popular children's TV show that has been utilising sign language for over 10 years is *Play School* on the ABC. Sofya Gollan is a guest presenter and does between six to 12 new episodes a year, though she is actually programmed more frequently due to re-runs. Gollan does everything the other presenters do but in sign language. 'I try to ensure the signs I use are Auslan - or are visual gestures that can be easily understood,' she says.

Hey Dee Ho Music, which runs in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, also combine part of their program with Auslan, including "sing and sign" activities in their regular music classes. Within weeks most children are able to use sign language to communicate words and phrases.

Baby sign language can assist parents in understanding their baby or pre-verbal toddler's needs, help language-challenged children communicate better, and is said to assist with language development. Of course, it is also a fun and unique way to interact with your child. As Durnin says, 'Sign language is beautiful visually. Learning to sign has no goals to achieve; it is enough to enjoy the journey as much as the destination.' ●

### RESOURCES

#### FURTHER READING

- *Australian Baby Hands* by Jackie Durnin (Baby Hands, \$29.95). Available from [australianbabyhands.com](http://australianbabyhands.com).
- *Hands Up & Sing* DVD (\$40). Available from [tinyhandstalk.com](http://tinyhandstalk.com).
- *SignBabies with Sofya from Playschool* DVD (\$19.95). Available from [signbabies.com.au](http://signbabies.com.au) in December.

#### USEFUL CONTACTS

- [australianbabyhands.com](http://australianbabyhands.com) Information on baby sign language and its benefits.
- [tinyhandstalk.com](http://tinyhandstalk.com) Learn more about the Tiny Hands Talk program and where it's being held.
- [heydeehomusic.com.au](http://heydeehomusic.com.au) For information on Sign & Sing classes and locations.