



Gestures, Signs, Pictures, and Words: How Does It All Work? Part 1

When we tell the parents of very young children that CSLOT's speech-language pathologists (SLP's) may teach their child to use signs to communicate, they often get a worried look on their faces and respond with, "But we want him to talk." We assure them that the use of signs is a linguistic precursor to the use of spoken words and the use of signs enhances, not hinders, language development. A sign, after all, is a signal that one person sends with the intention to communicate something to another person. As adults, we do it all the time in our daily lives to accompany the spoken word, and we call these signals "gestures." Young babies use gestures as well. From the age of about 9 months, babies gesture to get their needs met through ritualized requests such as reaching with an open-close grasping motion of the hand(s). Gesture-speech synchrony originates in infancy, with hand to mouth behaviors, and later with the co-occurrence of such behaviors as babbling and rhythmic movements of the hands (banging objects), and continues to develop through the school age years. The consensus of recent speech and language research is that gesture, speech, and language are "tightly coupled" neurologically and developmentally. There is overlap in the neural control for speech and gesture (Capone and McGregor, 2004), and speech and gesture, as symbols, share underlying cognitive abilities as well.

The growing body of research in gesture development in babies is rich and corresponds nicely with that of the use of signs in the development of language in children who are deaf. SLP's working with non-verbal children have borrowed the formal signs of American Sign Language or Signing Exact English and have applied these in therapy to great success. The sign, paired with the intent to communicate, can satisfy a need, which is motivating for a child who can't say the word. Over time, after hearing and seeing the word paired with the sign, the child's use of the sign will eventually fade in favor of the spoken word. Thus, it makes sense from a developmental perspective to teach these basic communicative signals and get speech-delayed children "talking" with their hands.

Resource

Capone, N.C. & McGregor, K.K. (2004). Gesture development: A review for clinical and research practices. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* (47), 173-186.