

Gestures and Signs for Communicating

Is your child making eye contact, pointing to objects, babbling, or smiling to try to tell you something? Teaching your child simple gestures and signs can make it easier for her to communicate. It can help her make the connection between communicating what's on her mind and getting what she wants.

Learning Guide: Promoting Your Child's Non-Verbal Communication Skills

- Begin by paying attention to your child's attempts to communicate or interact with you during everyday activities. Looking intently at something, smiling, and gestures can be among your young child's attempts to "say something" to you.
- To understand what your child's behavior means, think about what is most interesting and important to her. For example, if your child loves to play in the yard and points to the door, interpret this gesture as a request to go outside.
- Encourage your child to point, extend an upraised palm to "ask for" something, shake or nod his head, and use other gestures to interact with you and others during play and daily routines.
- Consider teaching your child some simple signs—*eat, drink, more, up, shoes, play, potty*—to interact with you. Many children use gestures on their own, and sign language is just another form of gesturing.
- Respond promptly to acknowledge your child's gestures and requests. Speak as you gesture or sign so that your child understands that the word and the gesture have the same meaning. "Outside. You want to go outside." This also helps your child build oral language as she tries to say the words with the gestures or signs.
- Join in your child's interactive play by copying her non-verbal communication and adding to it using words. For example, Kayla likes to toss the ball back and forth with her dad. She raises her arms above her head as a way to tell her dad that she wants him to toss her the ball. Kayla's dad copies her gesture when it's his turn to catch the ball. He raises his arms above his head and says "My turn" to ask Kayla to toss him the ball.
- Focus on increasing your child's communication and interactions by encouraging him to use gestures to request objects, places, or people that are interesting, favorites, or preferences.
- Vary your response to your child's nonverbal interactions to model the different ways she can communicate and interact with you. Your child points to the milk carton or makes the sign for "more" to request more milk. Sign "more" as you say it when giving your child more milk.
- Many toddler and baby signing dictionaries are available on the web. Try Googling **baby signs** or **toddler signs** to search. Many sites even include video clips so you can see how to do the signs.

Watch a video of this Learning Guide

You'll know the practice is working if ...

- The child uses gestures to ask for things.
- The child learns new gestures/signs and uses them to ask for what he wants.
- The child uses sounds and gestures or signs to interact with you and with others.

A Quick Peek

Lupita is an 11-month-old who loves outings with her parents at a park near their home. Her excited babbling and hand clapping as they approach the park's duck pond tell Mom and Dad that it's her favorite place in the park. In recent weeks, Lupita began wanting to join her parents in their routine of tossing bits of bread to the ducks. At first she wiggled and screamed until they realized what she wanted and put bread in her hands. Then her dad showed Lupita how to hold out her open palm to ask for more bread. He paid close attention, and every time she made the gesture, he was quick to hand her a piece of bread, saying, "You want bread." Screaming has been replaced by happy communication!



For more ideas, ask an early interventionist, home visitor, teacher, therapist, or another experienced parent, or consult online resources such as "[The Importance of Gestures](#)" by Lauren Lowry.