

Communicating with Gestures and Signs

At an early age, infants and toddlers learn and use gestures and signs to communicate their desires, needs, and preferences. You can help young children interact more easily with others and facilitate their later language learning by supporting their use of nonverbal gestures and signs during everyday classroom activities.

Learning Guide:

Supporting Pre-Linguistic Communication

- Engage children with toys/materials and in activities that match their interests or that they find interesting. Pay attention to what they do and wait for a child to approach or show interest in another child or adult.
- Notice when a child could be trying to initiate an interaction with others while engaged in interesting activities. Act as if his or her actions are attempts to communicate. For example, smiling at or looking intently at you while reaching toward a toy, might mean, “Help me get that toy.”
- Respond promptly and positively to acknowledge the child’s interest or request. Praise the child for his or her communicative attempt and give the child access to the desired object or activity. Imitate the child, join in the child’s play, and take turns with the child. Encourage a child to use a gesture or sign during each turn.
- Help children learn and use gestures and signs to make requests, show others something, or tell others what they want or need. Demonstrate a gesture or sign, encourage imitation, and guide children’s hands to help them form the sign. At the same time, use words to describe the gesture or sign. Pairing words with gestures and signs facilitates children’s acquisition of spoken language.
- Teach just one or two signs or gestures at a time. Once a child has mastered their use, vary your responses and introduce new gestures or signs. Simple gestures with almost universal meaning include pointing, reaching, holding a hand outreached with palm up to request something, lifting arms up to request being picked up, nodding or shaking head *yes* or *no*, and waving *hello* and *good-bye*. Simple sign language children can learn and use include signs for *more*, *eat*, *drink*, *again*, *play*, *yes*, *no*, *please*.

Watch a video of this Learning Guide

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

- Children use gestures and signs to initiate interactions with others
- Children use gestures and signs to communicate their needs and desires
- Children use gestures and signs as part of everyday communication with others

A Quick Peek



On one of the weekly summertime “water days” for the children in Laura’s classroom, Laura watched as children gathered around a water table. Laura noticed Ariel removing her shoe as she sat beside the water basin. Laura exclaimed, “Oh, Ariel! You are sitting by the water. What would you like to do?” Ariel pointed to the water and looked at Laura. Laura pointed also and made the sign for water as she said, “Water. That’s the water.” Ariel held up her fingers, and Laura guided Ariel’s hands to help her make the sign. Laura signed “water” again, while saying “Water. Do you want to feel the water on your feet?” Ariel held up her fingers, trying to sign “water”, and grinned as Laura helped her ease her bare foot into the water basin.

For more ideas and activities about signs and gestures, visit:

- [Using Gestures to Predict and Promote Language in Children](#) on the Child Talk website
- [More Than Baby Talk](#) on the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute website