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. Look for gestures or signs that are meaningful. For example, if your child loves to play in the yard and points to the door, interpret this gesture as a request to “get outside.”

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 “get 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. Pay close attention, and every time your child makes a gesture, be quick to hand her a piece of bread, saying, “You want bread.” Screaming has been replaced by happy communication!

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Many toddler and baby sign dictionaries are available on the web. Try Googling baby signs or toddler signs to search. Many sites even have 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 during play and daily routines.

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, therapist, or another experienced parent, or consult online resources such as “The Importance of Gestures” by Lauren Lowery.