



Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center

Using American Sign Language for Early Learning

headstart.gov/publication/using-american-sign-language-early-learning

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This brief focuses on American Sign Language (ASL) and the social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive benefits that it provides for infants, toddlers, and young children. Learn strategies for supporting families who use ASL (American Sign Language) or want to introduce ASL (American Sign Language) to their child and find tips for building connections with deaf family members. Explore fun activities to support children's language and ASL (American Sign Language) development.

Also check out the companion resource, *Connecting at Home*. It includes simple tips for families to support their children's ASL (American Sign Language) learning.



Research Notes

ASL (American Sign Language) is a complete visual language with its own grammar and syntax, separate from English. ASL (American Sign Language) is the language of the Deaf community. Many deaf people and those who use ASL (American Sign Language) consider themselves a cultural and linguistic minority, rather than equating deafness with disability. Many people use ASL (American Sign Language), including deaf, hard of hearing, hearing people, and people with limited verbal language.

ASL (American Sign Language) is the only language that is 100% accessible all the time to deaf and hard of hearing children. Early hearing screenings and access to early intervention are critical for deaf and hard-of-hearing children and their families. However, all children can

benefit from the use of [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) with no risk to other language skills. In fact, learning and using [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) benefits children across [Early Learning Outcomes Framework \(ELOF\)](#) domains such as;

- Language and Communication
- Cognition
- Social and Emotional Development

The Take Home

- Children who use [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) are considered dual language learners (DLLs).
- All children can benefit from the use of [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#).
- Learning [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) in the early years supports language and literacy skills.

What does research say?

Children who use [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) at home are considered dual language learners.

[ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) is the language used by the Deaf community. [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) is a complete language with its own grammar and syntax. Children who use [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) at home or are learning [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) from native speakers are considered [DLLs \(dual language learners\)](#) in Head Start programs. A child might have a parent or family member who is deaf and communicates through [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#).

It is important to learn about Deaf cultural norms to ensure that children who use [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) receive culturally relevant learning experiences. Explore resources or connect with your local Deaf services center to learn more.

Providing access to [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) is critical for deaf and hard of hearing children.

[ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) is the only complete language that deaf and hard of hearing children have total access to all the time. Connecting with early intervention services and providing early exposure to accessible language can help prevent language deprivation in deaf and hard of hearing children. Learning [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) also supports learning a second language, like English. Families of deaf and hard of hearing children will make their own choices about their child's communication, and it is important to respect their decisions. This may include using cochlear implants, hearing aids, speech therapy, learning [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#), speech reading, etc.

Families are a key resource and critical partners as you learn how to effectively support learning and development for deaf and hard of hearing children in your program. In addition, reach out to your program's disability services coordinator for resources about how to support deaf and hard of hearing children and their families.

Learning ASL (American Sign Language) benefits all children.

ASL (American Sign Language) provides the earliest possible mode for expressive communication, making it ideal for infants and toddlers to learn and use. Because ASL (American Sign Language) involves motor movements of the arms and hands, it provides another way for the brain to remember language and makes it easier to recall language. ASL (American Sign Language) also supports speech development. Using ASL (American Sign Language) supports all children who are DLLs (dual language learners) who are still learning English by providing them a way to communicate their needs without speaking. ASL (American Sign Language) can also reduce frustration due to difficulties with spoken communication.

Using ASL (American Sign Language) supports language and literacy skills.

Research shows that exposure and use of ASL (American Sign Language) and the ASL (American Sign Language) manual alphabet increases English vocabulary growth. It also supports pre-literacy skills, like letter recognition.

Try this!

The parent is the child's most important teacher, and you are their "guide on the side." Use these tips with families to help them support their child learning ASL (American Sign Language).

- Children who are learning ASL (American Sign Language) babble just like hearing children, but instead of verbally, will babble with their hands. Young children's signing will often not be the exact way to sign a word but will be approximate. It's important to pay attention to the context of their sign usage and use a little detective work to figure out what they are signing.

- For deaf families:
 - Ask about their preferred communications before services begin. Will they use an in-person interpreter, a pen and pencil to write, a video interpreter, etc.? Each family will have their own preferences for communicating during visits.
 - If using an interpreter with deaf parents, look at the parents while you are talking and not at the interpreter.
 - Learning a few ASL (American Sign Language) signs that are related to the conversation or learning to spell your name with the ASL (American Sign Language) manual alphabet is a good start to build rapport and cultural trust with deaf families.
- For families who are unfamiliar with ASL (American Sign Language) but are interested in using it with their child, share the wonderful learning benefits of using ASL (American Sign Language) in the early years with them. Knowing why ASL (American Sign Language) is beneficial and how it can support their child's communication can be helpful in encouraging families to use sign, regardless of their child's hearing status.
- Show, teach, or share a video of an ASL (American Sign Language) sign, like "more." Then model for families how they could use that during mealtime or playtime. Let families know that a child needs to see the sign many times before they will sign back. When an infant or toddler is first learning a sign, it may look a little different than the real sign, so be very observant to catch features of the sign!
- Discuss which ASL (American Sign Language) words or phrases families would like to learn and use with their child. What words do they use the most with their child? What daily routines could they integrate ASL (American Sign Language) signs into?
- Model and encourage families to use exaggerated facial expressions and body language while reading books or singing with their child. These are important features of nonverbal communication that support ASL (American Sign Language) learning and retention.
- Using ASL (American Sign Language) signs along with singing is a great way to support learning sign language. Singing with young children is already a great way to engage with them but adding ASL (American Sign Language) signs can boost their engagement and interest.

Connecting at Home

Learning and using ASL (American Sign Language) with your young child can improve their communication, reduce communication frustration, and support vocabulary growth. Learn ASL (American Sign Language) signs with this [online ASL dictionary](#).

Sign with Me

Learning basic words that are important to your child, like “more,” “milk,” or “all-done” can be a great place to start learning. Modeling the word within context for your child is an ideal practice. When it's feeding time, you can narrate what is happening while using the sign. “Do you want *milk*? I know you're hungry. *Milk* is coming soon. You love *milk*!”

See what I'm saying?

Communicating with [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) requires eye contact from both people. If you are playing together with a truck, you can say, “Oh this is a big truck!” while signing *truck*. Wait for them to look at you then say and sign *truck* again. It might take practice for you and your child to wait for eye contact to sign with each other, but keep signing!

Music to My Eyes

Young children are naturally drawn to musical singing and fingerplay songs, like “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” Learn one or two signs for their favorite songs, and while you sing the song, add in the signs! Remember, a child will need to see the sign around 100 times to sign it back.

Follow My Face

Facial expressions and body language are important parts of [ASL \(American Sign Language\)](#) communication. With your child out of view, hide an object in the room. When they come into the room, raise your eyebrows and smile when they are getting close to the object and frown and furrow your eyebrows when they move farther from the object. This directs them to the object only using facial expressions. Have the child hide the object and practice using their facial expressions to guide you too!

[« Go to Connecting Research to Practice](#)

Read more:

- [American Sign Language](#)
- [Disability Services](#)

[Teaching Practices](#)

Resource Type: [Publication](#)

National Centers: [Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning](#)

Age Group: [Infants and Toddlers](#)

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