

Especially for parents of toddlers! 

Sign Me Up!

Gestures and Signing

Teaching your toddler some simple sign language can make it easier for her to communicate. It might also improve her verbal skills. It can help her make the connection between her communicating what's on her mind and getting what she wants.

What is the practice?

Toddlers often have trouble making their wants and needs understood, which can be frustrating for everyone. You can teach your child some simple signs: *eat, drink, more, up, shoes, play, potty, outside, inside*. Knowing these signs can help you understand what your child wants.

What does the practice look like?

A toddler at the mall starts getting upset because she wants to tell her mom something but doesn't know how. Luckily, her mom has taught her the sign for *potty*, and it's easier for her to remember than the word. She uses her sign, and her mom gets her to the bathroom just in time.



How do you do the practice?

Many toddlers use gesture on their own, and sign language is just another form of gesture. Start with the things that are most interesting and important to your toddler in her daily communication needs.

- The sign for “more” (fingertips of both hands together) is simple to make and useful for toddlers. Make the sign as you say it when giving your toddler more juice, cereal, crayons, etc. Show her how to make the sign too, and explain what it means.
- Try adding a few signs into your toddler’s daily routine by using them regularly as you are speaking. When telling her it’s time to go outside, automatically make the sign for *outside*. Showing your toddler signs in context makes it much easier to learn them than trying to teach her by rote.
- Start with a few signs at a time. Begin with her favorite toys or activities and add more as she learns those.
- Speak as you sign, so that your toddler understands that the word and the gesture have the same meaning. This will also help your toddler’s oral language development as she tries to say the words with the signs.
- Your toddler’s signs—and, perhaps, yours—won’t be perfect at the start. It takes practice to get the motions down just right. But if she understands that the sign for “more” gets her another cookie, she understands the basics of signing and communication.
- There are lots of toddler and baby signing dictionaries available on the web and at bookstores. Try Googling ***baby signs*** or ***toddler signs*** for a starting place. Many even have video clips to show how to do the signs.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler using sign along with words to communicate?
- Does your toddler seem interested in and curious about signing?
- Is your toddler trying to communicate more than she used to?

Take a look at more signs for learning

Feeling Calmer

Eighteen-month-old Iliana gets frustrated sometimes when her mom doesn't understand what she wants. Her mom wants Iliana to communicate. She also wants to cut down on the crying and fussing that happen when Iliana can't make herself understood. She teaches Iliana a few basic signs so Iliana can ask for more food or for her favorite stuffed bunny. Within a few weeks of working these signs into their daily conversations, Iliana has mastered the signs. Now she wants to learn more signs. Her mom notices that even though Iliana doesn't make the signs perfectly, she makes them well enough to communicate. The toddler seems calmer and more confident at being able to get what she wants.



I Like It!

Perry is 22 months old. His dad knows Perry is a picky eater. It seems like one day he can like a food and the next day he doesn't want it. His dad teaches him some food signs to make it easier to know what Perry wants to eat or drink. Dad teaches the signs for some of Perry's favorite foods. He also teaches the signs for "yes," "no," and "more." Soon, mealtimes are much easier as Perry makes choices about what he wants and rejects the foods he doesn't want. He also seems to be more willing to try new foods. Maybe it's because Perry knows he will be able to say *no* if he doesn't like them.

Using Signs and Words

Briscoe, a 26-month-old toddler with Down syndrome has trouble talking and communicating with his parents. They often feel like he isn't "hearing" what they say. They find a book about signing with young children. Both parents start using simple signs with Briscoe throughout the day. They tell him with words and signs when it's time to get dressed, eat, go outside, go to bed, etc. Briscoe has a hard time at first making the signs. He understands the idea, and his parents are patient with him while they work on fine motor skills. After a few months, Briscoe is talking more and using signs to ask for things. It is easier for him to "listen" to his parents when they use both sign and speech.

