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

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 internalize this method of communication as they find interesting activities. For example, smiling at or looking intently at an adult while engaging in an activity might mean, “Can I have more?” 

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.

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 an object or activity.
- 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 encourage the child to continue to the desired object or activity. Involve 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 learn how and use gestures and signs to make requests, other children, or tell others what they want or need. Demonstrate a gesture, model how to imitate, 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 its use, vary your responses and introduce new gestures or signs. Simple gestures with almost universal meaning include pointing, reaching, holding a hand outstretched 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 goodbye. Simple signs include questions and yes and no, and include signs for more, eat, drink, again, play, yes, no, please.

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

- [Using Gestures to Predict and Promote Language in Children](http://www.ectacenter.org/decrp/)
- [More Than Baby Talk](http://www.ectacenter.org/decrp/)

DEC Recommended Practices Topic Area: INTERACTION
Practitioner Practice Guide: Interaction Part 2

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Watch a video of this Learning Guide

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