



HOW TO TALK WITH BABY BEFORE HE CAN TALK

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Most parents feel very frustrated when their toddler goes through the pointing and "uh uh" stage of communication. Not only does the parent or caregiver have to play a game of twenty questions to determine what the baby wants, but the baby often becomes frustrated and either gives up or resorts to tantrums. Communication is very difficult for families with babies of nine to thirty months who have little speech.

Now picture this scenario. Maggie, fifteen months old, toddles up to her mother, places her thumb to her lips, and mom responds immediately, "Oh, you want your bottle!" "Let's go in the kitchen and get it." The communication was clear and no one was frustrated. What Maggie did was use a "baby sign" to tell her mother that she wanted her bottle. A little while later Maggie came to her mother and held up two fingers in a "v" shape and her mother responded, "You want your bunny." "I think he's in your bed." "Let's go look for him."

Maggie and her parents have learned to use signs to communicate some basic needs until the time that speech will take over. Baby signs are becoming popular since the book by the same name was published last year. **BABY SIGNS: How to Talk with Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk** was written by Linda Acredolo, Ph.D and Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D., two psychology professors and mothers.

It all started ten years ago when Linda's baby, Kate, was twelve months old. Kate saw a fish in an office aquarium and ran to her mother, pointing excitedly and making a blowing gesture. The blowing gesture became her "word" for fish until she learned to pronounce fish seven months later. In another incident, Kate was in the garden with her mother and pointed to a flower and at the same time started to sniff. From then on until she was twenty months old, Kate used the sniffing to indicate the word "flower". The third incident occurred in Linda's office. Kate spied a spider in the corner and rubbed her index fingers together, clearly indicating that this was her label for spider. These were just the start of Kate's signs, which often evolved from activities, such as sniffing a flower, or finger plays, like the "Itsy Bitsy Spider". Over time Kate's parents decided to help her communicate better by looking for actions to pair with favorite objects or activities. But the signs did not stop her from saying real words. She used some signs and some words, whichever was easiest. Finally, as she got older, the spoken words got easier and the signs began to disappear.

The next step Linda took was to ask other parents whether their babies also used signs. The answer was overwhelmingly positive. Almost all babies learned some signs beyond "bye-bye" and head nods for "yes" and "no". Babies whose parents shared in their enthusiasm for signing had impressive sign vocabularies. And what was equally startling was that the more signs a baby had, the faster they learned to talk. It seemed like the baby signs speeded up the process of speech development.

Over the next ten years the authors did extensive studies of babies' early communication and they have concluded that Baby Sign babies "score higher on intelligence tests, understand more words, have larger vocabularies, and engage in more sophisticated play". The parents almost unanimously commented about the advantages of "Increased communication, decreased frustration, and an enriched parent-infant bond". There were also more subtle advantages of "Increased self-confidence and interest in books".

So how do you start to sign with your toddler? Easy! Initially, choose about five words that would make your lives easier if your baby could communicate them. They might include actions like "eat" or "drink"; nouns for things your baby enjoys, such as "cat" or "dog"; or words that can be used across many settings, such as "more" and "all done". It is recommended that you try to use these signs/words frequently over the course of several weeks. Remember, it is very important that you SAY the word while you are signing it. This way, we give the baby a choice whether he wants to learn to sign or say these words to us. The baby may choose to say the easier words that we teach, such as "up", but he will probably want to sign "elephant" for quite some time!

How long it takes for a baby to "catch on" and sign is very individual. Some babies learn their first sign in just a few weeks, while other babies take a month or two. Usually after the first few signs are acquired, the baby "takes off" and learns several signs each week. Around twenty-four months babies will usually start to combine two or three signs and /or words to make a "sentence". Sentences such as "more drink" and "all gone cookie" are common. It is not unusual for some children to combine signs and words together to make a sentence. They use whatever is easier to them.

The age at which babies begin to sign is usually nine to twelve months. That does not mean that you have to forego signing and talking to your baby until this age. It is just that younger babies generally do not have the fine motor coordination to make signs with their hands. Older babies obviously can make signs that require more coordination than younger ones. It sometimes helps when teaching a new sign, to grasp the baby's hand and help him make the sign. This will give him the feel for what you want. It is also okay to modify signs if you find that your baby cannot coordinate the movements.

It is important to remember that these signs that you will be teaching will only be used and understood by family members and primary caregivers. So it is not important that they be

standardized, such as American Sign Language, which is used universally by the deaf community. Your signs should be iconic, that is, they should look like or represent the actions of the things that they stand for. Frogs hop, so a sign for this noun could be a

hopping motion with your hand. A cat has whiskers, so you might choose to rake your fingers across your cheek to represent the whiskers. Fingers to the mouth might represent the action of eating something. A peeling gesture might represent a banana. With a little imagination, most parents have no difficulty coming up with signs that are iconic and that their babies can imitate. The book also contains ideas for most commonly used signs if you get stumped.

Baby signs serve their purpose during the early toddler years when your baby's speech mechanism has not caught up with his mind. At about thirty months most signing babies have discovered that signs no longer are the easiest form of communication. The babies learn that it is too hard to sign when hands are full of toys or mom is not in the same room. They quickly learn that speech is a more useful vehicle for communication and the signs gradually disappear while the speech expands. The baby signs had served their purpose- to get your baby communicating- and now they must give way to a more mature form of communication.

If you feel that your family would like to try signing with your toddler, **BABY SIGNS** can be purchased at many of the bookstores around the area. A copy costs about thirteen dollars.