

Bridging the gap:

baby signing for hearing children

By Vincent D. Buntinx

With our first child, who is now 3, we experienced the frustrating gap between when he could obviously understand what we were telling him, and when he could actually speak. All parents go through months of wondering why on earth their baby is crying – is he/she tired, hungry, thirsty, in pain, or in need of a nappy change?

When our daughter was born 2 and a half years later, we heard about signing for hearing children (from age 7 months). We were enthusiastic and registered for Diana Siepmann's Bizzy Bee class. Our baby was 8 months old when we started. We have now been to 5 classes, and she has just started signing! Her first sign was an unmistakable 'goodbye' (the sign is slightly different from that for 'hello') – she signed it to me as I was leaving her at daycare. Fortunately her mum was there too to witness it. We were absolutely exhilarated, because to tell the truth some part of us could hardly believe a child this young could learn the signs AND decide to try them in such a short time. (We had not discussed this together before, but admitted it to each other afterwards!). We both realised that in spite of all the books and articles we had read on child development, we were still underestimating babies' potential and willingness to communicate.

The three of us enjoy the classes very much. They feature lots of music, song and dance. Diana starts teaching everyday signs (mummy, daddy, milk, nappy change, etc.) and animal signs. ("The animals on the farm marching on a parade one day" is our

baby's favourite, along with "They were ten in the bed" which is used to teach number signs – she bursts into laughter during the rocking part!). Another surprising development is that since we started signing classes, our daughter actually seems to use a lot more body language than before: whenever she hears music she starts 'dancing', she claps her hands several times a day and when someone says 'bravo!' she lifts her arms up, then slams her hands onto the table and expects everyone around to do the same... all things she didn't do a few weeks ago.

We have integrated signing into our daily routine, and her big brother picked the signs up immediately. He knows around 15-20 by now. We are also experimenting with signing as an 'anchor' for other languages spoken at home/in the family, so when we sign 'milk' we say the word in 3 different languages. The material Diana gives to the parents refers to research establishing that teaching signing to hearing children actually helps them to speak better and earlier than average – which is interesting, as some people worry that using sign language may slow down speech development.

From the material we were given, and then from our own experience, we learned that infant beginners sign a little erratically – they use one sign for another and their small hand muscles sometimes struggle a bit to put the fingers in the right position. But when our son signs 'Daddy', with his hand touching his forehead, I know he is talking about me even though his fingers should be spread out and not half-bent! We are seeing the signs 'milk' (right hand mimicking milking an udder) and 'baby' (arms positioned as if rocking a baby) very often.

A lot of signs are based on the manual alphabet. We printed it out and pasted it in 2 strategic areas for practice: the toilet and the kitchen. Every morning I go through it in front of the kids.

I asked other parents about their experience. "Dominik invented a sign for 'good' and also does the sign for 'baby' a lot", said his mum, Bibiana.

"My daughter Maia started waving her arm in response to her dad waving her goodnight", said Alex. "It's still too early to tell more, but just attempting to sign with her makes me a lot more aware of how I communicate with her and more observant of her response."

We can't wait to see what our daughter will sign next! Around mealtimes she has a way of flexing her hands that does resemble the sign for 'milk' – but we'll wait and see!

