

## Something in the way we move...

*What does research tell us about adults modifying the signs, gestures, and movements—motionese—they use in communicating with infants and toddlers?*

In the same way that adults slip into higher-pitched, simplified “baby talk” or *parentese* when interacting with infants and toddlers, those who use manual signs, gestures, and other movements to communicate with young children modify them in ways that are called by the term *motionese*.

Child-directed motionese was the focus of a research synthesis conducted at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL). Researchers wanted to determine whether signs and gestures used with children differ from those used with adults. Their analysis of 14 studies showed that parents’ signing/gesturing behavior with their young children was indeed more like motionese than the behavior they used with adults. Parents were more likely to sign or gesture at a slower pace, touch their children, modify their actions with objects, use positive facial expressions, show a wider range of motion in signing and gesturing, repeat signs and gestures, and simplify signs and gestures.

The research demonstrates that motionese draws children’s visual attention to the adult who is seeking to interact with them. It also is more likely to make it easier for children to process and understand what the adult is attempting to say or communicate. The research analysis indicates that motionese increases children’s engagement in interactions with people and objects, likely making it easier to introduce other types of learning opportunities to the children.

This *CELLnotes* summarizes findings reported in Dunst, C. J., Gorman, E., & Hamby, D. W. (2012). Child-directed motionese with infants and toddlers with and without hearing impairments. *CELLreviews* 5(8), 1-11.



**Adults practicing child-directed motionese use simplified, exaggerated signs, gestures, and movements, expressed slowly and deliberately, to encourage and sustain young children’s attention and interest in communication.**

# Acting on the Evidence

Download free, two-page *CELL* practices guides in versions for parents or practitioners at [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org)

Staff of CELL have created a number of practice guides especially for parents and early childhood practitioners to encourage putting this research evidence to use in home, community, and classroom settings. All of the two-page practice guides listed below are available for free download on the CELL project web site: [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org). At this web address you can also find interactive posters called *CELLpops* and multimedia practice guides such as videos that illustrate practices supported by this research.

The collage displays five practice guide pages. The top-left page is titled 'Infant Signing Dictionary' and is 'Especially for parents of infants'. It includes sections for 'What is the practice?', 'What does the practice look like?', 'How do you do the practice?', and 'How do you know the practice worked?'. The top-middle page is 'Take a look at more first signs for babies', featuring 'A Hug or a Kiss?' and 'Cure for Frustration'. The top-right page is 'Take a look at more infant cooling activities', featuring 'After-Nap Cooling Game' and 'Time To Play'. The bottom-middle page is 'Infant Cooling Activities' and is 'Especially for practitioners working with infants'. It includes 'What is the practice?', 'What does the practice look like?', 'How do you do the practice?', and 'How do you know the practice worked?'. Each page includes photos of children and illustrations.

Especially for PARENTS

**Infants:**  
Give Me, Give Me  
What's Your Sign?  
Let Me Tell You What I Want

**Toddlers:**  
Sign Me Up  
Speaking Without Words  
Sound Play

**Preschoolers:**  
Sing Song

Especially for PRACTITIONERS

**Infants:**  
Infant Cooling Activities  
Talking Pointers  
Mealtime Conversations

**Toddlers:**  
Simple Signing  
That Sign Means Ice Cream  
Sounds Good

**Preschoolers:**  
Sing and Sign