

Especially for practitioners working with infants!

Infant Gestures

Nonverbal Communication and Signing

This practice is done as part of adult-child play where a child uses a gesture to ask for something or to continue playing a game. It will not take long for the child to understand that different movements and gestures can be used to cause you to give her something she wants.

What is the practice?

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What does the practice look like?

A one-year-old sits on the floor dropping toys and other objects into a container. The child dumps everything out and starts over. Her mother starts handing the toys and other objects to her child. Every once in a while, the mother waits until her child "asks" for the object by reaching or pointing. Any time the child extends her hand toward a toy, her mother gives it to her. The game continues, and the child starts asking for more objects. Before long, the little girl is using a palms-up gesture to have her parent hand things to her.



How do you do the practice?

This practice involves you and a child playing together with some toys or other objects. The main idea is to add "pauses" into the parent-child play. This extra time provided in play encourages the child to ask for a toy or object so she can continue playing with it.

- Start by identifying some toys and other materials with which the child likes to play. Small objects that she can hold in one hand work best.
- The child should be in a comfortable position where her hands are free to play with the toys or objects. This can be in a highchair, walker, sitting on the floor, on your lap, or just about anywhere else.
- Start the game by handing something to the child. Follow the child's lead and hand her another toy or object anytime she seems interested in playing with something else. One way to tell if a child is interested in a toy is if she is looking at the toy. Describe and talk about what she is doing.
- During the play episode, wait until the child shows some sign that she wants another object. At first, respond to any behavior the child uses to get you to give her another object (e.g., by reaching for a toy). Every once in a while, wait a bit longer to encourage her to use a palms-up request gesture.
- Games that involve the child "giving up" an object in exchange for another work best. Stacking rings, dropping toys in a bucket, and rolling a ball back and forth will often get the child to "ask for more."

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child reach more often for another object?
- Does the child look at you when asking for something?
- Does the child use a request gesture if you do not immediately hand her an object?

Take a look at more fun with gestures

Here's What I Want

Nine-month-old Matthew's snack times have become a routine full of "asking for more." He loves to eat dry cereal, which his caregiver, Erin, uses as part of a game of "tell me what you want." Snack times start by placing four or five pieces of cereal on his highchair tray. This is followed by Erin handing pieces of cereal to Matthew. Finally, Erin waits for Matthew to ask for more by looking at her or gesturing toward the cereal. Erin hands another bite of cereal to Matthew by holding her hand out palm up with the cereal to be taken. Matthew is catching on to the idea. He understands he can ask for things by holding out his hand to have someone give him something he wants.



Give and Take

One of Ava's favorite things is bath time. She especially likes playing with a boat that has space for putting things inside so they can "take a ride." She delights in putting things in and taking them out of the boat. Based on this interest, her home visitor, Chloe, and her father invented a special game for Ava that involves "give and take." Ava asks for small toys by holding her hand out to one of them. After all the toys are in the boat, she hands them back to her father, who drops them into the tub while saying "Boom!" each time one makes a splash. Ava loves to see her dad drop the toys in the water. She splashes with her hands in excitement and tries saying something that sounds like "boom."

Super Signs

Bryce's parents were told that their 14-month-old son might never talk because of his hearing impairment. His early interventionist, Jeremy, has noticed that Bryce becomes a bit irritated when he tries to communicate that he wants something or wants to play and cannot. With Jeremy's coaching, Mom and Dad have started using sign language with Bryce to communicate "more," "eat," "drink," and "again." They use the sign for "more" to help Bryce ask for more food or drink. The sign for "eat" is used to communicate hunger. They use the sign for "drink" to have Bryce ask for water or milk when he is thirsty. The sign for "again" is used by Bryce to have Mom or Dad play a game or to look at a book one more time.



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Joint-Attention Activities

Nonverbal Communication and Signing

By the end of the first year of life, infants are able to include adults in their play with toys and other objects. The ability to go back and forth between playing with a toy and looking at an adult is called shared attention or joint attention. This is an important first step in learning to interact and communicate with other people.

What is the practice?

An infant's interest in an adult and object or toy at the same time does (at least) two important things. First, it provides the infant the opportunity to share his or her interests with others. Second, it provides an adult the opportunity to describe and talk about what the child is doing. One of the main benefits of shared-attention activities is that a child learns to interact with and communicate with others using gestures and other social initiatives.

What does the practice look like?

Imagine an infant sitting in her bouncy seat with a favorite rattle or squeeze toy. The child shakes the toy and produces a fun sound. She looks up at her mom to see what she "thinks about all of this." Her mother responds by saying, "You made that noise, didn't you? Shake the rattle again!" The child gets so excited that the rattle drops to the floor. Her mother picks it up, shakes it, and asks, "Do you want to do it again?" She hands the rattle to the child. They play the back-and-forth game many, many times.



How do you do the practice?

Joint attention is a back-and-forth type of play. It involves an infant's abilities to follow another person's actions and to influence another person's focus of attention. The best joint-attention activities are ones that include both types of infant actions.

- A child's interest in people, objects, and events is extremely important for joint-attention activities to be successful. Start by identifying things that especially interest a particular child.
- Any object with which she enjoys playing is used to involve her in a joint-attention activity. While playing, label and describe different features of the activity. (For example, point to a ball and say, "Look! See the ball? Let's play 'roll the ball.'")
- The child will first become involved in joint-attention activities when you start an activity. (For example, place the child in a sitting position and roll a ball to her and saying, "Catch.")
- This is followed by statements to get the child involved in the activity (e.g., saying "Roll the ball back to me" and by gesturing with your hands).
- The more joint-attention-activity games you play with the child, the more she will start to initiate play and attempt to include you in the activity. Any attempt on the part of the child is an opportunity to use words to describe and label the actions of the play.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child look at you while you are playing together?
- Does the child share objects or toys with you?
- Does the child vocalize to get you to give her a toy or an object?

Take a look at more joint-attention activities

Shaping Up

Eleven-month-old Alan and his caregiver, Dara, are sitting on the floor facing each other and playing with a shape box. Dara opens the box and Alan reaches in and removes one of the shapes. Dara asks Alan, "Can you get one more?" Alan looks at Dara while she asks the question and removes another shape. Dara points to one of the holes in the shape box and says, "Alan, put the shape in the hole." Alan struggles to insert the shape but after a short time he is successful. He looks up at Dara, who says, "You did it! Alan put it in!"



Taking Turns

Thirteen-month-old Zelda loves to be outside. Her mother and her home visitor, Tom, have taken Zelda and her big brother, Danny, to the neighborhood park. They decide to play in the sandbox. The sandbox has five or six toys scattered about. Mom picks up a toy shovel and starts digging in the sand. Tom says to Zelda, "Look at what Mommy is doing! Can you dig like Mommy?" The mother hands the shovel to Zelda, who pokes at the sand with the shovel. Tom describes what Zelda is doing ("Zelda is digging a hole. Can Danny have a turn?"). Zelda looks up at Tom, who has his hand held palm up requesting that Zelda give him the shovel. Danny shows his sister another way to use the shovel (filling a bucket). Mom describes what he is doing ("Danny is putting the sand in the bucket. Now it is Zelda's turn to fill the bucket.") Danny holds the shovel out to his sister. Zelda reaches and takes the shovel and tries to put sand in the bucket.



Back-and-Forth Attention

Fifteen-month-old Theo has a syndrome associated with difficulties in engaging in joint-attention with objects and other people. With help from his early interventionist, Theo's mother has figured out some interesting ways to help Theo play with toys and other objects. She encourages and supports Theo's interactions with her and the toys. Mom has learned to sit across from Theo with toys placed between them. Mom places the toys between Theo's legs so that he can easily reach and play with the toys. Mom describes in simple sentences what Theo is doing while pointing to her son's focus of attention. Mom occasionally asks a question or uses a gesture to request an object. This encourages Theo to look up at her. Mom then describes what Theo does with the toy.



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Sign Language Activities

Nonverbal Communication and Signing

Infants often have difficulty letting others know what they are trying to say. Helping a child learn a few simple signs to ask for things or to tell you what he or she wants can go a long way toward overcoming that difficulty. A little sign knowledge will make it easier for the child to communicate with his parents and others.

What is the practice?

This practice uses simple sign language to help a child communicate with and talk to others. The best signs to teach a child are ones that can be used to ask for “more” or to say “yes” or “no.” Some of the earliest signs infants can learn are those for “eat,” “drink,” “more,” “up,” “down,” “all done,” and “yes” and “no.” Check out the *Infant Signing Dictionary* practice guide for other easily learned signs.

What does the practice look like?

A little girl is sitting in her highchair and is ready to eat. She knows that if she signs “eat,” her mother will feed her her favorite foods. Her mother always describes the thing for which her daughter is asking. She knows it is important to use the words for the signs, too. This way her daughter hears her talk about the thing for which she is asking and what she is doing. As soon as the little girl is finished eating, she signs “up,” knowing her mother will pick her up and take her out of the highchair.



How do you do the practice?

Here are some things you can do to decide which signs are likely to work best with a particular child.

- Start by identifying things the child wants and likes to do. Think of things with which the child sometimes gets frustrated because he is not able to use words to tell what he wants.
- It is best to pick about three signs to get started. Choose ones that include movements the child is already able to do (e.g., shaking his head).
- Just before or as part of an activity, demonstrate the sign for the child while saying the words that go with the sign. For instance, say, “Do you want to eat?” while using the sign for eat.
- As the child learns to use a sign, add another one into the activity. You could, for example, ask, “Do you want more to eat?” while using the signs for more and eat.
- Introduce new signs to the child to help him be able to talk to you and ask for things he wants.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is the child using signs more often to communicate with you?
- Has he become less frustrated when trying to communicate and “talk” to you?
- Does the child combine signs to ask for what he wants?

Take a look at more sign language activities

Keeping It Going

Eight-month-old Kayla especially enjoys playing different lap games with her family members. She has been trying to tell them she wants to continue a game they are playing. However, it is difficult for Mom, Dad, and Kayla's big brother to know exactly what Kayla wants or is trying to say. Kayla's home visitor teaches her and her big brother, Andy, a few simple signs by asking her, "Do you want to play again? Do you want more?" while signing "more." It does not take Kayla long to figure out that by tapping her fingers and hands together a few times Andy will play the game again. Kayla has even started to use the sign for "more" to ask her mom or brother to give her more to eat. She also uses the "more" sign to ask for more toys with which to play. Her parents and brother have begun learning other signs to teach her when she is ready for them.



Fine Signs for Meal Time

Lunchtime at day care used to be a hazardous event until 10-month-old Tyler learned the signs "eat," "drink," "more," and "finished." If his caregiver, Tina, gave him the "wrong thing" it was surely going to wind up on the floor! Now Tina begins meal times by asking Tyler if he wants something to eat or drink while signing each of the words. As he gets closer to finishing, Tina asks Tyler if he wants "more to eat?" while using both signs together. Tyler answers by signing "drink." Tina responds by signing "more drink" and saying, "Tyler wants more juice to drink." When Tyler seems about done, Tina asks, "Is Tyler finished?" while signing "finished." Tyler repeats the sign, and meal time is once again a big success.

Making It Clear

Eighteen-month-old Martin is a little boy with Down syndrome who can say about 10 words, but most people have difficulty understanding what he is saying. Through working with Martin's early interventionist, his parents have recently learned about using sign language with young children with Down syndrome. They now know that sign language not only helps the children communicate better, but it also improves their language production. Martin's parents start with four signs that "go with" things Martin especially likes. They pick the signs for "up," "again," "bath," and "down." "Up" is used to ask to be picked up. "Again" is used to have Mom or Dad keep playing with Martin. "Bath" is used to ask to play in the bathtub with toys. "Down" is used to tell Mom and Dad Martin is finished eating and "wants out" of his high chair. Martin not only uses the signs more and more often, but the words that go with each of the signs have also become easier for others to understand.



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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.

