

American Sign Language

Why it Is Beneficial and How to Incorporate it into Preschool Classrooms

by Gloria D. Julius

Communication is at the heart of everything we do as humans. As the world becomes increasingly connected and technology creates more avenues for interaction, strong communication skills are more important than ever—and nurturing them has taken precedence in early education.

Establishing a foundation for strong communication skills occurs within the first five years of a child's life, when brain development is most aggressive, according to the National Research Council (Shonkoff, Phillips & National Research Council, 2000). During this window of incredible learning opportunity, we are able to foster communication skills in children—even before they are able to speak—that will help them reach their full potential.

While it is not a new concept, American Sign Language is being used more frequently by teachers, parents and caregivers as the positive effects, such as stronger language development and

increased confidence in children, are becoming more evident. According to research, children have the ability to use their hands to communicate long before they are able to form spoken words (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010), and I have seen this proven repeatedly in classrooms across the country.

contributes to long-term success (U.S. Department of Education).

The Benefits of Teaching ASL to Young Children

While research about the effects of teaching ASL to young children is

inconclusive, some reputable studies show that there are benefits to this practice. Personally, I wholeheartedly believe in the value of using sign language with young children because I have witnessed its effectiveness firsthand.

My daughter began using sign language with my granddaughter, Jordyn, when Jordyn was only a few months

old. By the time Jordyn was 9 months old, she knew what she wanted and how to ask for it. For example, when she wanted something, she would repeatedly rub her chest, the sign for "please." At dinnertime, rather than throwing her bowl on the floor when she finished eating, she learned she got a happier response from her mother when she signed "all done." Their effective



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Sign language also empowers adults to communicate with infants and toddlers early in life and further strengthens the bonds between them. Additionally, as sign language is considered a foreign language, children have the opportunity to become bilingual at an early age, which research suggests accelerates brain development and language learning and



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communication avoided frustration for both parties, and I was amazed at how clearly Jordyn could communicate at such an early age.

In addition to the benefits I have observed in my granddaughter and other children through my role with Primrose Schools®, multiple reports indicate sign language helps facilitate language development in young children (Thompson, Cotnoir-Bichelman, McKerchar, Tate & Dancho, 2007). While some people have concerns that teaching sign language may delay a child's desire or willingness to communicate verbally, it has actually been found that teaching infants sign language helps connect the neurons in their brains—accelerating their ability to speak and enhancing early literacy skills.

Children typically do not have the physical dexterity to respond using sign language until they are 6 to 9 months old, but the developmental benefits begin long before that. Infants observe intently as their parents and caregivers speak and sign to them. Eventually, they begin to connect the adult's hand movements to certain words. Therefore, it is never too early to begin teaching sign language!

Another reported benefit of ASL is that it creates a bond between the caregiver and child. The inability to effectively communicate can be frustrating for children, often resulting in tantrums, which are, in turn, frustrating for caregivers. As I saw with my daughter and granddaughter, sign language facilitates communication, diffuses exasperation, creates a commonality and allows both parties to share experiences together.

Research shows that children who practice sign language know an average of 50 more spoken words by age 2 than non-signing children (Anthony & Lindhert, n.d.). Moreover, once they are able to sign, practicing the movements helps refine their fine motor skills.

Research has also found that sign language is a helpful method when teaching children with autism or developmental delays. It is often used by speech therapists when working with children who are unable to communicate verbally, and can help foster confidence and self-esteem.

The Challenges of Teaching Sign Language to Young Children

Learning a new language is challenging at any age, so it is no surprise that not all children may grasp sign language easily. Similarly, teaching ASL to infants and

toddlers can also be challenging because they do not have existing language skills yet. Young children may initially appear uninterested in sign language. This is normal! In fact, a child may understand the signs but, rather than copying the movements, he or she might choose not to engage or to respond in a different way. It is important to not get discouraged or frustrated if a child does not respond as hoped.

In order to successfully teach sign language, the teacher or adult must be confident in his/her ability to use the signs. This requires overcoming any fear of demonstrating the signs incorrectly. The best way to alleviate this concern is through practice. When practicing, make the gestures slowly and take your time learning each sign. Practicing with other adults is beneficial because it may help you become more comfortable with the movements. Over time and with consistent practice, the movements will become more intuitive.

Overall, the key to overcoming both challenges is patience—with yourself and with children. Once you feel comfortable with the movements, you can begin weaving sign language into everyday interactions with children in an effective, understandable way.

Incorporating Sign Language into the Classroom and Beyond

At Primrose Schools, sign language is included in daily classroom activities. Using simple sign language cards and verbal reinforcement, teachers begin introducing key terms to children as young as 6 months old.

Here are four tips for how to help children learn sign



language and develop foundational language and literacy skills in the process.

■ **Keep it simple.** Just like any lesson with young children, simplicity is key. When introducing signs, do not sign every word or attach movements to long, complex sentences. Instead, focus on common, simple words, such as a “mommy,” “daddy,” “more,” “milk,” “please” and “thank you.” Remember to speak in complete sentences, using signs for keywords while simultaneously saying them aloud. This practice will allow children to see, hear and understand the connection between the term and the sign, and help them comprehend how signs are used in daily interactions. Establishing eye contact with the child throughout the process will also help keep the child’s attention.

■ **Practice repetition.** In the early stages of brain growth, repetition is needed to form the fundamental connections between neurons in babies’ brains (Khandekar & Zuckerman, 2010). Repeating keywords and actions is one of the most effective, proven ways to help a child absorb and retain information. So, it is important to consistently repeat certain signs throughout the day and integrate them into children’s routines. For example, use the signs “more,” “all done,” “milk,” “please” and “thank you” at mealtime every day. Make it a habit to sign “sleepy” before naptime and “blanket” as you tuck children in. When repeating a sign, emphasize the word aloud to help the child make the connection. For older children who are able to sign themselves, repeat the words back to them in complete sentences when they ask for something and then pause to give them time to imitate the sign. Repeating the

keywords aloud reinforces language skills, such as voice tone and sentence construction. If after a few attempts the child is not repeating the sign, revisit it later; do not keep drilling. Remember, patience!

■ **Incorporate ASL into daily activities.** Once children have built a significant sign language vocabulary and are able to understand and imitate key signs, look for additional opportunities to weave sign language into everyday learning. For example, a child can sign “water” when she is thirsty or “book” if he wants to read. You can use signs when asking children to complete tasks, such as “clean up” or “help.” At one of our Primrose schools, a



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group of students even learned how to sign the “Happy Birthday” song to a nonverbal classmate! Keep in mind, these more advanced practices are best for older classrooms—ages 2 to 3 and up—when children have a firm grasp of both sign and verbal language.

■ **Extend the learning.** Teaching sign language also presents a great opportunity to partner with parents to extend classroom learnings. We equip parents with their own set of sign language cards so they can encourage their child to continue practicing signs at home. Share with parents the signs

you are using at school to reinforce lessons outside of the classroom.

As educators, our ultimate goal is to help children develop the skills they need to be successful in school and life. By incorporating innovative learning methods like ASL into our curriculums, we can ensure we are equipping children with the foundational language skills they need to be strong communicators in an increasingly interconnected world.

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