

# GROWING UP: All the Right Signs

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## 5 steps to using sign language for better communication with your preemie

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Alex had a congenital heart defect and faced multiple medical encounters while in the NICU. The first few months post-NICU were difficult and he spent many days back in the hospital. Like many preemies in this situation, it would have been easy for him to develop negative feelings - even fear - toward a medical environment. Unlike most preemies, however, Alex and his parents found a way to minimize this anxiety and eventually developed a sense of comfort when being examined. Alex learned sign language.

Preemies face many challenges in their early developmental years. Wouldn't it be easier for parents and medical personnel if preemies could talk and tell us how they feel, what they want, and what they like? In a way, they can by using their hands.

Over 20 years of research shows that children naturally gesture to obtain things they want - like putting their arms up to be picked up. By tapping into these natural tendencies and teaching your baby some basic American Sign Language (ASL) Signs, you can open a line of communication with your baby and learn her needs, fears and wants.

Kimberly Fries, a licensed speech language pathologist (SLP) specializing in children from birth to 3 years old, said that since many preemies experience delays, the addition of baby signing helps to offset delays and give preemies a way to communicate while they are catching up to their peers.

"Using signs helps these toddlers express pain and basic wants and needs," said Fries. "As with any baby, it gives that extra means of communication while waiting for speech."

Additionally, signing helps preemies who face multiple medical procedures find a way to express their needs. Imagine the terror babies must face in medical situations with no way to understand what is going to happen next.

### How to Start Signing

With all the additional issues you may be dealing with, don't stress out. You and your preemie don't need to learn a new language. You are just borrowing some basic ASL signs and adding them to your conversations. These signs give your baby a way to communicate back. You can learn as few

as 5 signs or as many as 100-300 signs to enrich your relationship.

Generally, parents start teaching their babies as early as 6 months. Since preemies may have additional delays, you should be aware that this process might take longer to start than it would for a full-term baby. By using your preemie's adjusted age, parents may get a better sense of when their child is ready to interact.

"There is nothing inherent about being preemie that causes delays," Fries added. "What often happens is there are other medical diagnoses that interfere."

Even though your preemie may face additional challenges, the same steps that parents take with full-term babies will work.

### **What Not to Worry About**

Some parents worry that using signs will slow down a baby's ability to speak. Studies show that this is not true. Babies who sign generally speak at the same rates as babies who do not. However, during the time when they cannot speak, babies who can sign can still communicate. Kelly Ducharme, a mother of preemie twins, said that signing was one of the best things she did for her children and herself.

"At the peak of their signing they knew over 100 signs each. All of the signs turned to words at around 24 months," she said. "This is quite miraculous when you realize they were 2 months premature, plus the fact that twins are notorious for being late talkers. They were on track for actual age in language development, and I attribute that completely to signing with them."

As Ducharme found, babies who sign have an easier time learning to communicate. When they begin to speak, they already understand the communication game and generally learn to talk faster once they begin to speak. As an added bonus, research shows that babies who sign have a 12-point increase in their IQ and have larger vocabularies and greater interest in books.

Why not give signing a try? There is no downside and the upside is a rewarding experience for you and your preemie. And you never know, your preemie just might surprise you with what he has to say.

### **1. Start simple:**

Start with three to five signs like "milk," "more," and "eat." Start signing when your baby is between 6 and 8 months and your baby holds your gaze for a few seconds. This may be later for preemies so refer to their adjusted age. Once you know your baby is watching you, it is a good time to start. If your baby is older, start right away. Based on age and manual dexterity, you will see your child sign within a few weeks to a few months. If your child has other special needs, be

patient as the process may take a bit longer.

## **2. Talk as you sign:**

Since your goal is to help your child become verbal, speak with your child as much as you can. When nursing or giving a bottle, make eye contact and say, "Do you want some milk?" and sign milk. Then, as you feed your child, open a dialog about the milk. "We're having milk. Milk is good!"

## **3. Look for signs:**

Babies adapt signs to their physical abilities, so they don't always look exactly right. Similar to speech development, babies' abilities to sign will improve as they sign more. In the meantime, encourage any attempts your child makes. If you think you see a sign say, "Oh, you're signing milk. Do you want some milk?" Continue to make the sign correctly and your child will learn to make the sign correctly.

## **4. Be patient:**

It may take a few months for your baby to make the first sign and even longer if your baby has delays. That gives you time to learn more signs. But remember that babies recognize the signs long before they can make them.

## **5. Incorporate sign:**

Don't stop and sign - just incorporate signing into your daily activities. Sign as you talk with your child, sign as you read books, sign as you sing, sign as you and your child interact. Soon, you will find that you need to learn more signs.

## **Getting Help**

Want some additional help? Look for a baby signing class. A great way to find one in your local community is to go to the local baby specialty stores, children's gyms, or Mom and Me classes and see if they sponsor baby signing classes. When checking in to classes, consider taking a class based on American Sign Language (ASL) Signs. Using ASL signs gives your child a start at learning the third most-used language in the United States (English and Spanish are first).

## **RESOURCES:**

### **National Association of the Deaf**

<http://www.nad.org/>

### **Sign Babies**

<http://www.signbabies.com/>

## **SIGN with your BABY**

<http://www.sign2me.com/>

## **Signing Baby**

<http://www.signingbaby.com/>

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[www.signbabies.com](http://www.signbabies.com)