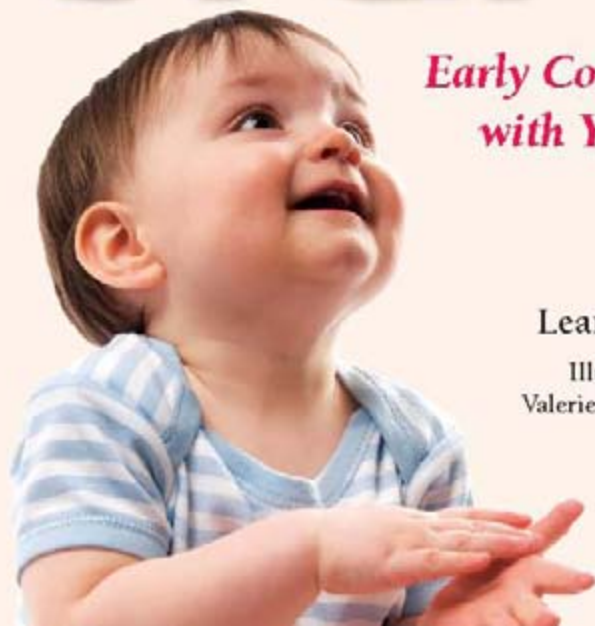


THE
PARENTS'
GUIDE TO
BABY
SIGNS

*Early Communication
with Your Infant*

Leann Sebrey

Illustrated by
Valerie Nelson-Metlay



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PREFACE

Self-expression is taking on new meaning in regard to infants, toddlers, and preverbal children (children who do not yet express language). Using American Sign Language with this group of youngsters, whether they are deaf or hearing, will promote a new recognition of their cognitive abilities as well as give them the ability to share with us their specific interests and desires. In my experience, infants as young as four months of age can learn to express preferences, needs, and desires.

Any time communication improves, frustration tends to decrease and the bonds and respect between individuals have the opportunity to strengthen and grow. These are also the benefits we see from using sign language with preverbal hearing children. Early communication is one of the very best things for your baby to experience. When signing is used with young children in daycare and classroom environments, the noise level decreases, learning becomes more productive, and children have fewer violent outbursts.¹

I wrote this book primarily for parents, family members, caregivers, and educators of preverbal hearing children. However, hearing parents of deaf children will also find it useful. In these pages, we will explore American Sign Language skills and techniques and perspectives on teaching signs to preverbal



Young toddler signing
PLEASE



Toddler signing
CELEBRATE

children. You will also find tips for successfully applying your new skills to home, daycare, and classroom environments. My fondest desire is that you find the process rewarding and that the young people in your life will be positively affected.

We stand at the edge of a new age in the parenting, caregiving, and teaching of infants and toddlers. With American Sign Language, we can offer beneficial experiences to very young preverbal children. The children and families of our communities deserve this enriching and empowering opportunity. For our children's sake, let's get the sign out!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my loving husband Patrick, who is my strong anchor and my trimmed sails all at the right time. Patrick took the photographs in this book and, as you will see, he has an uncanny ability to snap the perfect shots of our babies using sign (which is no easy task). Thank you, Patrick. I also extend my heart in appreciation to our children—Adam, Melanie, Sean, and Aleah; without their understanding and willingness to support me in yet another project, this book would still be unfinished. My brother Greg, who came to this world without hearing, has taught me how to appreciate life—visually, audibly, and kinesthetically—and the importance of sharing that appreciation with others. Nancy Darlington, mother of dear Jessica and Nyssa, is a close friend and a gifted teacher. She is also a champion for educating caregivers; her very presence emanates optimism and respect for all children. Alison Ames, the mother of a neat young lady named Veronica, is very talented at design and formatting. Alison has been essential in taking my ideas and developing them into a book. Karen Colburn Wilbanks, who is fluent in five languages, is a friend and the mother of an awesome young man named Colburn. Karen, who has added ASL to her repertoire, graciously took

on the task of editing my work. We have the best friends in the world; thank you all.

It is also very appropriate that I acknowledge the pioneers in the journey of bringing sign language to hearing infants and toddlers. The deaf community has shared the beautiful gift of American Sign Language with the hearing families of the world. I want to thank the parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators who took a leap of faith in the exploration of using sign with hearing babies. A special thanks to the researchers whose work gave evidence to what we now refer to as fact: Douglas Abrams, Catherine Brown, Marilyn Daniels, Kimberly Weatherly, Carolyn Rovee-Collier, Jana Iverson, Olga Capirci, Maria Cristina Caselli, Joseph Garcia, David Hammer, Philip and Elizabeth Prinz, Linda Acredolo, Susan Goodwin, Brie Moore, Sharon Gretz, Adele Abrahamsen, Nicola Grove, Virginia Volterra, Stephen M. Edelson, Yvonne Emmons, Chris Boyatzis, Ronnie Wilbur, Brenda Zinober, Margaret Martlew, Susan Goldin-Meadow, Heidi Feldman, Laura Namy, and Sandra Waxman.

May we all be blessed with love, a sense of peace, and the insight to appreciate the power and wisdom of children. Thank you, babies!

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what your baby is thinking? Research shows that signing babies actually speak earlier, have larger vocabularies, and show increased self-esteem indicating higher IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and most likely EQ (Emotional Intelligence) as well.² Infants who use signs can communicate their thoughts, needs, and ideas. What a tremendous gift to have a window into your baby's thoughts and to be able to respond with less frustration! I have experienced this as a pediatric nurse, a teacher, and as a mother. When our youngest son learned the sign for *flower* at 10 months of age, he immediately began sharing with us his interest and love for horticulture. Every plant, flowering or not, was inspected, identified, and appreciated. By teaching that one sign, we gave Sean a way to tell us what he found interesting and what caught his attention. His gentleness and curiosity toward flowers was able to grow, and now we have a greater understanding of the unique interests of our little boy. He is also my number one gardening assistant, and we both love every minute we spend together in the garden.

Experience and research is now demonstrating that parents and caregivers who are willing to learn and use a few



An ASL Class for child development therapists

basic American Sign Language (ASL) signs can facilitate more effective communication with their preverbal hearing children (see the selected references at the end of the book). Many ASL signs are iconic; in other words, the signs actually mimic the actions or behaviors that they represent. Therefore, the signs not only make sense, they also instinctively can become a very natural method of communication.

I have signed for many years. My younger brother has a significant hearing loss, and he received his first set of hearing aids when he was three years old. I was almost nine when my parents arranged for my first signing class, and ASL has been an integral part of our family life since that time. My four wonderful children all sign to varying degrees. With our youngest, I used the only sign that a breast-feeding newborn has any interest in, NURSE!* Our toddler can sign absolutely

*Words in capital letters represent signs.

anything he is shown, and he uses the signs very appropriately. He also readily speaks using basic sentence structure. Our older children sign as needed to communicate with their uncle and the babies. A sign we find ourselves frequently using, one that will survive in our family for generations, is I LOVE YOU.

With signs, we can communicate across a crowded gymnasium or through the windows of an airport. If you are searching for the very best thing you can do for your baby, start with good communication. It is an essential component in building and maintaining trusted, healthy, and loving relationships.

As a proponent of using ASL with hearing infants and toddlers, I speak and teach nationally, working to raise awareness of the benefits of signing with young children. This book is the result of hard work, years of experience and research, and the cultivation of the tools I use to teach parents, caregivers, and educators every day. Over the years I have taught thousands of adults how to sign with babies. I discuss scientific research as a foundation for using sign with preverbal hearing children, practical techniques for learning sign language (even as a novice), and the fundamentals of growth and development. I include child- and family-oriented signs, providing the necessary tools for parents of young children to be successful. Hearing babies who sign tend to speak earlier, have more self-esteem, and experience much less frustration than nonsigning babies.³

This book is designed to provide the tools that parents, caregivers, and educators need to be able to sign with very young hearing children. These techniques will provide the building blocks for two-way communication months, if not

years, earlier than usually anticipated. I realize that parenting young children leaves little time or energy for intense, uninterrupted study time. I commend all of you who are seeking the best things for your child. Your baby and your family will be forever enriched.