

The Importance of Teaching Young Children American Sign Language

Introduction:

Hearing children should be taught American Sign Language (ASL) not only because it helps them communicate more easily with their parents, but also because several recent studies have shown that use of ASL increases communication attainment and ability while reducing fussing and fighting among children, among other benefits.

One of the main reasons why teaching ASL to young hearing children is beneficial is because, as Steven Pinker states in his book *The Language Instinct*, “young children plainly cannot understand a word [their parents] say” (28). This does not mean, however, that the child cannot learn to communicate with their parents. All children, Noam Chomsky reasoned, are wired with the ability to learn language. In fact, Pinker claims, “children deserve most of the credit for the language they acquire” (29). In the first two years of their lives, children make amazing progress in language and motor development. As infants, John Bonvillian and his colleagues claim that children are only able to produce animal noises and cries, but by the time they are about two years old, they “acquire a substantial lexicon of spoken words and learn to form simple multiword utterances” (Bonvillian, Orlansky, and Novack 1435). By the age of three and a half or earlier, Pinker writes that children experience a mastery of grammar during “a period of several months . . . during which children suddenly begin to speak fluent sentences,

respecting most of the fine points of their community's spoken language" (33). This would suggest then, that children are masters at acquiring languages, which would also suggest that ASL should be no exception, since it is, after all, an accepted language complete with its own syntax. It would seem only logical that a hearing child should have no problem learning ASL.

Relevance:

I am sure some would be hard pressed to see the long term benefits of ASL to hearing children, while others may find it difficult to understand how anyone could argue against hearing children learning to sign. Perhaps an example of an instance of when ASL would be beneficial will help illustrate the importance of this issue.

Imagine for a moment that a parent has a young child who has not yet learned to communicate his/her wants. Now, the little one really wants the parent to give them the orange ball in the corner, so he/she tells their parent as much, albeit in their own way. Being the parent, and an adult, the parent cannot possibly understand what their little one is trying so hard to tell them, but they do know their child wants something, and he/she wants it NOW!

By now the poor child is quite frustrated, being unable to get their parent to figure out that it is the orange ball they want, not the blanket, not the teddy, the ORANGE BALL, right THERE behind mommy/daddy! Frustrated, the child is of course going to start crying and screaming, which will make the parent upset, and then nothing gets solved until about half an hour after much crying and screaming when the poor parent finally figures out that, oh, they wanted the orange ball in the corner.

By now, I am sure many people reading this are thinking, “Yeah, I can relate to that.” What if I were to say that one can prevent such a scenario? Yes, it is possible to prevent the screaming and fussing of the child. How? By teaching hearing children sign language, parents can not only communicate with their young one, but they can greatly reduce the level of fussing and screaming. Not only that, but recent studies have shown that hearing children who learn sign communicate better with their teachers and peers at school, and they are smarter and more likely to be successful than hearing children who are not taught sign language at an early age (Clayton 1). Also, children who learn sign pick up communication faster than those who do not learn sign (Meier and Newport 3).

Many readers may be thinking that by teaching a hearing child sign, the child will be unable to learn spoken language. Not true. If the parents talk with the child and the child is around several speaking people at school and other social situations, they should have no problem learning to speak and to sign simultaneously (Clayton 1). The parents will benefit by being able to talk with their child, and the child will benefit by being able to communicate with the parent and gaining a higher level of intellect.

Background Information and Arguments for Teaching Children ASL:

I would like to take a moment to define exactly what ASL is. Like any other language, it is naturally evolved, though only recently has it been recognized as a language on the house level (Reilly 7). It typically involves speaking with hand motions instead of speech, but does not follow typical English word order. For example, in ASL the object, such as a house, is mentioned first, and then described, whereas in English the description comes before any mention of the house being described. It is important to

note, however, that facial expression is very important in using ASL; without facial expression, the signer is depicted as speaking in a signing equivalent of a monotone.

I would like to point out, that in some cases, teaching sign to children can be a problem, especially if the parent is not teaching their child the proper signs, which can lead to very embarrassing moments in the signing community. This is especially apparent if the parent uses what would appear to be the sign for one object, when in fact may be a sign for a something else that could be vulgar and/or inappropriate. Perhaps the best way to combat this would be for the parent to learn and understand the philosophy of total communication.

Total communication incorporates the use of signs, gestures, lip reading, and hearing. The family of the hearing child can use signed English as well as visible speech at a normal conversation level in order to teach the child. The child is encouraged to use both sign language and speech in order to communicate with the world around them (Reilly 6). In this way, the child not only learns to speak, but learns to sign as well. It is recommended though, that parents who do not know ASL take sign classes to avoid teaching their child improper signs, and perhaps the parent can try to find classes they can take their child to as well.

One of the programs parents can take their children to is called Sign & Sing which is put on by the Kindermusik at Pathways Performing Arts in Colorado. It is a research-proven program that is based on methods that have been shown to increase “language development in hearing children, ease frustration, and enhance long-term hearing abilities” (Fultz, 1). The classes combine songs and playful interaction to help hearing children learn ASL.

The class also gives parents about fifty ASL signs for children ages six months to three years. It also uses a set of clip-on flashcards of ASL that show pictures of parents and children making signs. The program also gives parents a booklet of activities for parents and children to use at home, as well as a DVD glossary that has adults using sign (1). Lisa Fultz says that “one of the best ways to draw a child into learning sign language is through what they love; songs and play” (qtd in Fultz 1).

As the above program states, teaching hearing children to sign has been proven to improve communication and increase the bond between parents and their children.

According to the article “Developmental Milestones: Sign Language Acquisition and Motor Development,” control of the hands matures before “comparable motor control of the voice in young children” (Bonvillian, Orlansky, and Novak 1436). This fact supports the belief that children who use sign acquire language faster than those who do not.

Bonvillian and his colleagues state that this earlier language acquisition is due to the fact that the “visual cortex [in the brain] matures prior to the auditory cortex, facilitating the onset of a visual language system before an aural-oral system,” which is important because these cortexes help with understanding and retaining language (1436).

Victoria Clayton supports the idea that sign language gives children a verbal edge in her article “Can Baby Sign Language Delay Speech?” In this article, a parent asks whether baby sign delays verbal language. Clayton responds by saying that the simple answer is no. She goes on to quote psychologist Linda Acredolo who is the co-author of “Baby Signs: How to Talk with Your Baby Before your Baby can Talk”, stating that “talking and signing together flood the baby with language”. Acredolo’s recent research also indicates signing may even give children a slight future verbal edge, and she claims

that “at 36 months, the [signing] babies in our study were speaking, on average, the equivalent of non-signing 47 months olds” (Clayton 1).

Acredolo goes on to emphasize the importance of having plenty of people around who try to understand the child. When the adults do not respond to the toddler with correct replies and actions, the child “may try to “fix” the miscommunication with physical gestures, pointing, patting the person or using signs that have been successful” in the past. Thus, the more people who try to understand the child and communicate with it, the better the child will be at communicating not only in sign language, but spoken language as well (1).

Further research by Richard P. Meier and Elissa L. Newport suggest that despite the differences between spoken and signed languages, “signing and speaking children tread the same path, at much the same pace, in acquiring” language (Meier and Newport, 4). They go on to argue that because of the ease of production and perception of signs, “the emergence of the first recognizable lexical items and two-word syntax is earlier in sign than in speech” (4). According to Meier and Newport’s studies, most signing children produce their first sign at an average of 8.6 months, whereas the average age for children producing their first word was ten months. Parental reports from the study indicated that the average age for a first word was 11.3 months. It would seem then, that according to this study, signers have a lead of 1 ½ to 2 ½ months (5). This is a significant difference which goes to show how much of an advantage signing can be on early language acquisition.

Along with early language acquisition, recent studies by Bethany C. Larson and I. Joyce Chang have shown that ASL can improve hearing children’s memory. Their

results further show that sign language helps to “promote language development, improve reading skills, maintain behavior control, foster self-esteem, increase enthusiasm, cause children to be more actively involved in play, and increase ease of classroom management” (Larson and Chang, 239). Perhaps the most interesting result of their study was the discovery that sign language may improve a child’s “attentional abilities, visual discrimination, and spatial memory” (qtd in Larson and Chang 239). It would seem then, that:

ASL is able to aid children’s memory with its autonomous memory store by creating a built-in redundancy that establishes two independent language sources for children to use for search and recall (qtd in Larson and Chang 242).

Arguments Against Teaching Children ASL:

One of the main arguments against teaching hearing children to sign is the belief that the children will not learn to speak proper English. In all actuality, it would be close to impossible for a hearing child not to learn to talk. It is important to note, as Wegner states in “Can Baby Sign Language Delay Speech:”

Communication is communication. Signing, gesturing, using communication boards and other assistive methods are all acceptable in the very young child who is trying to get his message across and understand what others say to him” (qtd in Clayton 1).

After all, not only is the child surrounded by people who will speak to him/her in spoken English, but the child will also be exposed to spoken English through television and interactions with relatives, friends, and babysitters (Bonvillian, Orlansky, and Novack 1437). Also, available data to date does not support the belief that “there is a difference

between sign and speech in the onset of early syntax” (Meier and Newport 10). In fact, signing combinations occur at about the same time as spoken word combinations, indicating that sign language does not hinder the development of language in children (10).

Another argument suggests that hearing children learning sign may not be able to properly partake in the act of symbolic play. This argument is supported by the fact that when signing, a deaf or hard of hearing child must look away from what they are playing with in order to see the parents’ hands, whereas a hearing child does not need to look away when the parent speaks because they only have to listen, not look at their parents hands or face (Spencer 868). Also, studies of deaf children show that they are less likely than hearing children to play with more than one object because the language delays that result from their deafness interfered with their ability to plan play sequences and to “profit from adults’ verbal suggestions and instructions” (868). This suggests that sign language may cause language delays in hearing children as well.

While these argument are valid, it is also possible that an increased reliance on “visual exploration and gestural communication might enhance a child’s overall attention to gestures and lead to greater facility in expression of symbolic play acts” (868). In addition, Spencer and Deyo, researchers mentioned in Patricia Elizabeth Spencer’s article on the association between language and symbolic play, found that hearing status does not affect symbolic play of children. In fact, studies have shown that deaf children with deaf parents as well as deaf children with hearing parents participated in symbolic play longer than hearing children of hearing parents. This seems to indicate that there are no

significant effects for hearing status on the amount of symbolic play children partake in (871).

This study also indicates that symbolic play is not dependent on a child's language abilities. Use of realistic toys, then, can be learned through observation and participation in various types of playful activities (873). Also, the emergence of a vocabulary explosion in hearing children is linked to a marked increase in word retrieval abilities that allow for more efficient retrieval and expression of words. Thus, more efficient retrieval of words would allow for more efficiency in symbolic play. Other findings from this study suggest that there is a "strong link between expressive language and play around the age of 2 years as language development is accelerating." Language then, plays a vital role in supporting the development of a higher level of symbolic play and "access to a fluently functioning linguistic system may be necessary to support age appropriate play" (874).

There is another convincing argument against teaching hearing children to sign which suggests that it could interfere with the bonds between parent and child, specifically the bond between mother and child. Past studies have shown that hard of hearing toddlers with hearing parents are at risk of developing insecure attachments. Reasons for this include poor communication between mothers and hard of hearing toddlers, since the toddlers may think their mothers are being insensitive when their mothers respond with utterances the child cannot hear. Also, the mothers of hard of hearing children tend to dominate interactions with their children, which cause the children to view the control as insensitivity. Lastly, parents of hard of hearing children

are typically more stressed out, which is associated with attachment security in children (Lederberg and Mobley, 1997).

A study done by Amy R. Lederberg and Caryl E. Mobley found that the amount of securely and insecurely attached hearing and hard of hearing toddlers was nearly the same, which indicated that there is no significant difference between security attachment of hearing and hard of hearing children. Also, the study showed that there is no difference between hearing status and attachment of mother to child (1997). In fact, sign language can increase the amount of interaction between parent and child because sign language requires parents to “sign near or on objects . . . bringing objects into joint space” (Bornstein et al, 1997). Sign language also requires the mother or parent to displace “signs into the child’s line of sight and [time] utterances so that the child is looking at the mother when she signs” (Harris and Chasin, 1997). Visual attention, then, becomes important not only for signing communication, but for oral communication as well because the face of the one communicating provides a lot of information and cues that can add to what is being said or signed (1997). Thus, parents and children are interacting with each other as well as paying more attention to one another.

It would seem then, that although there are several convincing arguments against teaching young hearing children to sign, studies indicate that there are more advantages than disadvantages.

Conclusion:

Clearly, teaching young children ASL has a host of advantages for not only the child, but the parents as well. The studies mentioned indicate that it improves language ability, increases bonds between mother and child, and helps with memory. After all, teaching a child more than one language has constantly been shown to have vast advantages for the child in later years.

Being hard of hearing myself, I can vouch for the advantages signing has on young children. From what I have seen at my summer job at the Denver Zoo gift shop, children enjoy the challenge of learning sign language as well as the chance to communicate more easily with their parents. I have seen infants younger than two using variations of sign with their parents, and I have seen how happy and relieved the parents have been. Many parents reported that it not only helps their child learn to speak faster, but also reduces the amount of fussing, since the child now has a way to communicate his/her wants.

In many ways, being able to communicate and be understood is highly rewarding. There are still times in my life in which I become frustrated because I could not understand what someone was telling me, no matter how many times I asked them to repeat it. Most of the time, the other person got frustrated and refused to tell me what he/she said, which just lead to more frustration and annoyance on both our parts. Perhaps if both of us knew sign, such frustration and annoyance could be avoided.

I encourage all parents with young hearing children to use sign language as a means of communication. As this essay indicates, there are no major disadvantages, only major advantages. Besides, the child will not only find it fun, but he/she will enjoy being

able to communicate with the parents and vice versa. It is easy and it is fun, so why not give it a try?

Works Cited

- Bonvillian, D. John, Michael D. Orlansky, and Lesley Lazin Novack. "Developmental Milestones: Sign Language Acquisition and Motor Development." *Child Development* 54.6 (1983): 1435-445. Academic Search Premier. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 20 Sept. 2007. <<http://links.jstor.org>>.
- Bornstein, H. Marc, et. al. "Representation Abilities and the Hearing Status of Child/Mother Dyads." *Child Development* 70.4 (1999): 833-852. Academic Search Premier. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 13 Sept. 2007. <<http://links.jstor.org>>.
- Harris, Margaret and Joan Chasin. "Visual Attention in Deaf and Hearing Infants: The Role of Auditory Cues." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46.10 (2005): 1116-123. Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 18 Sept. 2007. <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost>>.
- Larson, C. Bethany and I. Joyce Chang. "Enhancing Hearing Children's Memory with American Sign Language." *Intervention in School and Clinic* 42.4 (2007): 239-42. Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 13 Sept. 2007. <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>.
- Lederberg, R. Amy and Caryl E. Mobley. "The Effect of Hearing Impairment on the Quality of Attachment and Mother-Toddler Interaction." *Child Development* 61.5 (1990): 1596-604. Academic Search Premier. JSTOR. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 13 Sept. 2007. <<http://links.jstor.org>>.
- Meier, P. Richard and Elissa A. Newport. "Out of the Hands of Babes: On a Possible Sign Advantage in Language Acquisition." *Language* 66.1 (1990): 1-23. Academic Search Premier. JSTOR. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 18 Sept. 2007. <<http://links.jstor.org>>.
- MSNBC.com*. 2005 MSNBC. 20 Sept. 2007.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. William Morrow: New York, 1994.
- Reilly, Erin. "Silence of the Deaf: Feelings of Deaf Children in a Hearing World." Rhetorical Paper. Anne Hartney: Composition 250, 2005.
- Spencer, Elizabeth Patricia. "The Association Between Language and Symbolic Play and Two Years: Evidence From Deaf Toddlers." *Child Development* 67.3 (1996): 867-76. Academic Search Premier. JSTOR. Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library. 13 Sept. 2007. <<http://links.jstor.org>>.

Yourhub.com. 2006 Yourhug. 20 Sept. 2007.