



## **Gestures, Signs, Pictures, and Words: How Does It All Work? Part 4**

In parts 1, 2, and 3 of this series, we explained the purpose of gestures, signs, and pictures. Part 4 is devoted to words, which is what everyone wants to hear from our children in the Early Intervention program.

Impatient to get to the word stage, or not understanding that words develop after a natural sequence of reliance on gestures and signs by children, parents and therapists of children who are late in developing a spoken vocabulary, often push them to produce words when they are not ready to do so and quickly find out that there is no rushing the onset of the use of words. Like signs, words are symbols. That is, they stand for something else, usually something concrete, and are represented mentally. To get to the word, we facilitate the development of symbolic thought, which occurs naturally through play. Just as words are symbolic in that they represent or stand for actual objects or events, play is symbolic when an action or sequence of actions stands for or represents actual events experienced by a child.

When you first enrolled your child in CSLOT's Early Intervention program, you completed The MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory: Words and Gestures, the exhaustive list of words that your child understands and uses. You will remember that there was a set of questions asking you about how your child imitated your behaviors around the house, e.g., "Does your child put the telephone receiver to his/her ear?" Such simple imitation of adult behaviors is an essential step toward developing symbolic play skills. When a toy phone is presented to the toddler or a short stick is presented to the preschooler, both can "pretend" to be talking on the phone using more and less concrete objects to stand for a real receiver. Such pretend play is symbolic and heralds, or occurs simultaneously with, the onset of the use of first words (at around 12 months of age).

In summary, gestures, signs, and pictures are all tools and building blocks in the process of language development. These developmental processes and tools lead to the use of words for children with emerging language. While the process is sometimes slow, each element is a building block that adds to a child's development of language. Understanding the importance of gestures, signs, and pictures along with words can help increase communication and reduce frustration in children with developing language.