

March 2007

\$5.00

Deaf Life

THE BOOM IN BABY SIGNS

Great for hearing babies-
BUT what about deaf?





Deaf **Life** COVER STORY

The boom in baby signs: of proven benefit to hearing babies . . . but what about those who are deaf?

As the parent of three, I remember how frustrating it was to have a crying baby or toddler who couldn't fully communicate what he wanted. There were days when my baby would try to say a word or would simply point at a cabinet door behind which were a number of possible items he might want—but which one? Needless to say, there were moments when both of us felt frustrated and unhappy about our inability to understand one another. I thought there was no other choice. At the time, there wasn't.

*But as soon as I opened this book on using sign language with babies (**Baby Signing**), I realized the possibilities. Sign language . . . of course! It made immediate, intuitive sense.*

*Still, I was skeptical enough that I enlisted the help of some "volunteers" (friends and their babies) to try out the signs shown in this book. **WITHIN ONE HOUR**, a fair number of babies in the 9-12 month range were using basic signing techniques (and one 7-month-old was well on the way). It was truly amazing—and exciting—to watch! The parents were equally impressed and, of course, proud of their offspring.*

If you think that sign language is [no] more than just a clever "game" for parents and children, think again. Studies have shown that babies who learn to sign may have a head start on learning how to speak later on. Rather than slowing down speech development, signing is a way of enhancing communication before very [young] toddlers are truly verbal. It lessens frustration and readies them for actual speech.

Signing is also a perfect way of communicating in a quiet setting (church, doctor's office waiting room, certain restaurants) and even babies and toddlers can learn that communicating quietly is far more effective and acceptable than grunting, crying, whining and pointing. In short, sign language not only works but has major advantages in specific settings.

Kevin Corn, Indianapolis, Indiana¹

It's difficult to pick up a magazine or newspaper without encountering an article about the "Baby Signs" phenomenon. Make no mistake, this is a very hot trend in parenting. Local newspapers, TV stations, and national magazines have been carrying cover-

age about workshops and classes being set up around the nation. A browse through the Amazon Website reveals an abundance of colorful multimedia kits for parents, and board books with full-color illustrations or photographs, meant to be shared with babies. Parents who have pur-

mommies. The most fervent evangelists of baby signing have been parents who have enrolled in a workshop or purchased a book or the multimedia kit, signed to their children, incorporated the signs into their daily communication—playtime, mealtimes, bath-time, excursions—experienced

“At the same time as we encourage ASL use, we avoid giving the message that parents MUST do so or they are doing something wrong.”—Linda Acredolo

chased these for their children have posted their uncensored commentaries, networking with prospective buyers.

The visibility of baby-signing programs received a boost from Hollywood—for example, the adorable twins Spencer and Bradley Pickren, who played Little Jack, the mischievous bambino in Jay Roach’s 2004 hit screwball comedy, *Meet the Fockers*. (The Pickren twins have since appeared in the *Signing Time* DVDs.) But the trend was already on the upswing by the time *Meet the Fockers* was released.

When celebrities do something trendy in front of the videocams, the public takes notice. But even more important is the role played by networking parents, especially

the results, and are so delighted that they have bought additional kits for their friends, to be given as gifts at showers, or immediately. They have also bought books and reference guides for their own parents, in-laws, and babysitters, so that the grandparents and caretakers can sign too. Some of the signers have become certified instructors, carrying forward the message and benefits to other families. Networking has played a vital role here.

Parents can choose from a bewildering array of board books, flashcards, dictionaries, guides, handbooks, DVDs, and multimedia packages. Some of the books feature illustrations; others full-color photos; still others a combination of photos and cartoons.

Browsing through the customer reviews in Amazon.com is an educational experience; we see that some parents buy the materials for their deaf babies; others use them with language-delayed and autistic children. Some parents insist on teaching their babies authentic ASL signs, shunning made-up or nonstandard signs; others don’t consider the distinction important. Some are using the signs only as a temporary bridge to speech; others want their children to become bilingual. Personal preference plays a major role. What one parent considers dull and boring, another parent is delighted with. The ultimate decisions are made by the babies themselves. Several parents have bought a variety of books or DVDs, and find that the children prefer one or the other. In some cases, older children enjoy the DVDs and pick up signs themselves.

Since children can form signs (real, simplified, or spontaneously

created) well before they can speak, signing enables children and parents (and grandparents, caretakers, and older siblings) to communicate with each other. This is something that Deaf parents and CODAs have long known—but it wasn’t exactly common knowledge in the hearing community.

The original “Baby Signs” program was created by Linda Acredolo, now Professor Emeritus of Psychology



at University of California, Davis; and Susan Goodwyn Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Child Development at California State University, Stanislaus. Both live in northern California.



Learning the sign for "hat" (above and opposite).

It all started with Acredolo's one-year-old daughter, Kate, who spoke a few words but spontaneously created a core vocabulary of symbolic gestures—*flower*, for example. Acredolo had never seen anything like this, and wondered how unusual this might be—and if Kate was unique. (With deaf children, this spontaneous gestural creativity is known as "home signs," but Kate was hearing.) After Susan Goodwyn arrived, having just earned her Master's in Language Development at University of London, she and Acredolo began a carefully organized longitudinal program (following up on the progress of a particular group of children over several years), going out into the community to document the spontaneous gesturing of other babies. In an interview with *Urban Baby* (circa 2001) she noted:

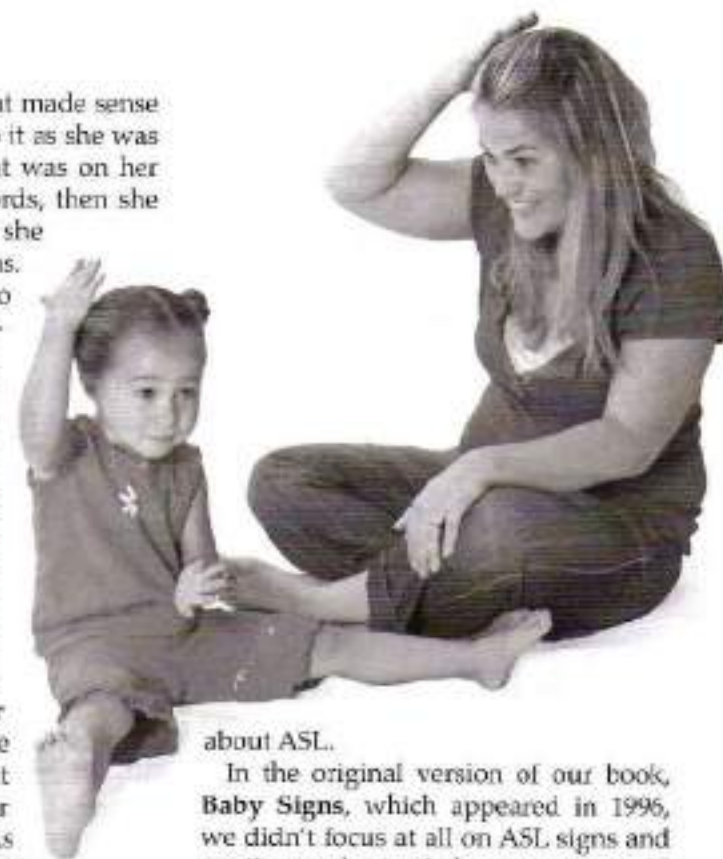
We found that babies spontaneously used a few—sometimes up to a dozen—signs for parents to respond to. Unfortunately, the parents were so focused on the verbal word that they didn't give the baby credit for what he was doing. The babies that were doing more of this, like Kate, were learning to speak sooner.

After we found this initial data, we decided to make it really easy for Kate, teaching her gestures like flapping our

arms for birds, things that made sense to us. Kate really got into it as she was able to let us know what was on her mind before she had words, then she became so verbal that she stopped using the signs. So we decided to look into how babies would develop their communication skills if we taught them "Baby Signs" rather than letting them just make spontaneous baby signs on their own. In each round of research we used 40 experimental families and 80 control families who didn't use "Baby Signs," and we followed their progress over eight years. Like Kate, the babies who were taught signs developed better communication skills. As for the research, we're still working on the project to see if we can use "Baby Signs" to see what babies remember, to tap into memory. We're going to keep going!²

We asked Dr. Acredolo about ASL signs *versus* made-up signs—an approach that the Baby Signs program has been criticized for allowing. She noted that Dr. Goodwyn was setting up a Baby Signs program in Thailand, and graciously replied:

We are finding lots and lots of international interest in signing with babies—which brings me to the question



about ASL.

In the original version of our book, *Baby Signs*, which appeared in 1996, we didn't focus at all on ASL signs and totally emphasized that parents could use any sign they wanted. There were two reasons: (1) We had no background in Deaf education or ASL; (2) The book had grown out of our research which, starting as early as 1982, had been motivated by observing babies making up their own signs. For example, our main research project (funded by the National Institutes of Health back in 1989) produced data based on that premise.

Our approach changed in our revised edition published in 2002 to our current position. We now recognize the advantages of using ASL signs, particularly as a way to build a bridge to the Deaf community and, with a few exceptions, we try to encourage parents to use ASL signs by focusing on them in our videos,

kits, and classes. The few exceptions are ones where the ASL would likely be too difficult for the baby. Even then, however, we say that if the family is interested in having the child eventually learn the true ASL sign, they can help the child switch to that sign down the line, just as babies switch from baby words to more adult words.

At the same time as we encourage ASL use, however, we avoid giving the message that parents **MUST** do so or they are doing something wrong. We say it's up to the family to decide which signs will work best. For example, they should feel free to use made-up signs if that will work best for them in the short period their child will need them. Because we know how beneficial it is for hearing babies to communicate with signs, we don't want to put any obstacles in the path of their parents. Now that the movement is international, this flexibility is also proving helpful because, as you know, signs used by Deaf communities differ from country to country.

Many of our business competitors criticize the flexibility part of our approach as a way to enhance their own presence in the marketplace. We've simply have had to learn to live with this fact.

Acredolo and Goodwyn published their first findings in 1985, documenting how other hearing babies were creating symbolic gestures, and studying how babies acquire language. Kate wasn't unique after all—but she was a great teacher.

The benefits of the "Baby Signs" programs have been well-publi-

cized. Signing has been shown to benefit babies' emotional, social, and language development, and improve interactions with other family members—older siblings enjoy signing with the baby too. Babies are delighted to be able to share their feelings, desires, questions, and curiosity with others, knowing that others understand them. Their self-esteem and confidence are increased; tantrums, crying jags, and fits of frustration accordingly decrease.

Signing stimulates cognitive development during what the experts agree is a crucial period for language acquisition. It *enhances* spoken-language development. Babies are eager to learn more words, and characteristically learn to talk sooner. The parent-child bond is strengthened, since they can have real conversations. Particularly appealing is the claim that babies who learn signs show an average 12-point lead in IQ scores over those who don't.

As their parents and grandparents testify, babies learn the signs easily and are eager to use them, delighted to communicate with caregivers and others who know how to sign:

[Kai] has been signing non-stop the last couple days, even to strangers. I ac-

tually have a really cute story.

Kai and I were leaving the Fairfield Mall Thursday evening, but the entrance ramp to I-80 was backed up into the mall area. Kai needed to eat, so we turned around and went to a Japanese restaurant near the mall.

A few couples were not happy to see a baby stroll through the door.

While the hostess was taking our order, Kai signed "flower." (There was a potted plant in the corner.) The hostess said she was familiar with the Baby Signs program and began signing with Kai.

It was so much fun for Kai to communicate. He did "more," "hat" and "frog" at first. Then, a little pre-school girl came over to our table with a toy horse. Kai's hands went crazy up and down. Everyone was laughing when they realized that was the sign for horse. By the time we left, most of the patrons were talking about babies and signing, even the grumpy lady. Wow. Everyone was waving goodbye to us, but Kai was signing "cat" instead. Sure enough, there was a cat statue on a shelf at the back of the restaurant. Everyone had a good laugh.

I really love Baby Signs!

Angela

Hi, I am a new Baby Signs Instructor. I thought I would share a cute story about my daughter, Ella. She is 9 months old and the only sign that she does with any regularity is "Daddy." Yesterday at dinner she was looking at the last strand of Christmas lights yet to come down. I showed her the different colors and turned off the lights and showed her the sign for light. She did it right away! Then she

wouldn't stop. We went to every room and she found a lamp or light and made the sign. Even this morning when she was having her bottle lounging in bed with me, she was looking out the window signing "light." It truly was like the light bulb went on for her...I know this is just the beginning!!

Lindsi Archabald



(...) Now when Owen signs for *drink*, I give him a bottle of water and he is so happy. He looks at you in the face and signs repeatedly and when you give him the bottle, he is so happy. It is so nice to be able to give him what he wants. I can only imagine what the future holds. Now that I see how well he is doing, I will baby sign much more often. This is no fluke for the skeptics; he does it to his father and me separately. It is very clear and he goes from fussy to content so quickly.

Thank you for advocating such innovative thinking.

Excited—

Nesya Pietras

Dear Dr. Accredolo:

Liz Gordon, our **WONDERFUL** Baby Signs instructor, contacted me regarding your search for a mom and baby girl who has been signing before her 1st birthday. **Norah is your girl!** Norah began signing around 10 months with signs for *hat, duck, fan* and *dolly*.

My husband and I read **Baby Signs** (the first edition), while I was pregnant with our daughter and were convinced of what a fabulous communication tool and bonding opportunity this was going to provide for us and our daughter. We chased Liz throughout the Chicago Northwest Suburbs to take her class. Norah was just a year when we began the Sign, Say, and Play class and she took off from there. She now has a repertoire of around 30 signs. We LOVE it!!!

I sing the praises of Baby Signs to everyone.

Recently my daughter was in the hospital and the doctors and nurses were amazed at how Norah would talk to them through sign language about what

she saw in her book, what toy she wanted to hold, what animals were in the mural on the wall, etc. In addition, my Mother recently stayed with us and took care of Norah on her own during the day . . . she is still bragging about how Norah could tell her what she needed through baby signs. My Mom didn't have to stress about Norah's schedule, because Norah was on top of it . . . she told her Grandma when it was time to eat, sleep, read a book (and which book), change her diaper and more. We have seen the same thing happen with Norah's day-care, where she spends three days a week. We keep them abreast on Norah's signs and they now have the **Baby Signs Quick Reference Guide** posted in her classroom.

(I'm working on them to train their baby and toddler classroom staff in Baby Signs.)

Norah also loves her **Sign, Say, and Play** books, CD and the video. (Actually the video is the only thing that perked her up when she was so sick. It would always make her giggle when Scooter tried to walk his dog and she would sign back.) Thank you for these **GREAT** tools.

Here is a rough run-down on the signs she uses:

Eat, drink (She actually has her own for this, which is smacking her lips together), *more* (uses it in play, with food, everything), *all done* (usually resulting in food on the floor), *love* (same as *dolly*), *stars, light, sleep, book* (she LOVES books), *bubbles* (kinda), *bath, frog, water, duck, toothbrush, bird, cat, dog, fish* (sometimes), *butterfly, flower, tree, hat, comb/brush, diaper, pig, horse, fan* . . . and some others I am just forgetting right now.

Thank you for the amazing work you

do and helping to make communicating with our daughter such an enlightened experience.

Sincerely,

Maggie Osborne

To give you some background, I am the wife of a CODA and a mother of three hearing children. I signed with all of my children from birth. My children are now 7 years, 5 years, and 3 years, and I have seen the benefits of signing with hearing children, both to reduce frustration and increase communication, but also to build an understanding of the Deaf community. Although

It's time to add another acronym to the alphabet-soup broth: SCOSA—signing (hearing) child of a signing (hearing) adult.

we only see the children's grandparents about twice a year, it is wonderful to see the way they can communicate.

I [have the] experience of using only ASL signs vs. including some of the modified signs from the Baby Signs Program with my third child. (She has now switched over to all ASL signs.)

Bonita Broughton¹

As the testimonials by parents show (and these are a tiny sampling), both parents and children enjoy learning and using the signs. It's too soon to tell what the political implications are, but a number of the sign-learning parents have expressed interest in continuing their learning—even

after their toddlers become fluent talkers. Some already have connections to the Deaf community—friends or acquaintances. All of them have gained a positive attitude towards sign language.

If signing benefits *hearing* babies, isn't it reasonable to infer that it benefits *deaf* babies just as much, if not more? After all, these baby-sign programs utilize many ASL signs. ASL has been used by deaf parents with both deaf and

hearing children for generations, and the advantages of early exposure to signing have been studied and validated. There is a large, and increasing, body of published research on the topic, including longitudinal studies.

While media coverage about the boom in baby signs is coming at us thick as a blizzard, it's also hard to pick up a newspaper or magazine without seeing an article about the wonders and benefits of cochlear implants for deaf children—usually in the context of the child's receiving, and making "miraculous" progress in, a strictly oral/auditory education.

According to the Food and Drug Administration's 2005 figures, approximately 15,000 deaf children in the U.S.A. have received cochlear implants, and the number continues to rise. Infant-hearing screening makes it possible to

Outside of the States, babies as young as 4 months old have received implants, and some 1600 children have bilateral implants. The majority of these children are from nonsigning families and are enrolled in oral programs.

Oral education, despite its long history of "dismal failure" (to quote from the 1964 Babbidge Report), has received a tremendous boost from the upsurge in pediatric cochlear implants. New oral day programs have been set up across the nation. Over half of the children attending oral schools have implants; sometimes a school's entire student population has them. Schools for the deaf, including those with a signing tradition, have set up preschool programs for children with implants, in which signing is not used at all. Mainstreaming continues

unabated. True, a number of deaf children with implants have been enrolled in signing programs, and make signing a part of their everyday lives, but they appear to be in the minority.

Parents who have committed to the oral/auditory approach, with or without cochlear implants, are instructed not to sign to their children, or, if they have already be-

gun, to discontinue it immediately. Those choosing this approach over a sign-affirmative one say that they favor it because it fits in better with their lifestyle—they don't have to learn what they consider a foreign language.

So while more *hearing* babies are learning baby signs and ASL as a second language, more *deaf* babies are receiving implants and starting Auditory-Verbal therapy, which trains children to rely on their residual hearing with the implants, or with powerful hearing aids—and signing is simply irrelevant.

An example of oralist justification, currently posted online:

Research has shown that [deaf] children who do not use sign language develop more sophisticated use of their hearing and speaking skills.—FAQs page, HEAR in Dallas, Inc.

The oralist rationale—and one that many deaf adults consider preposterous—is that virtually all deaf children, even those born profoundly deaf, can be taught how to listen and speak, with well-modulated voices, by utilizing their residual hearing. Signing, according to this view, interferes with acquisition of spo-

ken-language skills, and prevents implantees for getting full use of their implants. Oralists have steadfastly maintained this position through the years and are unlikely to abandon it, despite evidence to the contrary, that signing *hastens* the acquisition of speech and language skills.

What's the truth? Is there any scientific evidence that signing interferes with the acquisition of speech skills? Marilyn Sass-Lehrer, Professor in Gallaudet University's Department of Education, an expert in early intervention and education of deaf children, has some comments:

I want to commend you for addressing this issue—it's mind-boggling that those who promote early auditory access to language have been able to "spin" the message that while signing may be good for hearing babies it's detrimental for those who are deaf.



identify deaf newborns even before they leave the hospital. In 1990, the FDA approved cochlear implants for children as young as two years of age; the age of implantation was subsequently lowered to 18 months in 1998, and 12 months in 2002, although 6-month-old babies have received implants with special approval.

Ironically, much of the research that is used to discourage parents from signing can be used to support signing. For example, the research that suggests there is/are critical period(s) for neurological and linguistic development (that you cite), has also been used to support the use of signing with deaf and hard-of-hearing babies. Signing with babies who do not have full access to hearing is the most efficient means of providing early neurological and linguistic development. Babies who have been identified with a hearing loss often spend their earliest months with no access to hearing while they wait for hearing evaluations to be completed and hearing aids acquired. Even in the best-case scenario of early hearing-aid use, many babies experience inconsistent hearing-aid

language, and there is some research that suggests that signs (not only fully fluent models of ASL) provide an early boost to language development (spoken or signed). (See Yoshinaga-Itano, 2003 and Yoshinaga-Itano and Menn, 2003.) Because signs are more salient for very young children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing than a language that requires hearing, babies learn to recognize signs as representing words and concepts. There is also research that indicates that children are able to use signs well in advance of spoken words to express their needs and wants. This is true for both hearing and deaf children.

There are researchers who have shown that children with deaf parents who use sign language with their children, have literacy skills that are on par with their

“ASL provides children with an understanding of the world as well as a way to communicate their understanding.”

—Marilyn Sass-Lehrer

wearing time. Factors such as illness, equipment breakdown, poor fitting of hearing aids and molds, limitations of the hearing aid, poor acoustic environments, parents/caregivers who are not diligent about keeping the hearing aids in and on, etc., means that many very young [children] have limited access to language through hearing aids. Given these barriers — many people continue to discourage the use of visual means of communication and seem to suggest that no language access is better than visual language access. It's really astounding!

No research indicates that early signing prevents the development of spoken

hearing peers (Morford & Mayberry, 2000; Newport & Meier, 1985; Strong & Prinz, 2000).

Stong & Prinz's research indicates that those individuals who are competent users of ASL tend to also have stronger English than those who are not strong ASL users (regardless of their parents' hearing status).

Beth Benedict and I just co-authored a chapter for a book that will be published any time now—**Choices in Deafness** (3rd Edition) by Sue Schwartz. In this chapter we wrote the following:

“Children who acquire ASL as their first language may also develop intel-

ligible spoken language. In fact, one group of researchers found that early language acquisition (in either ASL or English) is the most important factor predicting better speech (Yoshinaga-Itano & Sedey, 2000). In another study, the same research group found that children with a strong language foundation in American Sign Language who did not receive a cochlear implant until after their first birthday (and some not until their eighteenth month of life) were able to acquire intelligible spoken language as well as strong English language skills. After years of teaching deaf and hard of hearing children, Livingston (1997) observed that children who used American Sign Language were in a better position to learn how to talk than children who did not use ASL. ASL provides children with an understanding of the world as well as a way to communicate their understanding. This is fundamental to language learning whether signed or spoken.”⁴

Deaf children whose parents are part of the oral/auditory/cochlear-implant movement are the *least* likely to benefit from the trend in baby signs. As a result of their parents' anti-sign bias, they may suffer from delayed acquisition of language. And this is one of the bitter ironies of the times we live in.

Is the trend in baby signing good for us? Yes. We want to see it continue. ASL is being spotlighted as a language of immense subtlety

and flexibility. Its applications are limitless. It can improve the lives of those who use it. That it has survived the unstinting efforts of generations of oralists to wipe it out, and is being enthusiastically employed to enhance communications between babies and parents—not just deaf ones, but hearing ones too—is another irony—but a delicious one. ■

NOTES

1. Kevin Corn is a Top 500 Reviewer on Amazon.com, a notably fair-minded commentator, and runs an eBay site, rareanduniquebooksonline.com. He has extensive experience working with deaf children, and has an adopted teenage son with a severe hearing loss in one ear. His comments, taken from his Amazon.com review of Andrea Fixell and Ted Stafford's **Baby Signing: How to Talk with Your Baby in American Sign Language**, are quoted by his kind permission.

2. Posted on the *Urban Baby* Website, no date or byline. Drs. Acredolo and Goodwyn have also published **Baby Minds: Brain-Building Games Your Baby Will Love** (2000).

3. All testimonials, excepting Benita Broughton's, which was sent to us directly, were provided courtesy of Dr. Acredolo.

4. Beth Benedict and Marilyn Sass-Lehrer, “The ASL and English Approach,” in **Choices in Deafness: A Parents' Guide to Communication Options, Third Edition**, edited by Sue Schwartz, Ph.D. (Bethesda, Maryland: Woodbine House, to be published June 2007).

DeafLife

Thanks to all those who helped with this article: Dr. Linda Acredolo, Dr. Marilyn Sass-Lehrer, Kevin ad Jane Corn. All photos courtesy of Dr. Linda Acredolo and Dr. Susan Goodwyn/Baby Signs.

FOR HEARING PEOPLE ONLY

How do Deaf people feel about the recent trend towards “baby signs”—encouraging hearing parents sign with their hearing babies?

We think it's a good trend, and we also think it's damned ironic. Hearing researchers and teachers like Linda Acredolo, Susan Goodwyn, and Joseph Garcia are simply recapitulating the collective wisdom of generations of Deaf parents, who signed to their deaf and hearing babies from the start.

Acredolo, Goodwyn, Garcia, and an increasing roster of others have taught a number of hearing parents to use baby signs with their hearing babies. These don't necessarily have any resemblance to ASL; they can be simple made-up signs that are used consistently with and understood by the baby: *bottle, diaper, thirsty, hungry, play, nap, flower, apple, etc.*

Using a scientific approach,

Acredolo rediscovered what Deaf parents have always known—that babies can sign cogently earlier than they can articulate spoken words. What are the advantages of a hearing baby's learning how to sign before s/he can talk? They are numerous. Babies are able to clearly express their desires, their feelings, and their needs in a way the parents understand immediately. This cuts down on frustration for the babies and the parents alike. Communicating one's needs clearly forestalls temper tantrums and “acting out.” Once the baby is able to tell the parents “I'm thirsty” or “I'm feeling lonely,” the parents can respond, the baby gets what s/he needs, and can move on to other development-enhancing activities, such



as interaction, learning, play, or exploring the environment.

What is ironic about this is that teaching signing to babies is being endorsed for hearing families at a time when it is being suppressed for families with deaf babies. Families who choose the oralist approach for their deaf babies, including, but not limited to, Auditory-Verbal therapy, and who decide to give their babies cochlear implants, are still being counseled by audiologists, doctors, clinicians, speech therapists, and other parents, not to sign with their deaf children, or, if they already do, to discontinue it at the earliest opportunity, since (in their view) signing only impedes the acquisition of speech. Their priority is the child's acquisition of spoken language, even though it means choosing the hardest possible way.

So, in effect, society is discovering that it's beneficial for parents to sign to hearing babies, while the audiological establishment is telling parents of deaf babies that signing is to be avoided at all costs. What a world!

What are our feelings on the topic? We know that teaching babies to sign is beneficial and should be encouraged. There is a difference of opinion on the merits of teaching true ASL or employing invented signs. Sometimes the babies themselves propose signs, and the parents adopt them. That's fine. But such made-up signs aren't intelligible to anyone outside the family. Some parents prefer to learn and use authentic ASL signs, since they have (or anticipate having) Deaf friends and want their signing to be consistent, or simply because they want to establish a foundation for language using real language. Parents can choose from programs that use real ASL and those that accept made-up signs.



FOR HEARING PEOPLE ONLY



Sign-affirmative parents have seen for themselves how signing benefits their children's development—the signs didn't impede their children's acquisition of speech, they enhanced it.

When is a baby ready to learn these signs? Acredolo tells parents that when a baby can wave "bye-bye," around 6 to 7 months of age, s/he's ready to acquire a vocabulary of basic signs. As the babies pick up speech, the signs can be phased out. (But a few children have retained the signs, and we wonder if some of them

the joy experienced by parents of knowing what their baby wants without guessing, pointing, or going through time-consuming, emotionally agonizing charades and quiz sessions. Notably fewer tantrums, or none at all. Decreased emotional stress on the baby who's trying to communicate, and on the parent who's trying to figure out what the baby's trying to say.

This means happier babies and a more satisfying, more stress-free family life. This, of course, is what Deaf parents have experienced with their babies, but only recently has the scientific establishment paid much attention to non-speech-based, ASL-based communication between parents and children.

The implications for children and parents are positive. Should any of these enlightened parents

become parents of deaf children, we're confident that they will put their expertise to use. We suspect that they would be unlikely to choose the oral-auditory route, since they've already seen the benefits of signing for themselves. The Auditory/Verbal approach requires parents to commit to a no-signing regimen, which is something we very much doubt that signing parents of hearing babies would agree to.

We have already explained how we feel about parents forbidding their deaf children to sign, or discouraging them from signing in any way. We're delighted that researchers have vindicated the wisdom of Deaf parents who signed to *all* of their children, hearing and deaf, from the start. The signs they used, of course, were ASL, and they were not phased out or dropped, but were continually augmented. These children (known as CODAs) typically became bilingual, fluent in both ASL and English. Some have made professional careers out of their expertise.

Most of the baby-signs multimedia packages are produced by

hearing teachers and marketed by mainstream (hearing) companies. A few of the baby-sign multimedia packages and books on the market are published by Deaf-owned companies, and feature the work of Deaf authors and illustrators.

As for the issue of hearing people profiting from these lucrative videocourses: we respond that this is a free, democratic society, and we believe in the open exchange of ideas and free enterprise. Parents who wish to purchase the videocourses are welcome to do so. They can choose which one they like best. Those who can't afford to, or prefer to take a different tack, can borrow them from friends, or the local public library, or read the books, take a community-college class in basic signing, or find a Deaf friend and learn the rudiments of signing for free (or cheaply). It is really not *that* difficult to learn the basics and employ them with children. A bit of education, practice, and a measure of self-confidence are what one needs—and a generous dash of patience and love. The results are worth it. ■

We're delighted that researchers have vindicated the wisdom of Deaf parents who signed to *all* of their children, hearing and deaf, from the start.

may be predisposed to learning ASL later in life!)

The results have been enthusiastically reported by the parents: a new ease of communication,

