

# Give Me a Sign

Teach a child who is too young to talk how to tell you what he wants.

BY CHERYL LOCK

**W**hen your little one cries and fusses and you frantically search for reasons—Is she hot? tired? hungry? Is she starting to come down with something?—you’d probably give anything just to be able to communicate with her.

A lot of parents have found a good way: teaching their baby to use sign language. “Signing helped Brody so much,” says Ericka Iverson, of Orr, Minnesota, who began the process when her son was about 7 months old. “Rather than getting really upset, the way he used to, he was eventually able to make the sign for *milk* when he was hungry. I would feed him, and he’d skip the fits.”

Baby sign language first became hot back in the mid-’90s, but its popularity has been growing ever since as more and more parents discover just how well it works. “The main reasons I recommend signing are because of its social and emotional benefits and the way that it enriches the relationship between the parent and child,” says *Parents* advisor Linda Acredolo, Ph.D., cocreator of *Baby Signs*, the first sign-language program developed for babies who are not hearing-impaired.



A baby can gesture long before he can say words.

## Why Sign?

Communicating with an infant before he has the ability to talk is the most obvious benefit of teaching him sign language. But studies have also shown that children who learn the skill may actually talk and comprehend language better than those who don’t. “When a baby gestures, it encourages parents to respond, which further reinforces his emerging language skills,” explains Jana M. Iverson, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. “If a child points to an object, such as a bird, his parents are likely to respond with, ‘A bird, that’s right! Can you tell me where birds live?’”

The language benefits persist. When Dr. Acredolo and fellow psychology professor Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D., tested signing and nonsigning children who ranged in age from 11 months to 3 years, they found that 24-month-olds who had signed as babies spoke at the level of a 27- or 28-month-old, had a bigger vocabulary, and were able to put together significantly longer sentences. Thirty-six-month-old signers talked more like 47-month-olds, putting them about a full year ahead of their nonsigning peers.

“We like to say that crawling is to walking as signing is to talking,” says Dr. Acredolo. “Once babies crawl, they’re not content to stay on their

knees. They want to start moving faster. With signing, babies get excited about being understood, and they want to do more of it." Recently, Dr. Acredolo and Dr. Goodwyn followed up with the study subjects (now age 8) to determine what, if any, effect early signing had on IQ. They found that the signing children actually had a 12-point advantage. "We suspect that the signers' accelerated language skills may have given them a jump on intellectual development," Dr. Acredolo says.

## Getting Started

You can begin to teach signs to your baby at 6 months, although typically children don't start signing back until they're around 9 to 12 months. "Try showing your baby signs once she's able to sit up on her own so she can imitate your gestures without falling over," recommends Anne Meeker Miller, Ph.D., author of *Baby Sign & Sing*, a system developed to teach sign language to infants and toddlers through music and sound. It's important to be consistent and patient, but don't be too intense about it. "Think of this as another reason to get down on the floor and play with your child," recommends Dr. Miller. "And if your baby doesn't take to it, don't push it."

Some parents rely on books, DVDs, or other programs that adapt American Sign Language for a baby's limited fine

motor skills. Others are far less formal about the process. Jennifer Walker, of Orlando, Florida, taught her 6-month old son, Riley, a few basic signs she learned from a DVD to get started. "When we don't know the right gesture, we just make up our own for him to use," she says. "I can tell he feels really proud when he can get me to understand what he's saying."

If your little one is pointing at things, babbling as though she's trying to talk, or has already mastered waving "bye-bye," she's probably ready for more complicated signs. "We suggest you start with three or so helpful ones, like *more*, *milk*, and *sleep*," says Dr. Acredolo. "Teaching too many signs at once isn't going to overload your baby, but taking it slowly will help keep you on track so you can model them consistently." Take advantage of natural opportunities to teach as they pop up. If your baby is fussing for more food, you could try saying "More? You want more?" while simultaneously using the sign, advises Dr. Acredolo. "The more frequently a child sees a sign paired with the word, the more likely she is to learn it, no matter what the gesture is."

Once your baby has mastered the basics, you can start to expand her vocabulary. She probably wants to communicate with you about other things in her world, as well: pets, trees, bath-time. The possibilities are endless. □



### When strangers try to interact with my 8-month-old, she turns away or cries. Is there any way to get her to be just a little more social?

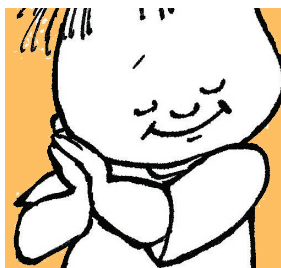
Not really. "Most kids between 8 and 16 months have stranger anxiety, and that's an important developmental step," says Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University in New York. You can't force sociability, but you can help her feel more comfortable with others. Try this: Instead of passing her off to unfamiliar arms, hold her and have the new person sit a few feet away. Say, "This is Uncle Bob, and he's so glad to see you!" As she gets more comfortable around a new face, she'll probably warm up.

## Simple Signs

Learn these easy, useful signs from Dr. Acredolo's program, *Baby Signs*, to start a conversation with your child today. Remember to repeat the word as you demonstrate the gesture.

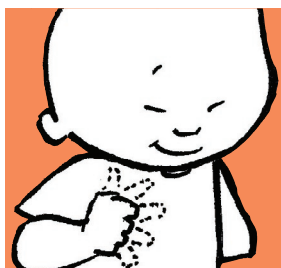
### SLEEP

Rest your head on one or both hands.



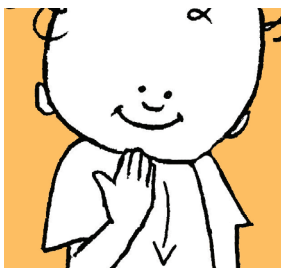
### MILK

Open and close your hand as if you're milking a cow.



### THANK YOU

Pull the fingertips of one hand away from your chin.



### MORE

Tap the fingertips of both of your hands together.

