

Teaching Infants to Use Sign Language

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Life News (Social and Behavioral Sciences)

Keywords

INFANTS SIGN LANGUAGE
COMMUNICATION

Contact Information

Available for logged-in reporters only

Description

When 11-month-olds at an Ohio State University laboratory school want to eat, they don't have to cry: they can use their hands to sign for a bottle. As part of a pilot program, infants as young as 9 months old and their teachers have learned to use sign language.

Newswise — When 11-month-olds at an Ohio State University laboratory school want to eat, they don't have to cry: they can use their hands to sign for a bottle.

As part of a pilot program at Ohio State's A. Sophie Rogers Infant-Toddler Laboratory School, infants as young as 9 months old and their teachers have learned to use some signs from American Sign Language to communicate with each other.

Infants often use the signs for simple words like "eat," "more," "stop" and "share," said Kimberlee Whaley, coordinator of the laboratory school and an associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State's College of Human Ecology.

The program has been a great success, Whaley said. It has made communication between teachers and infants even more effective. Parents, too, have been supportive.

"It is so much easier for our teachers to work with 12-month-olds who can sign that they want their bottle, rather than just cry and have us try to figure out what they want," she said. "This is a great way for infants to express their needs before they can verbalize them."

Some of the results of a pilot study of the program were reported recently in Toronto at a meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Although sign language has been used in child care centers with special-needs children, Whaley said this is the first time she is aware of it being formally used in a classroom setting for children without disabilities.

Whaley said the idea for the program came from watching the occasional conflicts in the classroom. "When toddlers have a conflict, they often will push each other to communicate their displeasure. We wondered what would happen if we could give them another physical way to express their anger. Well, the sign for 'stop' is very physical -- one hand slamming into the other -- so we thought that might work."

Whaley said there were other reasons to consider sign language. "We've known for a long time that there is a lot of thought going on in young infants' heads, but they don't have the skills to use spoken language," she said. "However they do have the motor skills to use sign language."

About a year and a half ago, the teachers decided to try using sign language in the classroom. One teacher was already fluent in American Sign Language. Other teachers took an immersion course in the language. They then began introducing the signs in class.

The program is not designed to teach American Sign Language as a formal language, Whaley emphasized. The children learn a few signs to help them communicate but do not learn the intricacies of the language. There is no formal method for teaching the signs to children; they learn it the same way they learn spoken language, Whaley said.

"We introduce the signs to them naturally, as part of our everyday life in the classroom. We always speak the words as we sign, so the children learn both. At lunch time, for example, we'll ask them if they're ready by asking them if they want to eat and using the sign for 'eat.'"

The Rogers school is a mixed-age classroom, with children from six weeks to three years old. So some of the children who were introduced to signs when they first arrived are almost two years old now. While the teachers have not specifically examined the question, Whaley estimates that some children have learned up to 25 to 30 different signs.

"The earliest we've had children using signs is at about 9 months old," according to Whaley. "They generally begin signing soon after they can sit up by themselves."

Typically, "more" is one of the first signs they learn because the teachers use that a lot. Other common signs include "all done," "now," "five minutes," "juice" and "sleep."

The parents of all the children involved in the program have also been surveyed, Whaley said. One of the findings was that children will use the signs that they learned in the classroom to communicate at home. Parents say they have learned the signs from their children as well, Whaley said.

One of the concerns parents had was that children wouldn't learn to talk as quickly if they already knew the signs. "We absolutely haven't seen that at all," Whaley said. "What we found is that their first spoken words are usually words they had already learned to sign. As the children learn to speak more words, their use of signs fades away."

Another intriguing finding of the pilot study is that girls "overwhelmingly use signs more often than boys," she said. "When we started the program, the oldest children in our classroom were a group of boys. We found that they used signs, but not nearly as much as the girls who were younger. This is something we want to study further."