

## Infant and Toddler Sign Language

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

**MELISSA  
RATSCH:**

Just to introduce myself-- my name is Melissa Ratsch. I teach American Sign language at Washington State University, both online and in the classroom. I've been teaching it for 13 years now here at WSU.

I grew up with a sister who is deaf. So I had been exposed to that my whole life-- deafness, sign language, and whatnot. I've been a sign language interpreter-- I have my certification-- it's been going on 16, 17 years now. Love working with it. I'm a co-developer of an infant and toddler sign language course that-- when I lived in Pullman, we used it down there and use it up here in Spokane as well.

Just to give you an introduction-- most of you have probably already seen the video, but you've also probably heard how important American Sign Language can be-- or baby signs, whatever you want to call it-- can help with your small children, that they can produce words on their hands without being able to use their voices yet. And it's a great tool.

Today we're going to learn how to do it, and what to do, what not to do, along those lines. So we're first going to talk about the benefits of signing with your child-- and it may be your own personal child, or a grandchild, a friend, or maybe you watch another child that you have in your home. It can be for anybody. Your child can communicate their wants and needs, before they can verbalize them.

Obviously, they have more control of their hands than they do their vocal chords and creating words with their mouths. So their hands come into play and become their communicators. It enhances verbal language development.

I say this because oftentimes people kind of get nervous to teach their young ones sign language before they can talk, because they've been told or they have this idea that if they're going to sign, then they're going to never learn how to speak. Sometimes it can be the opposite where others may just hold onto the sign language for a little bit longer, but then when they do start to talk, oftentimes it can be more words at once as opposed to just one word here and there.

It creates a strong foundation for early literacy skills. Part of that has to do with using both

sides of their brain at the same time. One side is the auditory side and the other side is the visual. So getting the visual language as well as hearing it increases their vocabulary skill as well as their literacy skills. And it empowers the child to initiate conversation, instead of us as the parents always making it happen. They can express their wants and needs with this, without us having to try to go through a list of what could it possibly be.

Some more benefits-- it does reduce frustrations in the child-- and this is very common. As you probably know if you've been around small children, they tend to get a little upset if we don't understand what they're saying right away, especially if they can't verbalize it. It can cause tantrums at times. And this way, it can cause a lot of reduction in that, because they can tell you, I want my bottle, or I want more of this or I want to eat, or I want to drink. Once you've established and they know those signs then they can tell you that, as opposed to them just grunting and pointing, or whatever, and you trying to figure out what they're trying to say, or what they're trying to get across as well.

I forgot to mention, like Cory said, if you guys have any questions on anything that I'm saying in the midst of all this, don't hesitate to put it in the chat box and I'll watch for that, and answer them.

It stimulates intellectual and emotional development, because, again, you're working with both sides of the brain at the same time, getting them to see if they can initiate conversation.

There's an emotional side where they feel more secure in the fact that they can tell you what they want as opposed to hoping you're understanding what they're saying. And it strengthens the bond between the parent and the child. Obviously, you're taking the time to sit down and interact with them and teach them these signs on a daily basis.

And it may result in a higher IQ. This is based on research by Doctors Acredolo and Goodwyn. They are kind of the forerunners of baby science, or signing with your infant and toddler. Back in the '80s, '90s, they did a study where they had about 150 or so infants that they followed all the way through about fourth or fifth grade. And by the time the kids got that far, they still had a large number of their original group that they started with, and tested them-- those in their classrooms that hadn't learned sign language as a child, as well as the ones that they had in their core group.

And the results were that they had the higher IQ. Obviously, this is on a case by case basis. Everybody isn't going to necessarily have this happen, but it's a good chance that it could do

that.

How about different schools of thought? ASL, which is American Sign Language versus baby signs. ASL, American Sign Language, is the language of the deaf and the deaf community in the United States and parts of Canada.

American Sign Language is not a universal language, like oftentimes people believe it is. Every country actually has its own sign system. And so ASL is just used in America and, like I said, parts of Canada.

But it is the language of the deaf community, where baby signs were created by hearing people to be used with an infant and toddler-- just for that short stage of life, to be able to communicate with their child at that time, where the signs wouldn't necessarily be the same in ASL versus baby signs. The difference between the two-- again it's the official language of the deaf, ASL is, American Sign Language. It's accepted as a foreign language in most universities across the United States.

Fourth most common language in the US. Some places I saw even said third most common. And if your child knows American Sign Language, you're teaching them those signs that others will recognize them if they have learned it as well, and it may interest the child to continue learning ASL as a second language.

The difference between the two-- baby signs are signs and gestures that were made up by children and adults. And they are not necessarily deaf either. Others may not understand the signs or gestures because they are different. They're adapted signs for a child to be able to use, with the dexterity they have at that point.

And it only works temporarily, in the fact that once they've learned these signs, it's not like they can take them and move on and interact and sign with people in the deaf community, or others who use sign language. Because they wouldn't necessarily recognize the signs because they're not the same as American Sign Language. So I hope that makes sense.

Personally, when I have used this with my own children and what I recommend to others is to use the ASL, just for these reasons listed. And it's not that baby signs are wrong or bad, and they may work perfect for your family, and that's great. It's just what I would recommend. When you begin signing with them, research indicates the best time to start signing is at six to seven months old. And they say about eight to nine months is when they can produce the

signs.

And the reason to start six to seven months is that's when they say that short and long term memory in a baby starts to be ready to be used and is more developed at that time. Up to six months, it's not as developed, so they wouldn't remember as much as they would at six to seven months of age. An eight to nine month old can produce signs-- I have seen as young as in the six to seven month range.

I have a nephew who is deaf. My sister-- his mom-- and her husband are both deaf as well. And so obviously that's their language-- American Sign Language-- and so he was always exposed to it, and not as much the verbal. And so he actually started signing his first few signs at six to seven months old. It's darling to watch. Obviously, they're modified. It's not exactly how they're shown, but you can definitely tell that they're signing the signs that they have seen.

And children learn to develop obviously at different rates. So these are just general guidelines. They're not something you have to stick to-- whatever time you feel is best for your child, or the ones you're around.

How do you begin? It's best to begin with very few signs. The ones that are highly recommended to start with are eat, milk, and more. More looks like this. You have kind of a flat O hand shape, on both hands. And they just tap. Oftentimes-- and you probably noticed on watching the video-- that you saw kids doing this. They will adapt the signs to how their hands can form it, but it's in the same movement as how you have shown them. So more is here. Again, oftentimes you'll see it like this, as well.

Eat is here. Again, the flat O looking one. It's like you're putting food in your mouth. It also is the sign for food as well. And this one again, you'll see them sometimes modify it with just their pointer finger. They maybe can't get their fingers to do this exactly, so they will do this one.

And milk. It kind of looks like you're milking a cow. You're just squeezing your palm together, making a fist, over and over. This is also the sign for bottle. So this is used with infants. You would sign it in front of them, like this. And so they would know-- you'd have the bottle and then sign it like this.

And these three are ones that are used throughout the day of an infant all the way through toddler stage. Do you want more to eat? Do you want more of your milk or your bottle? Do you

want more of whatever toy they have? And obviously, you'd be using the verbal as well.

And repetition is the key. It's not something that you're going to show twice a day, and that's it. It's something that you're going to want to include in their daily activities, when they're getting up in the morning, or do you want to eat, do you want more, bath or whatever it happens to be. Try to incorporate it here and there throughout the day, so it's not just once or twice that they're seeing it.

You really want to keep it simple, and not throw a bunch of signs at them to begin with. Start with just a few, like the eat, milk, and more. Maybe there's another one that you want to add in, maybe mom-- which looks like this-- or dad, daddy, up here. Start with just a few and wait for them to produce the two or three that you're starting with, before you start introducing more, so that they can feel confident in what they're doing.

It does take time, as well. It's not something that they're going to start producing overnight. It may take a few weeks. It may take a month or two, before you start seeing it. I remember personally with my first son, using it with him, and I was going to start right away, when he was a tiny baby, and constantly use it.

Well, that didn't happen. I didn't really start using it with him until he was right around one year old. And the fact that he didn't produce it right away-- I was like oh, you know, is he ever going to get this. And then, he did. It was just like it clicked. And you'd start to see it here and there.

And it is amazing when they start to do it. And it's exciting for them too, I think. Getting to see the excitement that mom or dad understands me. More of this, and it comes. And it's exciting to see their faces.

Repetition and patience. Again, it's not going to happen overnight. It is going to take persistence as well on your part. And again, the repetition. When you're reading a book with the child, if there is one of the words of the signs that you have taught them, you can point to it. And maybe there was a bottle in the book that you're using, you can say, oh, look, a bottle, and use it over and over again.

And making it fun with songs, games, and books. You don't have to know every word of the song, all the signs to it. Just one word of the song, you can use-- you know, more, or whatever-- that they can see it over and over. And they're singing that song, or playing that game, or reading a specific book, getting to see it is well. So you be creative with it, coming up

with different games to use, throughout their day. It can make it fun for them.

And obviously, praise and reward them for their efforts. This is something new to them, but once they figure out how well it works, they will use it a lot-- at least that's been my own experience. So praise them. Let them know how excited you are that they have learned that and they can now communicate with you.

Consistency. Again, you want to make sure that they are seeing it often. And you can help the child form their hand shapes. And it's not something that needs to be perfect. Obviously, if you're working with a two and three year old, their hands are a little more limber, and they can produce the signs that look a little more like the actual sign is supposed to look.

But with a small child, see them doing it, and it may be a modified version, and that's okay, if that's all their fingers can do at that time. But you would know in the context which one they're actually using at that time. And so when they do use it, you know it's not the exact way it's done. But you can still understand what they're saying.

You don't want force them, obviously, because then it's not fun for them. It's not an excitement of being able to communicate, and look how wonderful this is. It can become a drudgery. So you just want to take the times that they seem excited about it, or not working with them when they're super tired, and things like that. But you just want to intrigue them with it

And look for the signs that the child may be inventing, because when they see you using your hands and pointing at things, and this means this, they will sometimes start to do that themselves. I know, for example, with my own child, we finally figured out he was talking about the chandelier over the dinner table. He kept doing something up here, and he was probably about 18 months or so. And we finally figured out, it's the light. He's nodding his head. And so they do. They'll come up with things on their own at times, and it's pretty neat to see.

You do want to make sure you have their attention. Obviously, it is a visual language, so you need to have them looking at you, obviously. And you want to keep it in context. So if you're talking about their bottle, not just throwing it out there randomly, but you have held it up every time that it's time to eat, they're having it. Even if the mom is nursing, she can still use that as meaning bottle as well, associating it with time to eat, time to have your bottle, or whatever.

Making sure it's completely in context until they start producing it on their own, and they can link it and know, oh, yeah, this means bottle. This means I get to eat. And then from there-- if

you do this to them-- then they'll know that that's what's going to come. You want to make sure that you're using it in context.

Or maybe if you have introduced mommy or daddy, and waiting for whoever to come home in the evening. And maybe if it's dad that comes home later-- Oh look, daddy's coming. Look, there's daddy-- where he's actually in the room. Or maybe at dinner time, pointing at them, or at breakfast, oh, there's daddy, or mommy. Or having that person actually be there, until they can start producing the sign, and linking them to who it is. And then you can use it outside of context for them to remember it.

And obviously, the right frame of mind. It's not at the end of the day, when you're maybe frazzled, or whatever. You just want to make sure that both of you are ready to be engaged in it. And it's not that you have to set them down, and now is our time to learn these signs. Just integrate it, here and there throughout the day-- just random times, but again, in the context of the sign that you're teaching them.

And you can be the example. Maybe you and your spouse-- the sign or signs that you're working on, you can show them to each other as well, that they can see that you're using it, that mom or dad, or brother or sister are using it as well. And let your child explore the home. It allows for ample signing opportunities. Do you want more of this, or that? You can learn different animal signs, after they've established the eat, milk, and more, or the first few.

And learn them yourself. There are several websites out there with ASL dictionaries, and you can learn on your own as well, and just gradually introduce them to your child. And obviously, if your child's older-- 18 months, two, two and a half-- they can definitely start to bring on a few more, because they'll tend to grasp it a little quicker, but not always.

Teach other family members and caregivers the signs that you're teaching your child. It's very, very important to do that, because you want your childhood to know that these, the communication be it with your hands, and not verbally, that will work with everybody that they interact with, and not just mom, or not just dad, or not just day care. Because if they just know that oh, only mom knows what I'm saying. I'm saying this and she'll give me my bottle. But if I do this to grandma, and grandma just looks at me and smiles, then the frustration can come in, of the child not getting the response that he or she is looking for. And so if you take a few minutes to teach those that are around your child-- a significant amount of time, but it's very important that they can understand them as well.

The transition from signs to speech. It's as if crawling is to walking, that one little step in between, where they can communicate, obviously, nonverbally using their hands and visual ways to communicate. And then once they do start talking, usually the signs will go to the wayside. Because now-- oh, I can talk to mom through the walls. I don't have to be looking at our face to face and telling her what I need or telling dad that I want more of something. And it's another one of those things that's finished, but not forgotten.

And I know this definitely is true with my own son, because they were times even when he did start to talk, and wasn't signing very much, that if there was a word that he was saying that I wasn't quite understanding, it was very similar, for one example, grandpa, which was papa, and then his bottle, baba, bottle or baba, or whatever how he said it. But I couldn't tell which one he was trying to say, he was-- grandpa-- oh, OK. He was talking about grandpa, so I would kind of see him, I don't get it, I'm not getting it, and then you would use the sign. So even though, he was verbal, he would still throw in the sign if something wasn't being understood. So it's not like they completely forget them, because they usually don't. It's just that, obviously, verbal communication sinks in a little quicker than a visual way to communicate.

Here are your resources. Cory has a PDF of this. If you guys are interested and would like to have a copy of it, she can make sure that you do get a copy of those. These are kind of the books that we used for developing our course as well as the very last one there list, Signing Times. And there's Baby Signing Time, and there's Signing Time. They are great videos.

And I'm pretty sure most libraries-- public or county libraries-- offer these videos and if not, you can definitely find them online and maybe even on YouTube as well. There's cartoons. There's real people in the videos. You can actually see the child or baby doing the signs. And the gal who produces the videos, and is on them signing, she is great. And she makes it very fun and very entertaining.

There's everything from going to the zoo, learning different categories of signs, like birthday parties or people in your neighborhood, and things like that, where it's something where you're not necessarily able to teach them all these new signs. But at the same time, you're making dinner and you want to put them down and let them watch a 20 minute video of Signing Time. And they're being educated on it as well. I highly recommend those. I use them my own kids.

All right. I probably talked a little too quickly for some of you. I usually tend to get through it a



little faster than I think I'm going to. Do any of you have any questions at all?

You can go ahead and use your talk button, if you would like, or you can type it into the chat room at the bottom. You're welcome, Summer. Hopefully, you can take some of this and run with it.

Have any of you started using signs yet with your child or grandchildren, or anything? How sweet. You'll see it once they do start-- once you start seeing it. I kind of don't know if you're as the parent more excited, or the child is. That's great.

Yeah, a few more signs. Obviously, the eat, milk, and more. Mom is here. Just your thumb on your chin. All female signs are below the nose area, and male signs are above. So, dad, daddy. And grandpa, comes off. Grandpa. Or you'll see it twice. Grandpa, grandpa. Or grandma, grandma. And sometimes they'll do it with their finger where thumbs are not always as easy for them, depending on how old they are.

I'm trying to think of a few others. This is a good one. No, because you have to say that every once in a while with small children. Looks like this. You have two fingers here, coming down onto your thumb.

The other thing I forgot to mention is, for example, the sign, please, is here, just a flat hand and just circles on your chest.

And sorry, can be a fist, or your thumb to the side, either way. Same motion. And this, I'm sure, if you've ever worked with toddlers, there are times when you are teaching them their manners and you want them to say thank you. You can't force them to use their voice to tell them thank you, that you're wanting to maybe tell grandma thank you for the cookie. And some of them tend to be a little stubborn at times, and not do it.

But with sign language, can take their hand-- the sign for thank you looks like this-- where you can take their hand to their mouth and tell them thank you, and-- good job, you said thank you for the cookie. That was very nice of you. So you're still kind of in control of making them say what you want them to say to somebody, especially with manners.

Or sorry-- they broke something of their brother or sisters, or some toy, and they don't want to say sorry. Again, maybe a little bit of stubbornness kicks in, where you can take her hand and say tell them you're sorry. Good job, you told them you're sorry. So you can help them in that

regard as well.

The sign for love is here. This on both hands-- love. But you can also say I love you with one hand, [INAUDIBLE] here. If you have the I, the L, and the Y all together. I love you.

Yes, especially with the hearing loss, this would definitely be helpful. And maybe something, Summer for, your son to continue with, depending on if the level of hearing loss stays where it's at, or not. It would be something that maybe even as he progresses and uses it throughout school as well. That would be great.

Any other signs that you'd like to see? Or any other questions? This is bath. Kind of looks like you're washing your body. Bath.

Oh, yes. That is a great one. The sign for hurt looks like this. And you can tell them that this is owie. Do have an owie? Show mommy, and say owie. It looks like your fingers don't quite touch. It looks like this.

Yes. This one-- the sign for diaper-- and you can use it not just to go get a diaper, or whatever, but you can also use it to have them show you, did you go potty, and I actually have to stand up for this one. The actual sign for diaper is you have the two fingers here. Let me adjust the camera a little bit. Sorry about this. Down on your waist. Diaper.

The modified version that they use for a small child is diaper. They just kind of touch their bum, tap it. And that would be when they're still using a diaper. You can use those.

But if you're working on potty training, this is the sign for toilet or bathroom. Just a T, and it shakes. And you can even modify it, if you needed to, if their little fingers can't quite get the thumb in the middle yet. Or even teach them to just point down to their waist. That would work as well.

But, yeah, we've used the diaper sign. I have a nine-year-old son who we used sign language with him, and I have twin girls that are six. And nowadays, they're into figure sign. They love to spell everything, because they know I don't want them to talk to me while I'm on the phone, you know, yelling things at me. And so they'll come up and they'll start spelling words to me while I'm talking on the phone. Up was this one, if you want them to be picked up.

Another one that's very common is all done. I'm finished. Like you're done eating. Are you all done? All done with your bath? Are you all done? And your hands just go back. Repeat. With your bath. Are you all done eating? You can have them do this before you maybe take them out of their highchair, or whatever. That's a very common one is help. It looks like this, but their little hands can't normally do a two-handed sign as easily. So there is a modified version of help. For them, it looks like this. Help. Just tapping by your shoulder.

And again, when you're at home and don't have me to ask, then you can look them up online. Like I said, there's a lot of places where there are ASL dictionaries. You can look up specific words.

Oh, I'm tired. This is tired, where you have your fingertips touch your chest, and your hands just fall. But this is a good one for sleepy. Sleepy, or it's time to go to bed, same thing. Sleep. This is the sign for bed, like they have their head down on their pillow. This is sleepy or time to go to sleep.

I don't know about necessarily learning other languages, but it could definitely spark it since ASL is considered a foreign language. So they would be bilingual if they continue to know both languages. But I don't know necessarily about learning others. Actually, the ASL sentence structure, for a child that does get into learning it later on throughout life. It's very similar to the Spanish sentence structure. So it could help them in that regard, if they chose to go and learn Spanish.

Any other questions or signs that you'd like to know? Kind of a lot of information in a short amount of time. You're very welcome. I appreciate you taking time to join us today. It's something I love to talk about.

You bet. I wish I could see all of you, and not just myself.

You're all very welcome. Oh, there's Ann, hello.

Yes, that is helpful. And again, you can look up and the signs, maybe even before you're having dinner. It's something that they have common, like a sandwich here, or spaghetti noodles here. You can look it up, and then teach them. Find a couple. Try different ones each day. And sometimes too, you can even print out little flashcards. I know on the site for the

Signing Time website, she also has flash cards and cards on a little ring that you can use, and a poster thing you can put on your refrigerator to have the visual signs there.

Yes, the earlier the better, because then they can pick up on it and then as they keep going and learning it more than they've got such a good foundation, having started young, so that is great.

I have two nephews that are profoundly deaf and one of them has cochlear implants, and one of them does not.

You're very welcome, Suzanne.

Is Hands and Voices, is that something in Pullman? It doesn't sound familiar to me. I'm sure my sister that lives in Pullman, has her son with the cochlear implants, and I'm sure she's familiar with them as well.

Oh, OK. That's not something I'm familiar with.

Oh, in Lewiston. OK.

Yeah, I wouldn't mind getting their information because the students that are required to take my class at WSU are speech and hearing science majors, and obviously others take it as a foreign language or as an elective. But speech and hearing students oftentimes ask me where they can get extra hours of observation and things like that related to those who are deaf. So, yeah, I would love to have the information. Thank you very much.

Well, Cory, I think we might be done.

**CORY:** I think so. So do we have any last minute questions? OK. We might have one more question, otherwise it looks like we're going to start wrapping this up. So, like I said, get in the last minute questions.

**MELISSA**  
**RATSCH:** Yeah, Cory, you might be able to answer the next. I think you guys keep these recorded on the server for several months.

**CORY:** Are you talking about the WSU actual classes or these web learning events?

**MELISSA** Suzanne, are you talking about today? Yeah.

**RATSCH:**

**CORY:** OK. Yes, we record all of our events, and once we're done with the video production process, we will have it posted. Are you a part of WSU or a community member? OK. So we don't have it up quite yet, but we will be getting a media server posted. So stay tuned on our website-- and let me post that for you-- and then we'll have more information there. They are currently building it for us, so it takes a little bit of time.

**MELISSA** And Cory, I know they recorded Monday's class, but today's might be a better one to put up,  
**RATSCH:** just because I was asked to show a lot more signs.

**CORY:** Yes, they kind of go through all of the recordings that we have and pick out the best ones. So they're really good about figuring it out.

**MELISSA** Great.

**RATSCH:**

**CORY:** OK. I'm going to send out the prompt once more for the resources. If you didn't get the chance to save it, make sure you click Save. Otherwise, we had a wonderful time today. I hope you all enjoyed our presentation, and we hope to see you again soon.

**MELISSA** Thank you, again.

**RATSCH:**