



# SIMPLE SIGNING



with Young Children

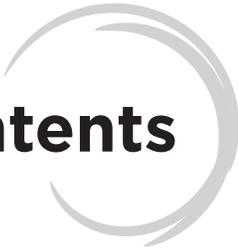
A Guide for Infant, Toddler,  
and Preschool Teachers

Revised

Carol Garboden Murray



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# Chapter 1

## Let's Begin Using Sign Language with Young Children



### Ten Reasons to Use *Simple Signing*

- 1. Enrich language development:** In the same way that crawling helps a child learn to walk, signing helps a child learn to talk. Your heart will leap the first time a baby signs to you. Babies and toddlers who sign typically have larger vocabularies in preschool and kindergarten than babies and toddlers who never learn to sign.
- 2. Reduce frustration:** Signing gives preverbal children the ability to communicate with their hands before they have the intricate oral motor skills to speak. Babies and toddlers who might otherwise only be able to grunt, point, or cry to show their needs learn that signing can replace frustration with successful communication. Using signs such as *stop* or *help* is an empowering way for children to express their boundaries and reduce social frustration. Instead of using their hands to grab or hit, they use their hands to communicate.
- 3. Expose children to a new language:** ASL is the third-most commonly used language in the United States. Teaching ASL vocabulary to hearing children has the potential to introduce them to another culture and, in doing so, expand their appreciation and acceptance of a diverse world.
- 4. Reduce the noise level in your classroom:** Children learn best in a peaceful, relaxed environment. Sign language helps teachers manage classrooms and develop an awareness of the auditory environment, or the early childhood soundscape. By using signs, you can give directions from across the room without raising your voice. Using sign language to send a silent message during a busy transition period is an artful way to communicate. However, since early childhood environments can be full of distractions, it is always important to incorporate multiple paths of learning and communication, including sign language. Reflective teachers become artful communicators who know just when to move close to a child and when to use a touch, a sign, a gesture, a quieter voice, or a stronger voice. The reflective teaching columns throughout this book give us tools to think about how we can craft communication-rich environments.
- 5. Reach visual and tactile learners:** Many signs are iconic and tactile. Signs look and feel like words. With sign language, visual learners can see language, and tactile learners can feel and touch words. Using signs offers a multisensory approach to teaching.

**6. Provide a common language:** As well as reaching children with special needs, creating an inclusive classroom means finding ways to make learning accessible to children who speak other languages at home. The basic ASL vocabulary you use for classroom management and literacy activities creates a common language for your entire classroom.

**7. Develop regulation and executive functioning:** Sign language promotes internal control and modulation. Children are motivated to learn sign language because understanding its “secret code” enables them to follow directions and pay attention without being “told” what to do. The empowerment that comes early from successful communication helps children develop internal resources and confidence. When you use signs for words such as *stop*, *go*, *fast*, and *slow* during transitions or with music and movement games, you help children develop regulation and motor-planning skills.

**8. Support emergent literacy:** Communication is foundational literacy. Signing enriches vocabulary and language skills. Signing the ASL alphabet is a fun way to practice the ABCs. When you present letters and sounds with signs, children learn the new information more successfully because they can see, touch, and hear those letters and sounds. Using signs during literacy activities such as songs and stories promotes children’s attention and creates a hands-on learning experience.

**9. Teach social skills:** Signs are a useful tool to validate children’s emotions. Signs improve responsive communication, eye contact, and attention between caring adults and children. Signs such as *my turn* and *your turn* help children learn and observe basic social rules. Signing courtesy words such as *please* and *thank you* gives these friendly words a special emphasis and reinforces kind behavior.

**10. Develop strong relationships:** The key to quality early education is trusting, respectful relationships. Sign language is a natural and elegant way to make connections, communicate, and develop stronger relationships with the children you teach.

## American Sign Language: Am I Learning a New Language?

This book demonstrates how easy it is to use an ASL vocabulary. You may start by choosing one or two key signs and, for the most part, using the signs along with the spoken word. The ASL vocabulary you use will be a tool for many things, such as reinforcing language learning, assisting with classroom management, fostering prosocial behavior in young children, and promoting early literacy skills.

This book will not teach you to be fluent in ASL, but it will help you use sign vocabulary that is meaningful to you and to the children you teach. Like any language, ASL is complex. It uses handshapes, facial expressions, location, and movement to represent words, ideas, and concepts. It is the language used by more than 500,000 Deaf people in the United States and Canada.

A common misconception is that ASL is a signed version of English and that if you possess a sign vocabulary, you can simply translate English into sign language word for word. This idea is not true because ASL, like all languages, has its own grammar and syntax. The only way to become fluent is to study the language and spend time with others who are fluent. Proficiency in ASL goes far beyond building a vocabulary.

Once you learn a sign vocabulary that is meaningful to your relationship with children and your teaching practice, you may be inspired to learn more about ASL. The beauty and power of speaking with your hands may lead you to take a class, purchase a good ASL dictionary, or invite ASL-fluent guests into your classroom. Similarly, learning signs may help children connect with others who use ASL fluently, or it may spark their interest in learning more about this expressive language.

The popularity of ASL has increased tremendously in the last several decades. Many colleges offer ASL as a second-language elective. Parents are learning about the benefits of using sign language with preverbal babies as a way to foster language and decrease frustration. Special-education teachers and teachers of hearing children are experiencing the benefits of using sign language in the classroom. It is estimated that 13 million people can sign with some level of proficiency. This makes ASL the third-most commonly used language in the United States.

## How Will I Teach Hearing Children About ASL?

Teaching ASL vocabulary to hearing children introduces them to another culture and can potentially expand their appreciation and acceptance of a diverse world. Members of Deaf culture advocate an accurate understanding of ASL as a distinct and dynamic language. Hopefully, as more educators and young children enjoy the benefits of ASL, they will also promote respect and appreciation for the language.

## Tips for Using Signs with Young Children

- **Use signs during meaningful interactions.** Start with signs for words you use as you interact with children during your daily classroom routine. Chapter 2 contains several signs that are easy and meaningful to put into practice with children.
- **Start simply.** When you introduce signing into your classroom, begin with two or three signs. For babies and toddlers, you can start with the signs *more* and *all done*. For preschoolers, start with classroom-management signs or signs you can use in songs or stories. Let your experience using signs grow with the children's enthusiasm.
- **Be consistent.** Once you start using a few signs, be consistent and practice using those signs all day long. Repetition is key!
- **Be expressive.** Facial expression is an important element of ASL. A good signer communicates with her whole being. Sign language is much more than practicing handshapes. Have fun!
- **Use resources.** Have several resources available, including this book, other teacher guides, and an ASL dictionary. There are many dictionaries, practice resources, and demonstrations online. Having resources available allows you to relax and take risks. If a child asks you how to make a certain sign, you can let her help you look it up. Remember, it is okay to make mistakes, and using resources such as dictionaries with the children helps foster the sense that they are in a community of learners.

Using a sign vocabulary allows you to accomplish a variety of goals:

- Teach babies to express themselves before they are able to speak
- Improve vocabulary of and communication with babies and toddlers
- Help toddlers practice emerging social skills
- Reduce frustration for late talkers
- Reach children with special needs
- Introduce young children to ASL and Deaf culture
- Create a common classroom language for children who speak other languages at home
- Enhance songs and fingerplays
- Increase attention and engagement
- Increase children's senses of accomplishment, mastery, and self-esteem
- Foster emergent literacy skills
- Create a more peaceful classroom
- Improve your creative storytelling

## Variation in Signs

As you learn signs and use dictionaries and sign-language resources, you will discover variations for certain words and phrases. Try to remain open and flexible, realizing that language is dynamic and always is subject to a variety of interpretations, pronunciations, or regional differences. Cross-checking a few references will help you decide which version of a sign is more common. Talking to fluent signers is always the best resource to help you understand subtleties or regional differences.

## Practicing Handshapes

ASL uses handshapes to express words and concepts. Learning the ASL alphabet (see chapter 5) is a good way to practice handshapes. Here are some common handshapes:



Flat Hand  
(fingers together)



Open Hand  
(fingers apart)



Curved Hand



The One-Hand Shape



Clawed Hands



Bent Hands

Practice these signs with each type of handshape. Start by making the handshapes by themselves, and then practice moving your hands to produce the signs here. To check yourself, use the index to find the pages on which these signs are illustrated.

### **Flat Hand**

*Fish:* Use the flat hand to make a fish swimming in front of your chest.

*Thank you or good:* Start with the flat hand at your chin or mouth, then extend it as if blowing a kiss.

### **Open Hand**

*Mommy:* Use the open hand and place your thumb on your chin.

*Daddy:* Use the open hand and place your thumb near your forehead.

### **Curved Hand**

The Letter C: The curved hand naturally forms the letter C (see chapter 5).

*Drink:* The C handshape represents a cup as you mimic drinking.

*Elephant:* The C handshape starts at your nose and mimics an elephant trunk as your arm extends.

### **The One-Hand Shape**

*Go:* Use both hands, each in the one-hand shape; bend at the wrists to point.

*Up:* Use one hand to point up.

### **Clawed Hand**

*Hot:* Abruptly pull your clawed hand away from your mouth.

*Bear:* Cross your arms with clawed hands in front of your body, and move them in a scratching motion.

### **Bent Hand**

*Blocks:* With hands facing, one bent hand touches the wrist of the other flat hand. Then switch hands and repeat.

*Duck:* Make the bill of a duck with a bent hand, and place it at your mouth.

# REDUCE FRUSTRATION AND HELP CHILDREN COMMUNICATE MORE EASILY.

Updated with the latest research, *Simple Signing with Young Children: A Guide for Infant, Toddler, and Preschool Teachers, Revised*, is the perfect introduction to teaching young children to communicate through signing.

Because their oral motor skills and vocabularies haven't yet caught up with their thoughts and emotions, babies, toddlers, and preschoolers often struggle to communicate. Sign language can give children the tools to help them express themselves effectively—with fewer emotional outbursts caused by frustration!

With easy-to-follow instructions and photos, *Simple Signing with Young Children, Revised*, will help teachers and caregivers use sign language to:

- enhance classroom management and ease transitions,
- support positive social behavior,
- teach language and literacy,
- help children learn impulse control,
- assist children in expressing emotions and needs, and
- create peaceful learning communities.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Garboden Murray, MEd, has worked with young children, families, and teachers for many years as a preschool and toddler teacher, kindergarten and first-grade inclusion teacher, early interventionist, director of programs, and early-learning trainer. She holds a master's degree in early childhood development and special education. She is the educational director of the nursery school at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

Praise for the first edition of *Simple Signing with Young Children*:

"Carol Garboden Murray draws upon her ... years of experience and expertise to write a thoroughly 'user friendly' instruction manual for parents, teachers, and caregivers to teach very young children how to communicate through sign language. ... Comprehensive, authoritative, and superbly organized ... very highly recommended."

—MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

  
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