

WHY USE SIGN LANGUAGE?

Sign Language Is a Bridge to Verbal Communication

Sign language is used as a communication bridge until a child can communicate using words. It is best to say the word you are signing. The child then receives information through his visual system and his auditory system. This will help the child make the connection between the sign and the word he is hearing. The child will begin to understand how to use words to communicate. That is why we call this approach "Total Communication". It combines signs, gestures and verbal communication. Sometimes there is concern that a child may not learn to talk if he learns to sign. But the opposite is true. Studies have shown that sign language actually encourages the use of words. The child learns words through sight, sound and movement. He is surrounded by a language rich environment. This helps the child to attend to communication at a very early age. And remember, talking is more efficient than signing so children will use words as soon as possible. In fact, you may find yourself requesting signs to clarify the verbal message your child sends.

Sign Language Is Easier Than Producing Words

Some of the body's finest motor movements are required during speaking. The act of speaking even a single word involves many rapid muscle and fine motor movements that, for the most part, are not visible to your child. The hands and fingers, however, are visible and make fewer demands on muscles and fine motor movements. Therefore, your child is able to sign the word before the word can be spoken.

Sign Language Reduces Frustration

Children with Down syndrome frequently understand more than they can communicate verbally. They have preferences and know what they want long before they have words to communicate their thoughts and desires. If a child does not have a communication system, he can easily become frustrated. The child may resort to screaming or tantrums in order to express his needs. Or he may stop trying to communicate. Sign language gives the child the power to communicate using signs and words rather than using tantrums and undesirable behaviors. It allows the child the opportunity to control his surroundings in an appropriate manner. This helps to reduce frustration and tantrums.

Sign Language Often Represents the Word Meaning

Because signs often look like the word they represent (they are iconic), they can help children understand and process language. Not only does the child obtain information from his auditory system, but from his visual system as well. Using signs while giving verbal directions will give the child a visual representation of the words you are speaking. This will help the child to process the information more quickly and with greater accuracy.

Sign Language Stimulates the Whole Brain

Studies have found that, while hearing individuals are using sign language, both the right and left hemispheres of the brain are actively engaged. The language component of sign language stimulates the left hemisphere of the brain while the visual and spatial qualities engage the right hemisphere of the brain.

Sign Language Helps to Clarify the Spoken Message

Once a child begins to use words he will frequently decrease or stop using sign language. Consider continuing to encourage sign language to help clarify a message, especially when articulation skills are not refined. You can request that the child sign the word they are saying if it is difficult to understand.