

USING THE BABY SIGNS® PROGRAM TO PROMOTE LITERACY AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

WHAT YOU CAN DO IN THE EARLY CHILDCARE SETTING TO PROMOTE FUTURE SCHOOL SUCCESS

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As a childcare provider, you have a unique opportunity to make a difference in a child's life that will have a lasting impact that will go far beyond their pre-school years. In the book, "Starting out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success," the N.R.C. found that "the majority of reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults are the result of problems that might have been avoided or resolved in their childhood years." (Burns et al., 1999, p. 5).

These are the years you have access to these children! In today's world, where many parents both work full time and have long commutes, you may have more time with these children than their own parents! Using Baby Signs® adds a kinesthetic dimension to learning that gives signing babies a distinct advantage, while adding a ton of fun to the learning environment that you are creating! Research shows that signing babies tested at age 2 showed a three month advantage over their non signing peers, which grew to show almost a full year (11 month) advantage in language development over their non-signing peers by age 3! When tested again as 8 years old, the children who had used signs scored 12 points higher in IQ on the WISC-III. (Goodwin et al., 2000)

THE CHILDCARE ENVIRONMENT: USING SIGNS IN YOUR DAILY ROUTINES

Does this mean you have to create an academic setting filled with formal teaching? Absolutely not! Babies learn by playing! What you do is incorporate the Baby Signs® Program into your daily routines, which adds to the verbal interactions you've already been having with these children!

HERE ARE SOME SPECIFIC POINTS TO CONSIDER AS YOU INCORPORATE BABY SIGNS® INTO YOUR CHILDCARE SETTING.

1. GET DOWN WITH THE BABIES!

Getting down on their eye level is important for many reasons. It shows you respect them, it shows you want to "listen" to them, and when it comes to signing, you need to be in their line of sight so they can see you modeling the signs to them.

2. RESPOND TO THE BABIES!

Let them know in words and signs you find their attempts at communicating important! A baby's first attempts at signs will be their best approximations of what you have been modeling. By responding, you are teaching them "that language is a circular process (you communicate, I respond, you respond back, etc.)." (Thompson, D., 2001, p.3)

3. BE A MIRROR TO THE BABIES!

Mirror back their approximated (attempted) Baby Signs® to let them know you understand. Lead them to mastering the sign by then modeling the correct way, all the while pairing the spoken word and sign together, as our ultimate goal is to have them speak the word.

4. EXPAND THEIR LITTLE WORLDS!

If they're signing to you, they're giving you a window into their little minds! They'll be able to tell you what they see, what they want (or don't want), what they like (or don't like). Grab these moments in the day and "tell" them all about the butterfly they just noticed flying by. It won't be hard, you'll find yourself so excited when they start to communicate that the teacher in you will naturally bubble up and flow out of your mouth and hands!

5. TELL YOUR BABIES THEIR OWN STORIES!

What are they doing, what are they looking at, what are they eating? Every moment of every day is an opportunity that you can use parallel talk/signing to put words to what is going on in their worlds. Give them a verbal running monologue, incorporating the signs to give meaning to your words.

6. TELL YOUR BABIES YOUR STORY!

Similar to parallel talk/signing, you can use self-talk/signing as well. Bring the baby's attention to what you are doing by talking/signing to them about it.

7. READ ALOUD TO YOUR BABIES!

"The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children." Reading takes on greater significance when babies at a very young age can be "active" participants, signing with you as you read books together. Babies need regular shared reading experiences with adults. It becomes important in the child-care setting when you realize that a study in 1999 revealed that more than 30% of parents say they do not read to their preschoolers even once a week. (National Education Goals Panel, 1999) The Baby Signs® Program helps make these shared reading experiences more meaningful to babies and more fun for adults, thus motivating both parties to read together again!

8. REPETITION, REPETITION, REPETITION, ... (YOU GET IT!)

Babies need repetition in their daily lives. Repetition not only provides stability (helping them feel secure in their environment) it helps them to learn. My twins recently started at a new child-care at 18 months of age. I went with them on visits leading up to their first day there alone. I watched their teacher cue these children through their daily routine with words and actions. It was clear from the children's reactions they knew exactly what was going to happen in their day. In particular, as they finished snack she would sing/sign children's songs and repeat children's rhymes while acting them out. One was "Old King Cole". I hadn't taught that rhyme to my twins. Two weeks later when we were at home having snack and doing very similar activities, I remembered "Old King Cole." I started in acting out and repeating the rhyme. You should have seen the look of delight on my twins' faces! I didn't get very far into the rhyme before they enthusiastically joined in with me. Using Baby Signs® during these activities gives children an opportunity to actively join in, making it fun for them and you!

9. JUST PLAIN TALK/SIGN TO THE BABIES

In a recent study on the importance of talking with babies, researchers followed 42 families over 2 1/2 years, from when the child began to speak until he/she was 3 1/2 years old. The researchers spent 1 hour per month with each family recording verbal interactions.

"Children spoken to less did learn to talk and eventually to read. However, in later childhood their vocabularies were more limited, their grammars were more restricted, and their total output was also less, continuing on into middle school. Their school performance, including reading, was also at a lower level. The investigators report that the differences were great, and they were durable over time."(Rosenkoetter et al., 2002, p.35)

According to Hart and Risley (1999): “The most important aspect of parent talk is its amount. Parents who just talk as they go about their daily activities expose their children to 1000-2000 words every hour ... What children need is time, not tricks. The data show that the first 3 years of experience put in place a trajectory of vocabulary growth and the foundations of analytic and symbolic competencies that will make a lasting difference in how children perform in later years” (Hart & Risley, 1995, pp 192-193).”

Hart and Risley concluded from their findings the following implications for the day-care setting:

- “The most important aspect of children’s language experience is amount.”
- “The most important aspect to evaluate in child care settings for very young children is the amount of talk actually going on, moment by moment, between children and their caregivers.”(Hart & Risley, 1995, Research in Brief)

I certainly spent some time evaluating my own verbal/signing communication at home with my twins after reading these findings. Although there is always room for improvement, I knew upon retrospect, that my joy and excitement over being able to communicate with my twins at a younger age than my older children, with whom I did not sign, lent itself to my having more interaction with them. I read to them more because it was fun watching them learn the signs to the books and then later watching them “read” to themselves. I know I talked to them more because it was exciting for me when they would sign to me and “tell” me about what they were seeing. My immediate instinct was to bathe them with words, telling them about what ever it was they had brought to my attention. We would have missed these moments altogether if they could not have told me what it was they were seeing. I feel sure you will have a similar experience with the babies in your childcare.

10. INFLUENCE PARENTS

You have the opportunity to impact the lives of these children at home as well. Look at my one little story about “Old King Cole.” Parents normally spend time watching you interact with their children. By modeling developmentally appropriate and stimulating ways to interact with babies to their parents, you can introduce new families to the joys and benefits of using the Baby Signs® Program with their babies! You have a unique opportunity to make a difference in a child’s life that will have life-long implications. Don’t ever underestimate the impact you have on the lives of the children in your care.

For more information about the Baby Signs® Program, please visit www.Signs4Baby.com

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