

Sign Language: Meeting Diverse Needs in the Classroom

by Cynthia G. Simpson and Sharon A. Lynch

For a number of years, sign language has been used in special education settings for learners with disabilities. Children with hearing loss, autism, cognitive disabilities, and language disorders have demonstrated improved communication skills with the use of signs. Recently, however, teachers have begun to use sign language with typical learners and young children with developmental delays (Lynch, 2003; Cook, Tessier, & Klein, 2000). Young children often benefit from the combination of speech, movement, and visual enhancement of communication. Preschool educators have recognized this fact for decades, as is evident in the use of finger plays, songs with motions, and the use of pantomime. Since movement is such a natural way for young children to learn, teachers find that sign language often promotes language and communication.

Why use sign language?

When movement and signs are incorporated in communication, some learners are better able to remember what they have heard. This helps children to increase their receptive (words that they understand) and expressive (words that they use) vocabularies. Shy children or reluctant speakers can participate in group activities using signs until they are confident enough to use their words. At first, the teacher can scaffold their responses by both speaking and showing children the signs that they in turn can imitate. Next, the teacher can demonstrate the sign with the child imitating it. Eventually the child is able to use the sign along with his or her own words. This process promotes the skill of learning to imitate, which lays the groundwork for much subsequent learning.

Also, the teacher can use signs with the class when giving directions. Once children have learned some basic signs, the teacher can use signs to cue children about what to do next, desired behavior, or things that they

American Sign Language in ECE

For over 30 years research has continued to prove that American Sign Language (ASL) is a valuable addition to an early education curriculum:

- It supports receptive and expressive language development in typical hearing children as well as children with disabilities.
- ASL incorporates kinesthetic, visual, and auditory learning and makes language more tangible.
- ASL supports developmental milestones and children's developing self-esteem and problem-solving skills.
- ASL is also a wonderful way to support early literacy and language development in all children.

Children learn through what they see, hear, and do. By incorporating ASL into your curriculum you are capturing the whole child — every child. You do not need to learn the structure of the language to incorporate ASL into your curriculum. What is important is to highlight the vocabulary you want children to know. An educator would emphasize the word that they want the child to remember. For instance, if you are asking an infant if they would like milk, you say, "Do you want MILK?" As you say milk you would also sign MILK. Then offer the milk to the child. This allows the child to start making concrete connections and builds their vocabulary.

— *Contributed by Jenning Prevatte, Sprouting New Beginnings*

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Benefits of American Sign Language to Children

Incorporating ASL into an early education literacy curriculum as a valuable intervention is a meaningful and enlightening choice. The effect it has on children's learning is powerful and long-term. When early education programs utilize ASL:

- Children learn at an early age that speech has visual representations. Understanding that speech has visual symbols makes the development of reading skills come along easier as children enter school. A child learns the word "milk" could look like a glass of milk or like the ASL sign "milk" which is created by opening and shutting your hand like you are milking a cow.
- Motor coordination and language development can happen simultaneously. This is helpful to both families and caregivers. A signing child is able to continue developing their gross motor skills while continuing to communicate his or her needs. This helps decrease frustration and stress for the child and the family or caregiver.
- Children have an easier time expressing their needs and having them met. ASL is a visual language and is easier for preverbal children to utilize to communicate their needs. Using ASL with children incorporates their natural tendency to gesture and gives that gesturing or pointing a purpose — an effective way to communicate.
- Children's pre-reading skills are supported during story time, free play, and music time through the use of ASL: vocabulary development, print awareness, print motivation, letter knowledge, and narrative skills. Children learn first through what they see and do; ASL supports that learning by being a visual language.
- All learning styles are supported. When you use ASL in your curriculum you are reaching the whole child — every child — by having them hear, see, and move to express the concept or vocabulary you are teaching.
- A bridge of communication is built with preverbal children. When young children's needs are met consistently and with ease the bonding process moves along with simplicity, both with families and caregivers.
- ASL is an effective intervention model for developing pre-literacy skills since it is incorporated into all aspects of language development.
- ASL is not just a language boost for our children; it is also a brain boost. A child that has the opportunity to learn ASL benefits from increased brain development. ASL supports early brain development in the areas of: communication, attention, bonding, and visual learning.
- ASL is easy for educators to integrate into their curriculum as an addition to current teaching practices. It is important to understand that educators are not teaching ASL as a language, but utilizing the gift of ASL to support language development and enrich vocabulary development by adding a visual stimulus to an auditorial input.

— Contributed by Jenning Prevatte, *Sprouting New Beginnings*

need to remember. Finally, the ability to use sign language can promote self-esteem in children as they learn new skills that they can share with others. Children with disabilities such as language disorders, autism, pervasive developmental disorders, mental retardation, and hearing impairment also can benefit from the use of sign language. While signs traditionally have been used with students who are hearing impaired, this mode of communication is easier for other learners with disabilities to learn for a number of reasons. Children with learning disabilities have increased oral vocabulary and sight word vocabulary with the use of sign language paired with oral language. Lynch (2003) experienced positive outcomes with sign language to improve vocabulary acquisition with children with disabilities such as Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and autism.

Movement is natural for most young children and learners who are developmentally delayed. On the other hand, vocalization requires the complex coordination of thought, breathing patterns, jaw, lip, and tongue control, and palatal movements. It is virtually impossible to scaffold voice production; however, hand-over-hand strategies can be used to support sign language communication. By utilizing sign language, opportunities for participation are provided for children with disabilities. Increased participation improves the child's self-concept as a **communicator**, and decreases the tendency to develop "learned helplessness" (Lynch, 2003; Seligman, 1975).

What concepts do you teach with sign language?

Sign language can be used when teaching new concepts or when reinforcing previously introduced materials. Many preschool teachers have incorporated sign language into their daily routines by:

- Signing songs that are traditionally sung in the classroom
- Signing words used during snack time such as eat, more, and names of food items
- Signing of the alphabet

- Signing numbers throughout the day such as during calendar time, lunch counts, or circle time
- Signing feelings such as angry, sad, happy, or frustrated
- Signing as a tool to manage behavior by introducing words such as no, stop, line up, sit down, quiet, and lunch (Hubler, 1999)

When selecting signs to be taught in the classrooms, teachers should follow the children's lead. Children's interests and abilities are revealed as they engage in play. Designing developmentally appropriate activities correlating with the children's cognitive and physical abilities will promote the success of sign language instruction.

How do you teach sign language?

Sign language can be taught and introduced in many different ways. However, children retain and learn more information when concepts are introduced to them in a meaningful context. For instance, if children are going to have a snack that consists of cookies and juice, the signs for "cookie" and "juice" can be introduced. If the child requests more juice or more cookies the sign is

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNING PREVATTE



What teachers and families say about American Sign Language

"I love the idea of adding ASL into nursery rhymes and other childhood favorite stories to enhance their early literacy, specifically narrative skills. Great hands-on learning!"

"ASL is incredibly helpful for classroom management. Saying and signing "Stop, listen, and look together" is an easy and very visual transition phrase for my preschoolers."

"I use ASL to help my two-year-olds to understand their feelings and how to use their hands to show caring and gentleness. They love to sing and sign, 'When you're happy and you know it.' This helps them label what they are feeling and supports their development."

"It has been much easier to bond with my second child than it was with my first daughter, who we didn't use ASL with. It's a great addition to my 'parenting toolbox.'"

"My one-year-old son signs three signs: MILK, MORE, and EAT. He doesn't need to scream for what he wants, he simply signs his requests and I provide it for him. This was the best thing I could teach him."

"I work with infants and we encompass MILK, MORE, and EAT into our daily routines with children. When we are about to offer a bottle of milk to a child, we ask them, 'Do you want MILK?' as we sign MILK. We have had children as early as 6 months sign milk back to us. It is the most delightful thing to watch them grow and understand language."

"I choose to use ASL with my son because I wanted a way to communicate with him before he could speak. It was such a simple thing to add to our daily routines that made a huge difference in our lives."

"I use ASL with my daughter when we read together and sign the story. ASL is a skill that grows along with your child. Using ASL with her has helped her build early literacy skills."

— Contributed by *Jenning Prevatte*,
Sprouting New Beginnings

Jenning A. Prevatte, M.Ed. received her Masters in Special Education with emphasis on infants and young children from Arizona State University. Jennings is a member of the Sign2Me presenter's network. Jennings is currently Level 1 certified under the Sign2Me presenters network and a certified Career Level trainer with S*CCEEDS of Arizona. Jennings is an early childhood educator and mother. She utilizes sign with her Kindergarten students and children with special needs. Brennen, her four-year-old son, has been signing since he was 9 months old. Jennings has also presented at VSAEYC 2006 Fall Conference, Association of Supportive Child Care (ASCC) "Young Child's Conference" Spring 2007, ASCC Self-Study 2007 Spring Conference, and the Arizona Early Learning Institute Summer 2007. Jennings's passion is to bridge the gap in parent-child communication, promote early childhood literacy and help others provide a healthy and developmentally appropriate environment.

The mission of Sprouting New Beginnings is to promote the cognitive, physical, emotional and social development of children while strengthening their bond between families and educators. Our focus is on fun and interactive ways to support the development of healthy minds and healthy children through play, music, and communication to promote school readiness. *We are devoted to planting the Seeds for Early Learning.*



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PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNING PREVATTE



Blue

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNING PREVATTE



Red

sign language. Community agencies that serve the deaf community also offer basic sign classes, as do large school districts with programs for children with hearing impairments. The Internet also is a source of information on signing, with some sites demonstrating signs through animation. When teachers of young children use sign language in the classroom, they are able to support the learning and communication of typical as well as special needs learners.

References

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Lynch, S. (2003). "Say it, sign it, do it! Using sign language with young children." *Dimensions of Early Childhood* 31(2), 8-14.

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then reinforced. The sign for "more" is then added. The consistent and repeated use of signs will provide children with the opportunity to naturally embed signing into the structure of the day.

Most teachers who use sign language in preschools are not fluent in American Sign Language. Instead, they use basic vocabulary to enhance the learning of preschool children. Many community colleges offer basic courses in

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No learners left out: The author points out that teaching sign language to all children ensures that shy and reluctant speakers will be able to find ways to participate in school activities. Ask teachers to consider this important point, identify children who might benefit most, and get started by teaching all children a few signs.

First the teacher...: Teachers will need to learn signs first in order to add them to the curriculum and their teaching. Explore ways for teachers to learn basic signs and then build sign language learning into the professional development calendar. Whatever the topic on the calendar, add a few new signs for teachers to learn at each staff meeting.

How do I teach children signs?: Add one or two of the references listed at the end of this article to your professional development library. Use the books to support interested teachers in learning more signs.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht