

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

Simple Signing

 Nonverbal Communication and Signing

Using sign language with toddlers with or without disabilities can help them communicate more effectively and contribute to their oral language development. Toddlers who use signs begin to make the connection between using a gesture that corresponds to a spoken word with a particular meaning.

What is the practice?

Introducing your toddlers to a few simple signs for common, everyday ideas, like *eat*, *drink*, *finished*, *play*, *bathroom*, etc., can help make communication easier for everyone. Signs are easier than spoken language for many young children to use, and learning signs can decrease toddlers' frustration at not being understood. Signing also contributes to oral language skills, because toddlers are often motivated to communicate more by experiencing success with signing.

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What does the practice look like?

A toddler signs *more* to his teacher to indicate he wants another serving of applesauce at snack time. A teacher helps a group of children make the signs for different farm animal names as they sing *Old MacDonald* together. These are examples of how sign language can be used in an early childhood classrooms. For children with language-related disabilities, signing is often used alongside 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 opportunities to incorporate signing into your toddlers' daily routines. Start with some simple signs that are of interest to the children and used repeatedly throughout the day.

- Children often enjoy learning signs that can be used regularly with an immediate response, such as signs for *more*, *eat* or *drink*, and for a favorite toy or activity. These signs are fairly intuitive and can be practiced on a regular 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, and this can lead to increasing use of the words as they get older.
- Pick a topic that your toddlers find particularly interesting and introduce some signs related to the topic. You can also encourage toddlers to develop their own signs for a particular object or feeling. Sign language is often intuitive, and the process of making up signs—even if they are not accurate—helps toddlers begin to make the connection between spoken words, gestures, and communication.

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 Adrienne's class often have trouble communicating what they want or need. They can feel frustrated when they are not understood. To help them, Adrienne has begun teaching them some simple signs. Every day when it's 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. Once the toddlers have mastered a few basic signs, she begins to help them learn 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, but Adrienne has also noticed that the more sign language the children learn, the more easily their words come.

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Songs In Motion

Some of the toddlers in Christine's home day care get very antsy during singing and storytelling at "circle time." To help keep them occupied, Christine teaches simple signs to go along with the words in favorite songs and nursery rhymes. She teaches the signs like a fingerplay, adding 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 developing fine-motor control. Christine knows that the children enjoy signing in this way because when they learn a new song, rhyme, or poem they often ask for the signs that go with it.

Signs All Day Long

In Sandy's inclusive toddler class, there are several children who use signing rather than speaking as their primary means of communicating. To help those children as well as the others communicate more easily, Sandy uses sign as she speaks when she is giving directions, such as telling the children it's time to line up, wash hands, eat, or lie down for a nap. They also enjoy signing songs as they sing. Some of their favorite songs have almost turned into fingerplays, with the children using stylized signs. Sandy knows her children enjoy singing and signing, and many of them have also begun copying her signs for *eat*, *bathroom*, and *outside* at the appropriate times.

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