



Gestures, Signs, Pictures, and Words: How Does It All Work? Part 2

How does one decide which signs to teach a young preverbal child? In CSLOT's Early Intervention program, we use signs that help the child get what he/she wants. The sign for "more" becomes a generalized sign for "I want." Thus, the therapist models "more," in which the fingertips of both hands meet in front of the therapist's chest with the palms facing down. A facilitator sitting in back of the child, gently takes the child's hands and, hand over hand, imitates the model. The therapist then immediately gives the child the desired object. This teaches the child that he can receive what he wants through using language, and language in turn becomes a tool for him to manipulate the respondents in his world. "Bye bye" can be taught in the same way and becomes ritualized so that the child is always waving goodbye appropriately. Other signs frequently used in the Early Intervention program are "eat," "drink," "cookie/ cracker," "fish" (edible goldfish), "baby," "go," etc. Parents who want to use signs that facilitate language in the home can search online sign language dictionaries of American Sign Language.

That the child can request what he wants is what sets the stage for later verbalization. Through his use of signs, the child has learned a handful of words that actually work for him to obtain the things he desires. The same is true for the use of pictures. Children learn that if they give the respondent a picture of the desired object, the object will be given to them. Both pictures and signs are representations of the real thing. On a continuum from most concrete—the object, to least concrete—the word, pictures and signs are perhaps midway.