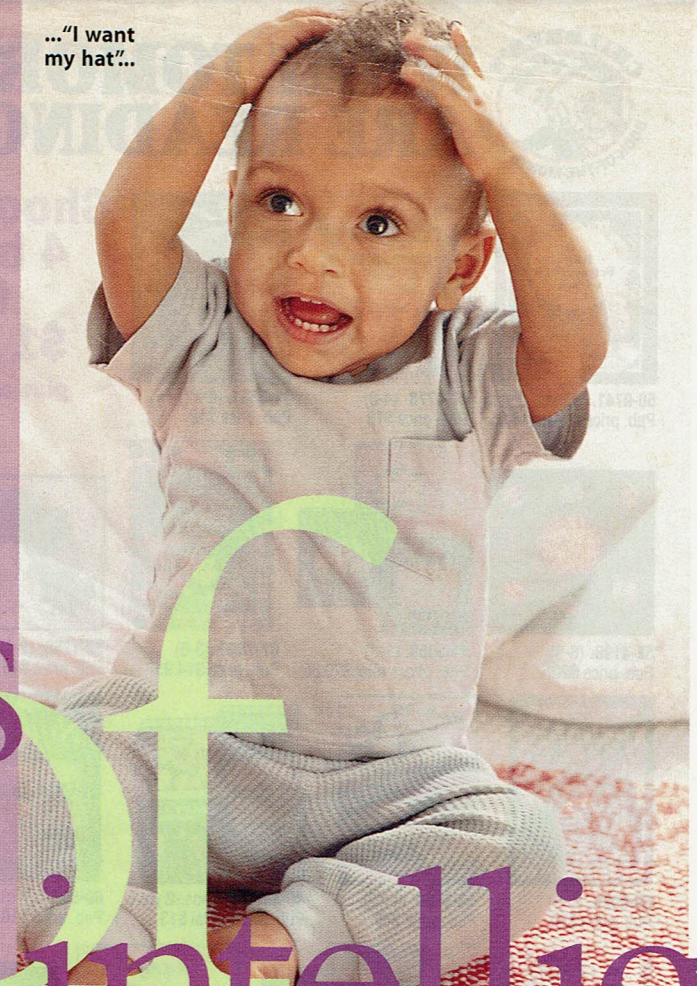


Starting as early as 7 months, babies can use sign language to say: "Pick me up"...

..."I want my hat"...



# signs of intellig

Look who's "talking" now!  
An ingenious new system of simple gestures helps babies boost their communication skills long before they can actually form words.



BY SUSAN LAPINSKI

..."Change my diaper, please"...





all started by accident. Out in her garden on a warm and sunny day, Linda Acredolo introduced her 12-month-old daughter Katie to a flower the way any parent might—by sniffing it and then waving it under Katie's nose.

Katie took to this new experience like a bee to clover. She quickly grasped the idea that sniffing and flowers go together. In fact, before long, Katie greeted every flower, whether it was real or printed on her pajamas, by first looking at one of her parents and then wrinkling up her nose into a big, obvious sniff. "I thought she was a genius!" recalls Acredolo, a Ph.D. and professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis.

The victorious look on Katie's face clearly showed how happy she was to be able to "tell" the most important

people in her life about the flowers she spotted all around her. A toddler typically doesn't yet have enough control over her lips, tongue, breathing system, and vocal cords to say a word as hard to pronounce as "flower," language specialists say. But by making her sniffing sign, Katie could leap right over this obstacle. And, watching her, Dr. Acredolo began to wonder if she'd just stumbled onto a missing piece in the puzzle of how children learn to talk. Would other babies and toddlers take to gesturing as easily as Katie had? And if parents did teach their babies to use such "sign language," would it jump-start their speaking skills—or hold them back?

### The Sign Language-Speech Connection

To find out, Dr. Acredolo teamed up with Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D., a language development specialist and associate professor of psychology at California State University at Stanislaus, for a 14-year study of the subject. The result is their new book, *Baby Signs: How to Talk with Your Baby—Before Your Baby Can Talk*, which details their observations of more than 100 little signers between 7 and 30 months old—and the amazing communication advantages signing has given them.

Among their findings: All babies can—and often do—use sign language to make themselves understood (just think of the way your child raises her arms to signal that she wants to be picked up). Signing may be particularly helpful to baby boys, who typically start talking later than girls—but can learn to gesture just as quickly. Regardless of gender, though, signing and the eye contact it requires helps your baby learn that communication is a satisfying, back-and-forth process. And it can provide you with an early window into your baby's mind. "It's marvelous!" exclaims one mother, describing baby signing with her 13-month-old. "He'd get really vexed when I didn't understand his babbling. But now when he turns his palms up, side by side, I know just what he wants me to do—read him a book!"

What's more, this sort of sign language does not delay the process of

learning to talk, researchers have found. In fact, by the time baby signers are 2, they are better at expressing themselves and understanding what is said to them. And, on average, they have mastered a bigger vocabulary—350 words for 2-year-old baby signers, compared to 300 words for their nonsigning peers.

### Teaching Your Toddler

"Before they have words, children can use gestures in so many ways—to let us know that they want a snack, a bottle, or a book," says Kathleen Grey, M.A., a child development specialist who directs the infant/toddler program in the Center for Child and Family Studies at the University of California at Davis. Signing is a regular part of that program's curriculum, and some of Grey's success stories include 14-month-old Tristan, who requests his favorite song, "Three Little Ducks Went Out to Play," during the center's circletime by opening and closing his hand like a duck's bill; and Nyssa, also 14 months, who learned to ask for a diaper change just by patting her hip.

And yet not all children take to signing automatically. "Babies' interest in learning hand signals varies greatly," says Grey. Some children at the center have learned as many as 25 baby signs for various objects, feelings, and needs, while other kids mix in a few gestures with the words they are learning to speak, or hardly sign at all—which are all normal reactions.

But whether your child does it a lot or a little, baby signing can help you understand each other sooner—and better. When your toddler says "ba," for example, you may be unsure whether he wants a bottle or his ball, or is referring to his brother. But if you teach him to make a bouncing motion with his hand to signal "ball," you'll always know when he wants his bounciest toy. "Signing will give you more opportunities for the positive interactions that are so important to a good parent-infant relationship," explains Susan Crockenberg, Ph.D., professor of developmental psychology at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

Although many children start being interested in signing at around

# ence



... "I'm hungry!"

9 or 10 months, some can handle it at 7 months, according to Dr. Acredolo (see "Signs That Your Baby Is Ready to Sign," *facing page*).

But even if you don't start signing until your toddler is 20 months old, it can still be a richly satisfying form of communication that your child can use until she's able to speak clearly—usually between 24 and 30 months. And it's a great way to prepare your child for later talking because of the labeling, questioning, and talking involved—all of which will help your child become attuned to how spoken language is organized. Interested? Here's how to get your child "signed up."

■ **Teach a new sign just as you'd teach a new word.** First establish eye contact, and then provide a visual cue (such as pointing to your child's soggy diaper). Next, say—as well as sign—the word or phrase you're trying to teach. For example, say, "Want a diaper change?" while you pat your own hip. You may also want to help your baby get the "feeling" of the sign



Show your baby how a sign (like this one, meaning "more") is made, and then gently mold his hands into the same gesture.

finger to your lips when you want her to be quiet. And you're both probably in the habit of waving "bye-bye."

Using such familiar signs as a base, introduce some of the signs illustrated here—or feel free to invent your own. Unlike the American Sign Language for the hearing impaired, baby signs are meant to be informal and spontaneous. "The goal is not to teach your baby a complex signing system," says Dr. Goodwyn, "but to give her one more way to connect with you and enrich your relationship."

■ **Start off slowly.** You can begin to teach your baby signs when he is around 6 or 7 months old, but be sure to limit your lessons to just four or five easy signs at first so you don't overwhelm him. Which signs you choose to start with depend

## Baby signers tend to like books earlier because they can label what they see.

on those you and your child find useful. by gently molding his hand with yours and then going through the motions.

■ **Build on the signs your child already uses.** Your toddler may point to the faucet to indicate she wants a drink of water, and you may put a

their 1-year-old son Keegan's attraction to their fireplace that they taught him a blowing motion for the word "hot"—and repeated it every time he approached the hearth. So well did Keegan learn the sign that one

# 10 EASY SIGNS YOU CAN

### 1 fish

open and close mouth, like a fish



### 2 cat

stroke the back of your hand with the palm of the other



### 3 butterfly

wave your fingers, holding both hands close together



### 5 scared

tap chest rapidly



### 4 bird

flap arms at sides



**signs that your baby is ready to sign**

- She shows a lot of interest in the people and things around her.
- She points at something, and then gives you a questioning glance.
- She seems interested in looking at picture books.
- She holds a toy out for you to see, as if asking its name.
- She makes an “uh-uh” sound that makes you think she’s trying to “talk” with you.

summer day, when his bare feet were burned from walking on extremely hot pavement, he made a furious blowing signal—and got himself picked up and rescued by his mother right away!

■ **Look out for your baby’s interests.** You might get some clues to what excites your child when you look through picture books together. If the sight of a hungry caterpillar starts her bouncing up and down, for example, you’ll want to teach her how to wiggle her index finger each time she sees one of her furry little favorites.

■ **Be persistent.** One of the best ways to teach your baby a new sign is to find as many concrete examples of it as you can. If you’re trying to teach your child the sign for “cat,” for example, keep your eyes open for kitties everywhere—in books, on TV, and in toy store displays as well as on neigh-

borhood windowsills. Point to these various felines as you say the word “cat” and follow up with the kitty sign—stroking the back of your hand with your other palm. Then ensure that the gesture “sticks” in your



Children gain confidence when they can label their everyday objects.

baby’s memory by helping him make the sign with his own hands.

■ **Show your enthusiasm.** Videos of successful little baby signers show the wonderful way their faces light up when they make a sign and see that it’s understood and appreciated by the adults around them. A nice bonus of signing, says Grey, is that proud parents get new insights into just how capable their children are. So it becomes easy to respond with enthu-

siasm: “Hey, that’s right, Jenny! It’s a hippo! Good for you!” And like so many early learning experiences, says Dr. Acredolo, “the more enthusiastic you are about baby signs, the more enthusiastic your baby will be.”

■ **Take your time.** How long will it take for your baby to catch on? Some children learn a sign in two weeks, others in two months. But as a general rule, the younger your child, the longer the learning time.

At 10 months of age, it’s simply harder to pull together the memory, motor, and attention skills required than it is at 20 months, Drs. Acredolo and Goodwyn explain. But even if it takes a while, your investment is worth it for many reasons. “Baby-signing babies tend to like books earlier because they are able to ‘label’ what they see in them,” Dr. Acredolo points out. “And they can direct you to what they are interested in—for a change!”

■ **Have fun.** No doubt you’re eager for your child to reap the benefits that baby signing appears to provide. But what’s more important is using this new skill to enjoy each other even more. There are few things cuter than the sight of your toddler pressing a finger to his button nose to symbolize a pig (or funnier than your husband doing his own piggy sign on a much larger scale). So have fun—the learning will follow. ■

*Susan Lapinski, a mother of two daughters, is a senior editor at Child. She lives in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.*

**TEACH YOUR CHILD**

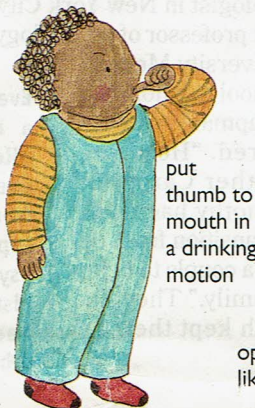
**6 dog**  
put tongue out and pant



**7 sleepy**  
lean cheek on hands



**8 give me a drink**  
put thumb to mouth in a drinking motion



**9 read to me**  
open and close hands, like pages in a book



**10 sad**  
rub eyes with fists, as if wiping away tears

