

Especially for practitioners working with infants! 

Infant Sign Language Dictionary

 *Nonverbal Communication and Signing*

Sign language is one way infants are able to communicate with others before they learn to talk. It is also used with babies who may never be able to talk due to a disability. This practice guide dictionary includes some frequently taught signs. You may find them useful to use with the children in your care.

What is the practice?

Before children learn to use words to communicate, they first use gestures to interact with their parents and other people. Sign language is a special kind of gesture that can be used to “talk to” others. Infants who use sign language are able to communicate more effectively with others. They can also learn the words that go with signs more easily.

What does the practice look like?

Infants using sign language to communicate often approximate what the signs would look like if used by an adult or older child. The signs do not need to be precise to be effective. The important thing is that a child learns the connection between a sign and its effect on others. Using the sign for “more” to ask for another cracker or to get someone to play a game over again is an example of this kind of practice.

How do you do the practice?

Infants learn sign language best when they are using signs to do or ask for things that they especially want and like to do. Search the Web using *infant sign language* and you will find many examples of infants signing to communicate with others. Here is a list of some simple signs that make sense for most young children.

Bath (rub hands against the chest or stomach in a circular motion).

Book (put both palms together and then open them up in imitation of a book opening).

Bye (hold hand up, palm open, and wave hand back and forth).

Change (twist the hands together in front of the body).

Down (point the index finger downward two or three times).

Drink (hold hand in cupped position and tip up as if drinking from a cup).

Eat (move one hand with the fingers together toward the mouth).

Help Me (pat the palms of the hands on the chest several times).

Hug (criss-cross arms across the chest).

Hurt (make a fist with each hand and have the index fingers touch one another).

More (cupped hands, touching fingertips together).

No (shake head back and forth or tap fingers of one hand together to indicate “no”).

Sleep (hands, palms together, against cheek of tilted head).

Up (point the index finger upward two or three times).

Yes (nod head up and down or shake balled fist up and down to indicate “yes”).



How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child use gestures and signs to get things he wants?
- Does he look at you while making the signs?
- Does the child try to repeat sounds or words that you use to repeat what he is signing?

Take a look at using infant sign language

Hugs 'n' Kisses

Seven-month-old Cheryl gets excited any time her mother and father give her hugs and kisses. Her home visitor has suggested making this into a game. They can teach Cheryl some sign language helping her communicate what she wants and needs more easily. Cheryl likes to play the game while she is seated on her mom or dad's lap facing either of them. They start the game by asking "Does Cheryl want a hug or a kiss?" If Cheryl does not use the sign for either type of affection, the parent repeats the question. Mom or Dad uses the signs for "hug" or "kiss" as they say the words. This almost always gets her to use one or the other sign. No sooner has she gotten what she wants than she uses the other sign. Each time she uses the sign during the game or during the family's everyday routines, Cheryl gets the action for which she "asks."



A Big Plus

Eleven-month-old Mark often gets frustrated when things do not go his way. He gets upset if he cannot reach something he wants or is not taken out of his highchair fast enough when he is finished eating. His childcare teacher, Marlan, found that a few simple signs like "help me" and "down" have gone a long way toward softening Mark's frustration. Mark tries to take off his shoes but often gets stuck! The sign for "help me" is sure to get Marlan to assist him. Marlan has explained the signs to Mark's family. Now his mother, father, and big sister have learned that when he signs down it means he is finished! Mark has also learned to shake his hand "yes" and "no" to answer questions like "Do you want more?" Sign language has been a big plus for Mark in communicating with other people.

Signs and Friends

Sandy's mother takes her daughter out and about as part of running errands and taking care of other family business. Sixteen-month-old Sandy is not able to talk clearly because of a hearing impairment. It is hard for people to understand what she is trying to say. Sandy's early interventionist has given Sandy's mother a list of signs to teach her daughter. They have started to use them when interacting with people out in the world. Mom started with a few simple signs like "bye" and "hello." Her mother's friends often want to help Sandy, so the signs for "up" and "down" have really come in handy. Sandy and her mom sometimes have lunch at a friend's home or at a fast-food restaurant. She uses the signs for "eat," "drink," "more," and "finished" to tell her mom and the others what she wants.

