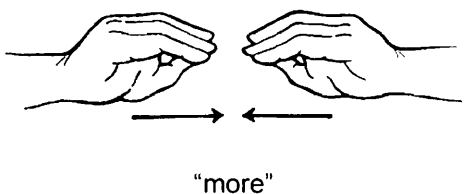


A Sign of the Times: Sign Language in Child Care



Almost every adult has, at one time or another, seen people using sign language. Whether on television, in the mall, or in church, sign language is becoming an increasingly familiar sight. It is also becoming increasingly common in child care programs. A number of care providers already use sign language to help young children learn important early communication skills. But many providers are surprised to learn that children with all different abilities and disabilities—not just children who have a hearing impairment—benefit when signs and gestures are used to accent verbal information.

Take a moment to watch children in your program who don't use words to communicate. Imagine, perhaps, a toddler who wants to be picked up. Before the child learns to use words or combinations of words to communicate, he or she will develop a system of gestures to express needs and desires. Sign language can be thought of as a way to build on a child's natural desire to communicate using gestures. As we teach signs, we are actually teaching a more sophisticated way to use and respond to gestures. The "sign" a toddler uses to indicate an interest in being picked up represents one of the important ways young children communicate.

It is true that sign language is an important part of communication development for a child with a hearing impairment. But young children without hearing impairments are being taught to use sign language, too. As a care provider, you might have a child in your program who uses words and signs or who uses signs for 15-20 words and makes sounds (but not recognizable words) to accompany those signs. Why do parents, speech therapists, and early intervention specialists use signs with children without hearing impairments? First, signs build on children's ability to use and imitate gestures. We can show a child the sign for *more* (gather fingers and thumb on each hand and bring both hands together at midline) and follow it up with taking the child's hands to help him or her shape the sign to get a feel for what more looks like and feels like. It is more difficult to help a child imitate and produce new sounds. Second, sign language is a wonderful way to provide additional information to a child who is learning to talk. When signs and spoken words are used together, the child benefits from both visual and auditory cues. In a way, signs emphasize what you are saying and add another means of ensuring comprehension.

With everything else that has to be done in a busy child care day, it might be hard to think about learning signs--much less using them in your program. Many vocational/technical schools, universities, and other community programs offer sign language courses and this may be a good way to become familiar with sign language. Even if you can't take a class, take a few minutes to learn the signs a child in your program is learning to use. Remember, a very young child learns a few signs at a time. You can often learn a child's entire repertoire of signs in a few minutes of conversation with the parent or speech therapist and, in addition, receive valuable advice about when and how to use the signs to give the child opportunities to communicate throughout your daily routines.

You may be surprised to learn that the term "sign language" has been used as a generic term for different varieties of sign communication. With this in mind, it is important to use the signs that are most helpful and meaningful to individual children even when they differ from illustrations in a sign language manual or from what was taught in a sign language course (although this background is helpful).

One of the exciting things that happens when you begin to use signs with one child is that other children are learning and practicing a whole new language! Imagine being able to tell parents that you are teaching their young children sign language. One program learned the signs for familiar animals, colors, and favorite food and practiced them daily. Children went home with new skills and pride in learning a "new" way to communicate. Sign language is an exciting addition to integrated child care programs—one whose time has definitely come.

Making It Work

Sing and Sign

Child care providers and young children are already adept at communicating with signs. We use gestures routinely to punctuate requests, express emotion, and to emphasize or illustrate words. We encourage movement and participation in songs, stories, and finger plays.

In general, incorporating sign language becomes expedient when any child in our program is learning to communicate with signs or is supplementing limited verbalization with sign language. Most child care providers become committed to incorporating simple sign language throughout their program's activities and routines because they are so aware of how important communication is to children's development.

One way of becoming familiar—and adept—with sign language is to use signs during familiar songs, rhymes, and games—especially ones with repeated words. Until children become more adept, use the sign for the first letter of proper names and animal sounds. For example, you can use the signs for some of the key words while singing the song *Old McDonald Had A Farm*: farm, cow, horse, pig. You can use the finger spellings for M for McDonald and the letters E, I, and O while singing E-I, E-I, O (at first, you will have to slow the song down to do this). You can also use finger spelling for M, N, and O to indicate moo, moo, neigh, neigh, and oink, oink. To indicate animal sounds, move the hand out from the mouth while forming the letter; this gives a visual cue of the idea of "sound from the mouth." Be sure whatever "shorthand" sign you choose can eventually be extended into a more complete form of the word. Finger spelling can be found in books or web sites that include the sign language alphabet.

Because sign language is a visual-gestural language, it is tricky to understand the appropriate sign and its placement simply from an illustration without demonstration. Do not let this discourage you from using sign language with children, but take advantage of parents and others who are able to demonstrate signs for you; and be willing to allow them to correct or modify your technique.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *The Speech Therapist and mom are using sign to communicate with Jeffrey. They have asked me to help him by practicing the signs during the child care routines and activities. By the end of the day, I forget to include his special words more often than I remember. How can I incorporate his language into my program?*

ANSWER: First, you get a pat on the back for your attempt to incorporate sign into your program rather than teach sign to the children. Children learn sign language in much the same way as they learn spoken language, by imitation and motivation. Think of sign language as a natural way of communicating just like English, French, or Chinese—and you can learn to communicate with a French-speaking person if you are willing to learn the language. What this means is that one way of incorporating sign in your program is to use it for key words with all the kids in all the activities and routines of the day—as much as possible; for example, choose words like *more*, *shoe*, *rain*—or the words Jeffrey is learning—and pair the sign with the word every time you use it. For practicing a particular sign, either let the sign dictate activities or let favorite activities dictate the sign. Start with one sign, such as *more*. Post a picture of the sign to remind you, staff, older children, and parents. Look for (and collect) ways to use the sign/word throughout your

typical activities. Now pair the sign with the word *more* every time you say it: *more* milk?, *more* blocks, *more* helpers, one *more* chair. Encourage the children to use the sign when they make requests for *more*. Sing *The More We Get Together* at circle time. I'm sure you are getting the idea, but just in case, let's try it with *apple*. Again, post the sign for *apple*; read *Ten Apples Up On Top* (Dr. Seuss); cut apple slices as a group activity and serve for lunch or snack; place plastic/wooden apples in the housekeeping corner; get out the puzzle of fruits, etc.

Doing these things keeps a child's method of communication from being kept secret from other children or treated as unusual or *different*. And what a wonderful skill children are learning—another language they can use all their lives!

