



To Sign or Not To Sign?



That is often a question asked by parents of children with communication challenges. Children with articulation delays, apraxia, autism, cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, and learning disabilities are among the many different disorders for which signing has demonstrated positive outcomes. In fact, research reveals that using sign language accelerates development of speech, and also enhances language, intelligence, social, emotional, and academic skills.



Many children with communication challenges have difficulties taking in auditory information (i.e. speech). Children with this underlying difficulty take longer than the average child to understand what is said to them. Using signs with these children provides a visual language support for their weaker auditory system. Signing also slows the language down because we naturally speak slower when we are complimenting our speech with signs. This provides the child with auditory challenges the visual support and more processing time.

Children impacted by Cerebral Palsy frequently have low muscle tone and lack of control of musculature necessary for speech production resulting in speech that is difficult to understand, sometimes even to the closest caregivers. This lack of understandability is frustrating at best and more often than not, desolating.



Most children with Down Syndrome experience delays in language with expressive language often lagging behind receptive language. In addition, low muscle tone and challenges in making the small, rapid movements of the articulators for speech production often result in speech that is difficult to understand. Sign language is excellent for increasing both expressive language and for providing additional communicative information to others that allows for increased understanding of the child's verbal speech productions. Much like gestures and pantomime increase one's ability to understand a person speaking in a foreign language, signs aid the listener of a child with Down Syndrome who is hard to understand by providing additional information. The result is more successful communicative exchanges and increased social opportunities.



Children with apraxia of speech are challenged to produce speech in the presence of a motor planning disorder that causes them to have difficulty producing the necessary motor movements for talking. Sign language offers these children a bridge between their normal intelligence and receptive language skills and their ability to express themselves. The multi-sensory input of seeing the sign, hearing the word and making the sign facilitates their ability to verbally produce the word resulting in increased speech production.



When maintaining attention is challenging for children, learning to speak is often delayed. Childhood attention challenges may be the result of an inability to determine what sounds are important to key into; background sounds are heard as clearly as the sound of Mom talking to them while sitting at the same table. Signing increases the likelihood that the communication partner will position themselves in front of the child, obtain their eye contact and monitor the child's attention. This focusing of attention helps the child to filter background sounds from what is important for them to attend to. In group settings, the use of signs is a natural way to encourage children to attend to each other, thus supporting the acquisition of appropriate social skills.



Children with autism attend more readily to visual stimuli than auditory stimuli. Hence, the use of signs is a natural solution to their communication challenges. Signs are often gesturally linked to the target word; for example the sign for cat is like whiskers while the sign for cow is like horns above the head. For many children with autism, this visual association of the sign with the word is a key to the development of verbal speech. The delayed social skills present in children with autism are also positively impacted by the use of signs as described in the paragraph above. Lack of communication contributes to the many aberrant behaviors that are frequently demonstrated in children with autism. Providing a means of expression dramatically decreases frustration which in turn eliminates and/or reduces many of these undesirable behaviors. According to Stephen M Edelson, Ph.D from the Center of Autism, these children frequently need the extra visual support to be successful with the rules and language necessary for successful social communication; sign language provides this support and allows for a secure means of social communication. For many youngsters with

autism, sign language is an avenue that increases their chance to be verbal speakers and effective social communicators.



Sign language has been shown to promote language acquisition, reduce frustration, increase cognitive functioning, improve social skills, and facilitate speech production and overall communicative competence. Once verbal speech is solidly in place, the child will eliminate use of signs as a natural progression. Until then, encourage signing as a means of fostering communication.



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