

A BRIDGE OF HANDS: The Case for Pre-School Sign Language

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Our best Christmas present, Wren Liliana Xue Ge Fontaine, came home to us on Christmas Eve. She is three years old, animated, tall for her age, and very cheerful. She also seems to have a very large vocabulary. I say “seems” because I don’t know for sure. As she chats happily with us, we understand only one or two of her words. She talks to us in Sichuan Mandarin.

While her new family has learned a few of her words, and she a few of ours, if we are to care for her we have to find a way to bridge the language gap between us immediately. If, without a common tongue, we are to find out what she needs, what she wants to eat, where she wants to go, we will have to use every communication tool in our toolbox. So, like tourists at a bazaar, we instinctively resorted to sign language.

From time immemorial, humans have used body language to communicate, inventing gestures and hand signs to share ideas, both simple and complex. Across the North American continent, Indian tribes crossed their language gap with a universal language of hand gestures that is still taught in modern-day powwows.¹

But when I suddenly realized I needed to tell Wren that the glass top on the new stove was hot, I didn’t have time to learn, much less teach her, a complex sign-language system. I had to invent something right then! I mimed touching the stove, getting burned, and jerking my hand back, blowing on my fingers. Coupled with the word “hot” and a pained expression on my face, I succeeded in grabbing, first her attention, then her understanding. She laughed at my efforts and repeated a word to me. She got the picture. Either the stove was hot, or her new daddy was a moron. Or maybe both. But she stayed away from the stove. She and I succeeded in communicating an important message, and in so doing, opened a world of conversation through gesture: sign language.

Now when I want to tell her to be careful with the pizza I use an abbreviation of my elaborate pantomime, jerking my hand back and blowing on my fingers. “Hot,” I say. “Hodja,” she answers back and blows on her food. We have established a “home sign” between us. Not only that, but we have reached an agreement about our levels of communication – we will speak, and listen, in gestures, while we learn each other’s tongues.

Signing Stimulates Language Skills

Not only is sign language a quick bridge over language chasms, several studies show it accelerates the learning of those languages! In study after study, sign language is shown to stimulate expanded vocabularies and the learning of second languages. Two such studies showed that coupling sign language with vocabulary lessons significantly improved learning among pre-schoolers.²

Sign language has a significant benefit for families adopting a child from a non-English-speaking community. Not only does learning sign language accelerate the learning of native vocabulary, it also helps pre-schoolers learn a second language more quickly. A study at Nova Southeastern University showed that teaching 5-year-olds Spanish as a second language was improved when

combined with teaching them the American Sign Language equivalents.³ So, by stimulating Wren to sign as we teach her our language, we are actually helping her to learn English faster!

But I Don't Know Sign Language

But I don't know any signs. Aside from "yes," "no," "I love you" and "peanut butter," I know no American Sign Language at all. Still, I don't really need any training to get started. In a way, sign language is universal. The product of this creative dialogue among us – the private signs that evolve – are called home signs, or native signs. A study of these native signs across cultures suggests some good news about the universality of sign language. A study of deaf children in both China and the U.S. who had not been exposed to a usable conventional sign language found that the deaf American and Chinese children used gestures to express motion in exactly the same ways. This suggests that abstract ideas such as motion events can be communicated to and between the young of various cultures via signs, naturally and successfully.⁴

Babies are Smarter than they Talk

The benefits of sign language as a communication bridge are not limited to pre-schoolers, like Wren, who are already talking. Child development research is uncovering huge benefits for pre-verbal children whose families encourage them to sign. In most cases, from 9 to 30 months a child's desire to communicate exceeds his or her ability to speak. If parents collaborate with their children in developing baby signs, (called symbolic gesturing in academia), they are also speeding up the process of learning to talk, stimulating intellectual development, enhancing self-esteem and strengthening the bond between parent and infant.⁵ While the process of using signs to communicate should be creative and collaborative, simple and useful examples are offered in books such as Baby Sign Language Basics, which comes with explanations and flash cards.⁶

Signs of Advantage

All the recent research on the advantages of sign language for early language development, and all the information and products available, have led me to believe that the so-called language gap between Wren and the rest of her "forever family" is an opportunity for the family to begin a sign language project. It is bound to speed up her English language acquisition, reinforce the bond between us, and give us hours of pleasure creating our own private communication. Signing will become an integral part of our family culture. Our bridge of hands will connect us from now on, even after our verbal bridge is built.

¹<<http://www.inquiry.net/outdoor/native/sign>>

² Daniels, Marilyn. "Seeing Language: The Effect of Sign Language on Vocabulary Development in Young Hearing Children." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (81st, San Antonio, TX, November 18-21, 1995).

³ Blake, Susana S. "Development of a Foreign Language Program for Pre-School Children." Master's Practicum: Nova University, Florida.

⁴ Goldin-Meadow, Susan; Zheng, Mingyu. "Thought Before Language: How Deaf and Hearing Children Express Motion Events Across Cultures." COGNITION v 85, n2 p145-75 Sept. 2002.

⁵ Acredolo, Linda, and Goodwyn, Susan. Baby Signs: How to Talk with Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk. Contemporary: Chicago [1996]. 5-7.

⁶ Briant, Monta Z. Baby Sign Language Basics: early Communication for Hearing Babies and Toddlers. Carlsbad, CA: Hay. [2004].