

# LIFE

AMERICA'S WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## The Boom in **Baby Sign Language**

The surprising  
trend every parent  
is talking about

Meet the *Fockers*'  
"Little Jack"  
asks for milk



Lauren Bacall: Memories of Hepburn ★ Wolfgang Puck's Oscar-Night Pizza

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## Their Fingers Do the

# TALKING

What if babies could communicate with us months before uttering a word? Thanks to a breakthrough program using sign language, thousands already are.

BY DAVID HOCHMAN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
GABRIELLE REVERE

It was the simplest of gestures—fingertips tapping against fingertips—and yet it made Lindsay Vardalos weep tears of joy. For two months, the first-time mom had been using sign language as she spoke to her 9-month-old daughter, Eva. Then, one morning in the kitchen of their home outside of Phoenix, little Eva signed back—informing her mama that she wanted “more” food.

“I was so filled with emotion,” says Lindsay, 26. “Here we were, two months before Eva spoke her first word, and she was telling us exactly what she needed.”

A silent revolution is sweeping through the cribs and sandboxes of America. Once taught only to the hearing-impaired, “baby signing” for hearing children could soon supplant Mommy and Me yoga as new parenthood’s most fashionable obsession. In this winter’s blockbuster *Meet the Fockers*, “Little Jack” (a role shared by twins Bradley and Spencer Pickren) signed up a storm for his grandpa, played by Robert De Niro. Bookstores are stocked with DVDs and instructional kits with titles like *Signing Time* and *Sign With Your Baby*. The number of families participating

in the same Arizona signing classes as Lindsay and Eva Vardalos has grown almost fivefold in just two years. In January, Gymboree, the chain of educational fun zones for the under-5 set, began offering baby sign language classes in 50 stores. The response was overwhelming, and that number is expected to double within the year.

The Gymboree classes, as well as many other spin-offs of baby signing, are based on the research of

Linda Acredolo, Ph.D., and Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D. More than 20 years ago, while working in the psychology department at the University of California at Davis, the two women began to develop gestures using standard American Sign Language but with some modifications for pudgy baby fingers. The resulting book, *Baby Signs: How to Talk With Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk*, has sold nearly 500,000 copies in 14 languages since it was first published in





#### HAND SIGNALS

Two-year-old Spencer Pickren, who along with his twin brother, Bradley, starred as "Little Jack" in the recent film *Meet the Fockers*, uses sign language to say what's on his mind: "want."





**DIGITAL REVOLUTION**  
At right, a 17-month-old signs "please" when asked if she wants a snack at a Sign, Say & Play class in Arizona. Later, teacher Jenny Hodges (far right) uses a book to reinforce signs already learned.



1996. Three years ago, Acredolo and Goodwyn formed Baby Signs Inc. to certify instructors. With a network of specialists now spread across the country, the system may well be on the verge of mass acceptance. "Our hope is to have sign language become a natural part of parenting," says Acredolo.

**T**he short-term appeal of signing with children is obvious: By using these gestures, parents can communicate with babies as young as 6 months, about the time experts believe the infants are beginning to comprehend language. In child-development terms, that's

centuries before most kids utter their first true word, normally around 12 or 13 months—let alone the multiple-word strings that start to pour out of tiny mouths between 18 and 24 months. Before that first milestone is reached, says Laura Namy, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Emory University, "it's actually easier for children to coordinate the motor behaviors in their hands than those in their throats and mouths."

For moms and dads whose proactive attitudes toward child-rearing have turned *What to Expect* books and *Baby Einstein* videos into multimillion-dollar industries, the idea of fast-forwarding past the often-frustrating preverbal phase is proving irresistible. Perhaps happiest of all are those parents whose little darlings would otherwise kick and scream their way through toddlerhood because they lack the means to express their feelings. Says Vardalos of her daughter, "The screeching, the pointing, the tantrums—we never had that."

But the jump start on language seems to have long-term advantages as well. A number of studies, including a review published last year in the *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, have found that gestures enhance rather than hinder language development. Acredolo and Goodwyn also found that infants who signed eventually developed a 12-point IQ advantage over those who didn't, and went on to achieve higher scores on a standardized reading test. Other studies have shown sign language to be useful for children with autism or Down syndrome.

# HOW TO TALK BABY

Children who learn baby signs use an average of 70 gestures. Here, some essentials.



cereal



noise



apple



please



eat



drink





**A**t one Sign, Say & Play class in Tempe, Arizona, 10 children ranging in age from 6 months to 2½ years sit in a circle with their moms as an enthusiastic teacher, Jenny Hodges, asks the kids to sign how they're feeling. One toddler shapes her hand into a C and pulls it down her torso (she's hungry); a 15-month-old boy makes brushing motions at chest level (that's "happy"). "It's a lifesaver," says one of the moms, Ramona Garcia, who signs with her 2½-year-old, Jenna. "In church, we can throw signs like 'Do you want cereal later, a bottle, or a cookie?' without making a commotion."

That's not to say baby sign language is completely uncontroversial. "Spoken language is so useful, powerful, and efficient, there's really no substitute," says Mabel L. Rice, Ph.D., director of the child language doctoral

program at the University of Kansas. While she says there's no evidence that teaching babies to sign is harmful, she advises parents to pay attention if oral communication hasn't kicked in by age 2, since it may indicate hearing or developmental impairment.

Meet the *Fockers*' Pickren twins learned signing from their mother, Wendy, an occupational therapist. She began signing to them in their California home when they were just a few weeks old. The toddlers, who were 18 months old when they filmed *Fockers* and are now 2, know at least 150 signs, from simple concepts like "milk" (squeezing an imaginary udder) and "eat" (fingertips to lips), typically among the first signs mastered, to astonishingly complex ideas and emotions. One remarkable day on the set, says Wendy, Bradley pointed to his hair, made circles on his cheek,

thumbed his chest, and knocked one fist on the other. Translation: "I want someone to do my hair, makeup, and clothing so I can get to work!"

But nothing impressed audiences more than when "Little Jack" used sign language to tell Grandpa he'd like to eat, then have a nap, and later, well, would probably need a diaper change. For the movie's director, Jay Roach, who had used sign language with his own two sons, the Pickrens' performance was especially satisfying. "When we pulled it off, it was like being at NASA when they landed a man on the moon," he says.

The post-*Fockers* boom may only be starting. "Parents don't go to the movies," notes Seattle-based instructor Nancy Hanauer, whose business has grown "exponentially" since 2000. "Wait until *Fockers* comes out on DVD. Then I'll get a huge surge." ■

**I'LL SIGN FOR THAT** The Pickren twins' mom, Wendy, uses sign language to complement speech. Here, in their California home, she makes the sign for "red" as she hands Bradley a block in that color. Spencer has already received his red toy.