

AACS Speech –Language Pathologists Series



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Using Sign Language to Help Your Child Learn to Talk

Using simple signs is a good way to get your child communicating and reduce frustration before she can speak. Signing will not prevent or delay your child's speech development. Signing helps children become active, engaged communicators without tears, whining or tantrums. When a child starts using a word, the sign will no longer be needed. Both you and your child will stop using the sign in favor of the word, and the sign will fade away. To get started, pick 5 signs for things the child really likes and would be motivated to ask for. The more opportunities a child has to ask for it, and the more motivating the item or activity is for the child, the faster they will catch on to this form of early communicating. When the child indicates she wants an item, say the name of the item and make its sign at the same time. Then take your child's hands and help her form the sign while you say its name again and give your child the item. Repeat this every time the name of the item comes up until your child starts to make the sign without your guidance.



Use signs together while having meals and snacks, pairing signs with eat; drink, please, thank you, and favorite foods. Use signs while singing and dancing, keeping a slow pace so your child can keep up.

Tape pictures of signs to the pages of your favorite picture books. Pair signs with words as you label throughout the book.

Signs can be used to supplement speech that is unclear. Some families use name signs to allow a younger child to talk about a sibling with a name that is difficult to say or understand.

Imitation of gestures, which is a prerequisite for sign, can be taught in a fun manner through many of the popular children's songs such as: Wheels on the Bus, Itsy Bitsy Spider and Happy and You Know.



Use signs as a family. Often siblings can be helpful in using and teaching signs. With the right attitude, using signs can be like a game. Always verbalize with signs.

If a child seems to be "looking" for a word, you can give them the sign as a prompt, to help them remember that word.

Pick signs that are different from each other and feel free to adapt if you think a natural gesture or modified sign will be easier – most of our kiddos are using this as a "bridge". Also add seasonal signs, e.g. egg, candy, tree, bird, etc. A great reference website is www.commtechlab@msu.edu. You can look up a sign alphabetically whenever you want and watch it done until you are comfortable using it.



3075 Ridge Pike, Eagleville, PA 19403-1538

610-265-4700