

Chapter 1

Getting Onboard with Baby Signing

In This Chapter

- ▶ Answering frequently asked questions about baby signing
 - ▶ Trying your first sign — so you can rest assured that you *can* do this
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In the course of a typical week, I get tons of questions about signing with babies. The questions come from inquiring minds in settings such as play groups, meetings, grocery stores, phone calls from friends, and, of course the classes I teach on the subject. Even people who don't have children in the baby or toddler stage are typically fascinated with the subject. Imagine . . . a window into a baby or young child's mind before he can speak. What a gift to both parents and children!

In this chapter, I go over some of the most common questions I encounter on signing with babies. Use this chapter as an opportunity to get comfortable with the concept of baby sign language — to get onboard, so to speak — and then get ready to open the gift of signing with your own little sweetie pie.

What Exactly Is Sign Language for Babies?

I always enjoy hearing this question because it gives me a chance to rekindle the initial excitement I felt after asking the same question way back when. This question means someone is curious, and because she's asking me about signing with babies, it's my job to excite her about the subject just as someone once excited me — and subsequently changed my world.

Many people assume that babies don't speak because they don't understand. But the truth is, babies understand a great deal. Think about it: Only one thing satisfies a hungry baby, and that's a full tummy. And a hungry baby will scream and scream until you give him the means to fill his tummy. He can't say, "Hey, you! Feed me!" But that's exactly what he's thinking when he screams until you feed him.

The reason babies don't speak isn't for lack of understanding. It's for lack of the ability to control the movements of the mouth and tongue that are necessary to produce intelligible, audible speech. Those movements are undeveloped until babies are older. However, at a much earlier age, babies *can* control the movements necessary to produce signs. And as a result of this ability, a world of two-way communication can be opened for babies and their caregivers.

Which leads, of course, to the answer to the question "What exactly is sign language for babies?" Sign language for babies is a method of using either invented hand gestures or American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with very young children months and even years before they can communicate verbally. (Note that American Sign Language is the official name of the official sign language for the deaf. Later in this chapter is a section called "Should I Use ASL or Make Up My Own Signs?" Take a gander at that section to get my take on that question.)

Why Should I Sign with My Baby?

Signing with babies provides many benefits. Consider these, for example:

- ✔ **Signing gives babies a voice by giving them a way to communicate their wants, needs, and observations.** Instead of simply trying to guess what a crying baby needs, for example, a parent or caregiver can understand the need because the baby signs MILK or BALL or FINISHED. Of course, this doesn't mean the crying stops altogether, but frustration levels are drastically reduced because — through the signs that the baby can make — he can communicate some of his specific wants, needs, and observations. (By the way, I cover the signs for MILK and FINISHED in Chapter 5, and I show you the sign for BALL in Chapter 10.)
- ✔ **According to research done by Baby Signs (www.babysigns.com), by the time children who signed as babies and toddlers are in second grade, their IQ scores are an average of 12 points higher than the IQ scores of their non-signing peers.** So, beyond the here-and-now benefits of giving babies a voice

and reducing frustration levels, signing has long-term benefits as well. (See Chapter 13 for details about signing children and IQ scores, grades, and ADD/ADHD.)

✓ **Speech stimulates a particular part of a person's brain.**

Children who have chatty, interactive parents typically have more stimulation in the speech center of their brains. That's pretty cool in and of itself, but now consider this: Children who are exposed to a secondary language have stimulation in an additional part of their brains as they're exposed to and learn the language. And here's the biggie for purposes of this book: According to research done by Dr. Marilyn Daniels, children who sign as part of their language development have stimulation in a third, *kinesthetic* (movement-based sensory experience) portion of their brains.

✓ **Signing a word makes that word more concrete because the child is not only hearing the word but also seeing the sign for the word, seeing the object of the sign, and feeling the movement of the sign.** Repeatedly experiencing the sign will eventually lead to a child's responding to the sign through obvious understanding or using the sign or word itself.

Speech delays and signing: They're not related

My second daughter, Aidan Elizabeth, was diagnosed with a speech delay at 22 months. Her doctor reluctantly wrote the referral for speech testing, telling me he was humoring me by doing so. The reason for his reluctance came from his belief that speech-delayed children showed a symptom of frustration because they couldn't communicate, and he knew from discussions with me that Aidan Elizabeth wasn't frustrated because she *could* communicate with her family — through signs. At the time, in fact, she knew around 125 signs. Aidan Elizabeth wasn't frustrated — because she had a means to communicate.

Now, her older sister, Darby, who was almost 3 years old at the time, knew around 175 signs and conversed with the maturity of a much older child. I mention this because it turns out that one of the potential reasons for Aidan Elizabeth's speech delay was having a talkative older sister. The theory was that Aidan Elizabeth didn't need to talk because Darby talked for her.

Aidan Elizabeth qualified for speech therapy and has made significant strides in her speech development, but here's the take-home point for you: She would've had the speech delay whether we signed with her or not. Signing didn't cause the speech delay. In contrast, I hate to think about how frustrating her life would've been *without* signs.



Even after I explain the benefits of signing with babies, some folks worry that signing might delay their babies' speech. Rest assured, research has repeatedly proven that signing children actually begin to speak earlier and speak more often than their non-signing counterparts. According to Dr. Michelle Anthony and Dr. Reyna Lindert's research into signing babies, by 18 months of age, an average Signing Smart child will have 94 signs and 105 spoken words. By stark contrast, a typical non-signing 18-month-old has 10 to 50 spoken words. (Signing Smart [www.signingsmart.com] is a signing program for hearing babies and toddlers that promotes ASL signs.)

Should I Use ASL or Make Up My Own Signs?

Know up front that either made-up signs or American Sign Language (ASL) will achieve the goal of communicating more easily with your baby until he can talk. In this book, though, I solely use ASL, so you know where I stand.

Think of it this way. Your child says “wah-wah” and you know and understand that he wants water. All of the experts tell you to signify your understanding but to continue to model the correct pronunciation. My reason for preferring ASL signs over invented gestures is the same. Besides, if I'm going to go to the trouble of figuring out and passing on an additional language to my child, I think I'll invest in a real language — ASL. I mean, sure, Pig Latin is fun and it communicates — but Latin it ain't.



Use ASL and open all kinds of doors

When my oldest daughter, Darby, was 11 months old (and I was seven months pregnant with her sister), we went out to eat at a local restaurant. In the process of the meal, Darby signed MORE. Right away we heard an excited exclamation from a hearing-impaired young man at the next table: “She signed MORE! She signed MORE!”

He immediately came over and began signing and speaking to us. We clarified that no one in our family was hearing impaired and we weren't fluent in conversational ASL, and then we shared with the young man our reasons for signing with our baby. He was not only fascinated with the concept but also grateful to us for showing our child how to communicate in his language.

By the way, you can find the sign for MORE, as well as other mealtime signs, in Chapter 5.

When Should I Start and When Will My Baby Start Signing Back?

In very general terms, it's never too early to start signing with your baby. Consider this: Do you wait until a baby can speak before you speak to him? Of course not. You introduce words from the very beginning — and you can do the same with signs.

That said, however, you have to be mindful of how many signs you introduce to your baby early on (see Chapter 2), and you *can't* expect a newborn to sign back. The younger you start signing to your baby, the longer it'll take for her to sign back. On the flipside, if you start signing when the baby is older, she'll probably respond more quickly.

Like many milestones in babies' lives, there's simply no hard-and-fast rule for knowing when your baby will start signing back. Each child is different and responds to signing in different ways. And each family is different and uses signing differently.

Turn to Chapter 2 for the nitty-gritty details on the right time to introduce signs to your baby, where and how to begin, when your baby might start signing back, and who else to bring onboard to sign with your baby.



Many families keep from signing with their babies because they think they're too late. I can't tell you how often I've heard, "Maybe we'll sign with the *next* baby." Maybe so. The truth is, it's never too late to start signing with your children. They'll benefit from the experience regardless of their age.

When Should I Stop?

The decision to stop signing is very much an individual decision. Know that continuing the journey past babyhood does provide long-term benefits (see Chapter 13). I still sign with Darby, my oldest, and she's 4 years old. She still signs back to me. In fact, she still asks me to show her *new* signs. She loves signing and finds it fun and useful. For example, there are times when Darby gets a little wound up and can't seem to find the right words to communicate. During those times, signing naturally takes over as she communicates through ASL instead of speech.

My whole family has terrific fun going about our lives and naturally adding signing into our routines. Signing keeps the kids distracted

during a long wait at the doctor's office, for example, as we play "I Spy . . ." using color signs (see Appendix C). On rainy days when we're stuck inside, we sometimes learn new songs or read new stories, and we pick out a character or two to focus on and sign all the way through. (Check out Chapter 16 for some great signing songs and look in Chapter 7 for the sign for BOOK.) And I can even tell my kids to "STOP!" across a crowded room or at the local park by signing instead of screaming. (STOP and other safe-and-sound signs are located in Chapter 6. Signs related to the great outdoors, including the family park, are located in Chapter 10.)

In other words, signing shouldn't be a chore. It should be fun and not forced. That's the way it is in my family, and we have no plans to quit anytime soon.

What Should I Sign with My Baby?

Which words to sign is one of the most difficult decisions to make when you're just starting out signing with your baby. Because ASL is an actual language, literally thousands of signs exist. Just buy an ASL dictionary and you'll see what I mean. Choosing your repertoire can be overwhelming, but a few simple guidelines can help you decide which signs to use for your baby.

To begin, look around you. What is common to your world now that baby is here? Start by signing a couple of the things that are part of baby's everyday life. Things like MILK (including formula) and BATH are pretty consistent in baby's day-to-day experience, so those signs would probably work nicely. You probably also find yourself frequently asking baby if he wants to EAT or DRINK or is TIRED and ready for BED — all worthy signs, too.

There are likely also a few things that really get your baby excited, like maybe the family DOG or the FISH in the aquarium at the doctor's office. Or maybe your baby is inseparable from her teddy BEAR or BLANKET. Identify objects that your baby is really interested in (with my youngest, Cole, the fascinating object was a HAT for a while), and you'll start to build a useful and fun list of signs.

As you're getting started, use this book as your guide for some handy words to sign. Chapter 4, for example, focuses on some basic signs that may be perfect for your baby. Or look through Chapters 5 through 10, which provide signs in themed groups — signs specifically for meals, safety, bath, bed, clothing, animals, and the great outdoors. Or if you're a just-gimme-the-top-ten kind

of person, turn to Chapter 15 for ten signs every baby or toddler should know. And when you're ready, Chapter 11 covers how to sign some simple word "sentences."

I'm Just Regular Folk — Can I Really Do This?

You may be overwhelmed by the thought of figuring out ASL, remembering all those signs, and becoming a signing coach to your baby. You're not alone. Many who start down the path of signing with their babies turn back because of worries over those very things.

In fact, my own husband was reluctant when we began signing with our first baby. He had studied Spanish in high school and college, and Greek in college and graduate school. The experience was enough to convince him that foreign languages are not his strong suit. The thought of tackling another language, especially one as unique as ASL, was a little scary for him.



But the point is not to learn an entire new language. You don't have to know all of ASL to sign with your baby. You only have to figure out and become proficient with the individual signs that are of value to you and your baby. And you only have to do so at a pace that keeps you one step ahead of your baby's learning curve. Even my reluctant husband manages to do this and do it well. Seriously, if you take the process a handful of signs at a time, you'll be amazed at how much you can remember. And you'll be blown away at how much, over time, your baby can remember, too.

As for the coaching part, some people seem to be born to teach. There are at least eight school teachers in my immediate family, and although I denied it for many years, I'm one of them. Maybe you're not born to teach, and that's okay. You can still coach your baby to communicate with sign language. In this book, I provide you with tools to help make the task easier. Chapter 3, for example, is kind of like a boot camp for getting in the right mindset and "handset" (so to speak) as you prepare to sign with your baby. It covers some basic hand shapes as well as some general do's and don'ts — tips and hints to help you along the way. In addition, because a few signs encompass individual letters of the ASL alphabet, I've included illustrations of the entire ASL alphabet in Appendix A. Plus, every sign covered in this book is accompanied by step-by-step directions and an illustration for making the sign. If you hit a stumbling block, check out Chapter 12 for some guidance. And if you're so inclined, check out Chapter 17 for info about some outside

resources (Web sites, videos, and signing schools and courses) for additional help.

But right here and now, I want you to check out how easy signing can be. I want to show you how to make the sign for a very versatile word — WHAT. You can simultaneously say and sign this word in all sorts of conversations and situations. While you and baby are looking at a storybook together, for example, you can point to an object on a page and excitedly say and sign, “WHAT is that?!” Or if baby is crying, you can wipe away the tears while gently saying and signing, “WHAT is wrong?” Here you go:

- 1. Place your elbows to your sides, hands extended, palms up.**
- 2. Shake your hands a bit in the natural gesture for “What?” (see Figure 1-1).**



Figure 1-1: Say WHAT?
