

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

Sing and Sign

Signing for Preschoolers

Sign language is a good way to help preschoolers with and without disabilities communicate. Learning sign language helps improve preschoolers' verbal communication skills and fine motor skills.

What is the practice?

Teaching preschoolers sign language by having them sign the words to favorite songs is a fun way to help children practice signing. Pick a favorite song that lends itself to signing. Repetitive songs with lots of action words work well. Begin teaching the gestures along with the singing.

What does the practice look like?

Preschoolers making signed motions to *Wheels on the Bus* is one form of singing and signing. Teaching the specific signs that correspond to the words of a song makes the signs fun to learn. The children can then use these signs in other contexts.



How do you do the practice?

Singing is one way to build sign language into your class's daily routine. Signing can be more meaningful for children when signs learned while singing are used in other contexts, and vice versa.

- Start with familiar songs your preschoolers like. Model the signs as you sing. Many children, particularly those who prefer lots of movement during circle times, will imitate you immediately.
- Explain that sign language is a way that people communicate if they or others have trouble hearing or speaking. Introduce a few simple signs from your song. It often helps to start with signs that are fairly intuitive (i.e., putting a hand to the mouth for "eat.")
- As children grow confident in singing and signing their songs, use signs during other classroom routines. For example, use the sign for "eat" that appears in a song when it is snack time or lunch time. Build on their familiarity with the sign for "sleep" at nap time.
- Encourage your children to be creative by inviting them to pick songs for which to try to find signs. Ask them to imagine what gestures might convey what they want to say.
- For children who have some fine motor problems, help them slowly attempt to make the sign. The first step is seeing the connection between the gesture and its meaning. More refined movements will come later.
- You can find simple signing dictionaries online by searching for preschool sign or in teacher supply stores. Many DVDs of children's songs also include signing or other gestures and motions along with singing.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your preschoolers enjoy signing while they sing?
- Do they use the signs in other contexts?
- Do they ask to learn more signs for songs or everyday use?

Take a look at more singing and signing

Barnyard Signs

The preschoolers in Andrea's class love to move around at circle time. After a few stretches and jumping jacks to harness their energy, Andrea starts a favorite CD. She tells the children they are going to learn something new. "Some of you already know a little bit of sign language," she says. "Today we're going to learn the signs for Old MacDonalD." She starts by showing her students the signs for different animals. When they get to the right part of the song, they all sign together rather than say the animal name out loud. The children love this game. Each day Andrea adds a few more signs until they're signing the animals in the whole song.



In Context

Pia has taught her 4-year-olds the signs for some of their favorite songs. Now she is trying to help them use those familiar signs. One of their favorite signed songs is about food. Pia has begun encouraging them to use signs from the song at snack time and in the housekeeping center. Some children have also begun to use other signs from favorite songs. For example, they name the toys in different centers with signs they have learned. Signing seems to make it easier for them to remember the spoken names for objects. It also increases their curiosity about words.

Signs of Friendship

In Fern's inclusive preschool class, some children use sign as their primary means of communication. Other children who use speech are curious about the signing and are eager to learn some signs of their own. Fern teaches them the signs for a few of their favorite songs. They learn signs for rhymes they recite as part of their daily routines. They now know the signs that remind them to keep their feet on the floor and their hands to themselves. The children who use sign as their primary communication enjoy being "experts" and teaching their friends something new. The children who are unfamiliar with sign have become increasingly interested in using signs to communicate with their peers.

