

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Simple Signing

 *Nonverbal Communication and Signing*

Using sign language with toddlers with or without disabilities can help them communicate more effectively. It can also add to their oral language development. Using signs helps toddlers begin to make connections between gestures and spoken words with particular meanings.

What is the practice?

Teaching your toddlers a few simple signs for common, everyday concepts can help make communication easier for everyone. You can start out with signs like “eat,” “drink,” “all done,” “play,” “bathroom,” etc. Signs are easier than spoken language for many young children to use. Learning signs can decrease toddlers’ frustration at not being understood. Signing also improves oral language skills because toddlers are often motivated to communicate more by their success with signing.



What does the practice look like?

A toddler signs “more” to his teacher to let her know he wants more pudding at snack time. A teacher helps a group of children make the signs for the farm animals as they all sing “Old McDonald.” These are examples of how sign language can be used in early childhood classrooms. For children with language-related disabilities, signing is often used at the same time or instead of oral language. Even for typically developing children it can be a fun and engaging way of communicating. Plus, signing while singing or reciting rhymes and stories can be good fine-motor practice for young children.

How do you do the practice?

There are plenty of chances to incorporate signing into your toddlers’ daily routines. Start with some simple signs that are of interest to the children and will be used often throughout the day.

- Children enjoy learning signs that can be used regularly with an immediate response. Some toddler favorites are the signs for “more,” “eat” or “drink,” and for preferred toys or activities. These signs are fairly intuitive and can be practiced on a routine basis, making them easy to learn.
- Toddlers can also benefit from using signs for conversational terms like “thank you,” “please,” and “hello.” The gestures are often easier for young children to remember than the words. This can lead to children using the words more frequently as they get older.
- Pick a topic that your toddlers find particularly interesting and introduce some signs that relate to the topic. You can also encourage toddlers to make up their own signs for an object or feeling. The process of making up signs helps toddlers begin to make the connection between spoken words, gestures, and communication. The links are still enforced even if the toddler’s signs are not perfect.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your children imitate new signs?
- Do your children use signs to communicate?
- Are your children excited about learning new signs?

Take a look at more ways to use simple signs

Bye-Bye, Frustration!

The toddlers in Addy's class often have trouble letting her know what they want or need. They can feel frustrated when they are not understood. To help them, Addy has begun teaching them some simple signs. When it is time to go outside, she makes the signs for outside and play, while saying the words out loud. She encourages the children to imitate her. When she helps them with diapers or the bathroom, she uses signs along with speaking. The toddlers have mastered a few basic signs. Addy decides to teach them more abstract signs that help with turn taking: "mine," "here," "thank you," and "yes." The signs seem to be easier for some of the children to remember than words. Addy has also noticed that the more sign language the children learn, the more easily their words come.



Songs In Motion

Some of the toddlers in Christine's childcare class get very antsy during singing and storytelling at "circle time." To help keep them on task, Christine teaches simple signs for the words in favorite songs and nursery rhymes. She teaches the signs like she would a fingerplay. She adds a little bit each time until the children remember all the movements. The signing has helped them better understand the words in the songs and rhymes while they develop fine-motor control. When the children learn a new song, rhyme, or poem they often ask for the signs that go with it. This lets Christine know that the children enjoy signing in this way.

Signs All Day Long

Sandy's inclusive toddler class has several children who use signing rather than speaking as their primary means of communicating. To help these children as well as the others communicate more easily, Sandy uses signs as she gives spoken directions. She does this when telling the children to line up, wash their hands, eat, or lie down for a nap. The toddlers also enjoy signing as they sing. Some of their favorite songs have almost turned into fingerplays, with the children using made up signs. Sandy knows her children enjoy singing and signing. Many of them have also begun to copy her signs for "eat," "bathroom," and "outside" and use them at the right time.

