

5 Myths About Signing With Your Child

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We're so happy you've decided to start signing with your child! The decision to do so often comes with lots of questions, and maybe even a few misconceptions. Let's bust some of the myths about signing with children so you can have the best experience possible.

Myth 1 – There's a perfect time to start (and we might have missed it!): Parents of infants always ask when the “best” time to start signing might be. They worry they are starting too soon, or too late. Parents of children who are talking think it is definitely too late!

The truth is, American Sign Language (ASL) can be started at any time, just like any other second language.

There are some really nice times to begin though. While you can certainly start signing with your newborn (just as you immediately begin talking to a newborn), beginning a more focused time of sign language around six months old is often quite successful. The reason for this is that the child is able to focus their eyes, sustain eye contact, and engage more readily with caregivers. Six months is a nice window if you want to see the shortest time between starting signing with your baby and some sort of reaction and indication they are learning, a time period of around a few months.

With children who are already speaking, the time between starting sign language and seeing them sign back is significantly shorter. It's rewarding for you and incredibly fun for the child.

In short, anytime is a good time to begin signing.



Myth 2 – There are certain words you should start with and a perfect way to do it: Parents worry that there are some words they should start with first because they are “easier” to sign, or some they should skip because they appear complicated. Or, parents worry about how many signs to introduce at first, and at what pace.

The truth is, just like with speech, as long as you are signing on a consistent basis and keeping it fun, children are going to pick up on the language one way or another.

There are no “perfect” words to start with – although we recommend choosing a few simple signs to start with that fit well into the daily routine. So, for instance, you might start with some foods around eating and drinking since you’ll naturally get to practice them several times per day.

The number of signs you introduce at a time depends entirely on you. We don’t consciously choose the number of words we speak to an infant, and the same goes for signing. Just pick the number of signs you are comfortable with, get going on those, and you can always add more later.

Myth 3 – She’s not signing yet – she must not be interested: If you’ve started signing with your child (of any age) and she doesn’t seem to be signing back, don’t get discouraged! Just like with speech, a child’s rate of signing comes naturally, at her own individual pace.

There are so many variables around when a child will start to sign: when you started, how you present the signs (keep it fun – and use music!), how often you model them, sibling dynamic... it is really endless.

Be on the lookout for subtle signs of understanding. You’re likely to see that before you see an actual sign, especially for younger children. Watch for a light or twinkle in the eye when you sign MILK and the child is hungry! Or watch their little feet start kicking as you pull out the bottle or prepare to nurse while signing EAT. They may not be signing just yet, but they are most certainly absorbing the language, and getting ready to wow you.

Myth 4 – It’s too hard for me to learn: ASL is a true language, and like all languages, complex. The idea of learning a second spoken language is pretty intimidating for many adults, and the same may hold true when thinking about tackling sign language with your child.

One of the really great things about sign language is that it is multi-sensory. We say and hear words we sign, but we also see and feel the sign. This does something unique in the brain, essentially triggering muscle memory, along with language learning. The signs stick, and stick much more quickly than you might imagine because the act of communicating this way is literally like riding a bike – on some level, after practicing, your body begins to know what to do.

Myth 5 – The form of signing we choose doesn’t really matter: If you were to just research sign language, you would find many variations used in America and Canada. There is American Sign Language (ASL), Signed Exact English (SEE), and Pidgen Sign Language (PSE) to begin with. Then there are also organizations that teach “sign language”, but take some liberty with the signs, perhaps modifying them in ways deemed easier, or pulling from a variety of the above mentioned language structures.

We feel quite strongly that American Sign Language (ASL) should be the language system of choice for those wishing to sign with children. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. First, and perhaps most importantly, ASL is the language of the Deaf Community. It is inextricably tied to their culture and heritage. You wouldn’t dare modify a spoken language (such as Spanish) to make it easier, right? Nor should you for signing.

Countless people throughout America and Canada use ASL. Teaching your child ASL vocabulary as a part of your signing efforts ensures that they are using a true and established language, and one that they can pull from should they meet a native signer. Not so with some of the variations. We think it’s best to use what is tried, true, and traditional within the Deaf Community.