

# Communicating before words

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Some parents have shared with me that they are hesitant to teach their baby sign language because they want their baby to talk. To them, the idea that we are teaching baby to communicate without words was taking a step back.

What if we stop saying “baby sign language” and just call it gesturing?



Sometimes explaining that teaching basic sign language to children is really just elaborate gesturing gets people on board and helps make it seem less complicated.

So how is baby sign language like gesturing? When I wave, that means *hi* or *bye*. We usually say “hi” or “bye” at the same time that we move our hand. So, is waving a gesture or is it sign language? Has learning to wave ever stopped a baby from talking? Of course not. In fact, we all encourage waving.

It's normal and natural to talk with our hands and to gesture. For the vast majority of babies, learning a few extra signs is just like teaching a few extra gestures. It's normal and natural.

There is no “right” time to introduce signs. Some people start when baby is a newborn. Others wait until she starts doing other gestures such as waving, clapping, or pointing. You can start showing your child signs any time your child is not yet fully communicating with words. Even when some toddlers start using words they can be difficult to understand. Gestures, or signing, can help differentiate whether “muh” was *more*, *milk*, or even the woman across the street who looks like a *mama*.

Choose 2-3 words that may be helpful in reducing frustration such as “more” and “all done” and 2-3 favorite foods/animals/toys/activities. No need to learn all the signs and don't feel pressured to become fluent in American Sign Language. Just use enough to get communication going. Some children might really take to signing and use several dozen signs. Others may just master a few signs to reduce some frustration.

You can look up signs online just by searching the word for video clips. You'll also find flashcards and books online and in many libraries and bookstores. There are wonderful DVDs as well which are fun for both you and baby to watch and learn together.

We would never discourage a baby from waving, so why would we discourage learning signs? Just wave back and say “hi”. Now you are communicating!

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\*For the FULL article and additional sign language resources, go to [www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com](http://www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com).

