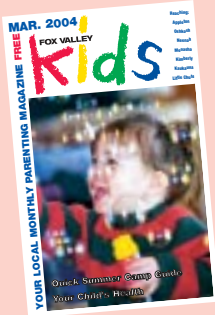


ON THE COVER

FREE

VOL. 11, NO. 1



Kathryn Quinn  
Connor has a  
blast blowing  
bubbles.

Thanks to Kathryn's  
parents for sending  
in this photo.

FOX VALLEY  
**Kids**

Reaching:  
Appleton  
Oshkosh  
Neenah  
Menasha  
Kimberly  
Kaukauna  
Little Chute

MARCH 2004

YOUR LOCAL MONTHLY PARENTING MAGAZINE

# Tiny Talking Hands

By Judy Kneiszel

Appleton's Kristine Alarie is teaching babies to communicate through sign language.

At one time or another, every parent has wondered what their desperately-crying baby was trying to tell them. In the past, moms and dads had to use the process of elimination to determine the problem: Is she hungry? Is it teething pain? Is his diaper wet? Does she want her blanket? What is it?

Now, thanks to Appleton's Kristine Alarie, a growing number of Wisconsin babies (as young as nine months) can clearly communicate their needs with their tiny hands. Alarie teaches hearing parents how to begin two-way communication with their hearing, pre-verbal children through the use of American Sign Language.

"Signing is a wonderful bonding experience," she says. "It is like a window into a child's mind."

Alarie, an educational interpreter for the deaf, first became interested in signing with hearing babies when she saw a story on CNN about three years ago. She soon became a certified presenter for Sign2Me and began teaching sign language to individual parents. Two years later, she began teaching classes of 10 at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Appleton and Mercy Medical Center in Appleton. She offers the only program of this kind in the Fox Valley and

Green Bay areas.

"The reason babies can sign before they can talk is that fine motor ability comes before speech," Alarie says. "Babies can communicate using their hands way before [they're able to use] speech."

And signing with a baby doesn't just help with communication, though Alarie says that's the primary reason to teach signing to a baby.

"We're starting to see research that indicates kids who were taught to sign as babies have higher IQ rates, higher literacy rates and higher vocabulary rates," Alarie says.

Beth Clay, an Appleton mom, started signing to daughter Hannah when Hannah was just 6 months old. Hannah started signing back at 9 months of age and now, at 14 months, she recognizes 40 signs and can do about 30 of them herself.

"It takes some of the guesswork out of parenting," Clay says. "One time I was gabbing with some friends and Hannah came running in and made the sign for pain by her mouth. I looked at my watch and saw it was time for more Motrin and made the sign for medicine. Instead of starting to cry because of the teething pain, she just made the sign that she was starting to feel bad and the problem was solved."

Clay says her husband had seen some research about sign language and babies before she was even pregnant with Hannah. They ordered a sign language kit and started with a few signs on their own.

"When we saw the class was being offered at St. Elizabeth Hospital we were really excited," she says. "Kristine is the best teacher."

At the classes (which last for an hour and are held once a week for four consecutive weeks), parents are provided detailed instruction on signing with children. Participants learn approximately 100 American Sign Language words to aid in communicating with their children.

In her classes, Alarie uses a program based on American Sign Language, developed by Joseph Garcia, a child development researcher. Working as an interpreter for the deaf in the late 1970s, Garcia noticed that hearing babies of deaf parents could communicate needs and desires at an earlier age than the children of hearing parents, according to Garcia's Web site, [www.sign2me.com](http://www.sign2me.com). Alarie incorporates instruction, music, games and stories in a fun and engaging atmosphere. She offers hands-on practice and reinforcement with weekly themes such as animals, foods, family and everyday

signs.

"It's a new language and if you don't use it you lose it," she says. "So I use repetition and silly songs. Parents who use it as a natural part of everyday life see their kids pick it up easier."

Alarie says being able to communicate through sign language does not delay speech, as some people might think.

"It's like crawling to walking," she explains. "When kids discover walking they find it's faster than crawling. Once kids are verbal, they drop the sign language except for fun."

She says sign language is especially helpful when kids are starting to talk.

"It's really, really handy between 18 and 36 months [of age]," Alarie says. "This is the frustration year, because a child will have language, but get frustrated trying to get it out. At that age, signing is still helpful because it's still easier for them than getting out the words."

Alarie has taught a few classes to day care centers and says around the country, day care centers and preschools are starting to use sign language with kids because, aside from the academic benefits, they've found it really cuts

SEE TALKING HANDS, PAGE 13



Kristine Alarie shows Beth and Hannah Clay the sign for "duck."



## In Your Neighborhood

Here's your chance to wish someone happy birthday, say congratulations or welcome a baby! Send us your news by the 15th of the month: Erickson Publishing, Attn: Kids in the Neighborhood, P.O. Box 45050, Madison, WI 53744-5050

### Heaven's Gift ... Our Answered Prayer!

Nathalie Denise, born December 19, 2003



### To Our Precious Katie

Happy 7th birthday on March 12. We are so blessed to have you. *Love and Sweet Kisses — Dad, Mom and Nikki*

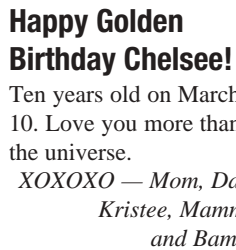
### Happy 5th Birthday Zachary!

We are so proud of you. *Love — Mom and Dad*



### Happy 6th Birthday!

Happy birthday to JJ on March 10. XOXOXO *We Love You — Mom, Dad and Mitch*



### Happy Golden Birthday Chelsee!

Ten years old on March 10. Love you more than the universe. *XOXOXO — Mom, Dad, Kristee, Mamma and Bamps*



### Happy Birthday!

Happy 4th birthday to Max and Mason McParlon on February 26. *Love — Dad, Mom, Mitch, Matt and Grandmas*



### Happy 1st Birthday Alexander!

*We Love You — Mom and Dad*

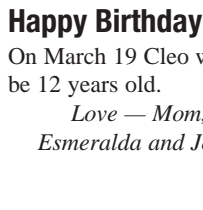
### Happy Birthday Elizabeth!

You turn 3 on March 26. *Love You — Mom and Grandma*



### Happy 3rd Birthday Christopher!

We love you! *Mom, Dad and Anna*



### Happy Birthday!

On March 19 Cleo will be 12 years old. *Love — Mom, Tim, Esmeralda and Joseph*



### Happy Birthday!

On March 3 Esmeralda is going to be 6 years old. *Love — Mom, Tim, Joseph and Cleo*

## Send Us Your Good News!

Fox Valley Kids  
Attn: Kids in the Valley  
P.O. Box 45050  
Madison, WI 53744-5050

by the 15th of the month before the event. Photos are welcome; please include a SASE if you would like the photos returned.

### Here's My News:

## TALKING HANDS FROM PAGE 1



Hannah Clay signs "butterfly" while listening to the song "Look Up."

down the noise level in the classroom.

"Kids can, for example, quietly and discreetly sign when they have to go to the bathroom and it doesn't disrupt the whole class," she says.

When she's not working with babies, Alarie interprets for deaf and hard of hearing students in seven school districts.

"That's how I stay immersed in American Sign Language," she says. "Working with the deaf and hard of hearing has helped me be a better teacher with the babies. As I grow as an interpreter, I become a better teacher."

Teaching and interpreting was a second career for Alarie. Several years ago she was working in payroll and personnel and battling

infertility when, on a whim, she took a class in American Sign Language.

"The teacher said I had a gift for expression and I went on and got my degree," she says. "I found out I couldn't have children, but I also found exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. I feel happy and blessed that I love what I do. I found my calling and I love my job every day, whether I'm working with a fifth-grader or a 5-month-old. I find incredible joy in working with kids."

For more information about the benefits of signing with babies and Alarie's upcoming classes and appearances, visit her Web site at [www.handsofexpression.com](http://www.handsofexpression.com).

FVK

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