



### **Signing with Baby Offers New Way to Communicate**

Tori Hayes and her 15-month-old daughter, Ella, communicate with each other using dozens of words. While this might sound like an advanced vocabulary for a toddler, Ella is actually using sign language to express many words she cannot say or has trouble enunciating. Hayes and her daughter are part of a growing movement of parents and professionals teaching hearing babies simple gestures, or signs, to communicate before they can talk.

Child development experts say babies typically begin to talk between 12 and 15 months. However, some believe babies can grasp sign language and communicate with it before they learn how to speak.

“I began signing with Ella when she was two months old,” said Hayes, a speech pathologist and deaf educator. “I believe she began understanding many of the signs by the time she was six months old.”

Hayes said with signing, babies are able to understand words before they are able to verbalize them. Somewhere around 16 to 18 months, babies might say 50 words but understand over 100, so these babies are already ahead of others who do not know how to sign.

In answer to parents' concerns that signing is a skill for those with hearing disabilities, Hayes has no reservations about teaching sign language to her own daughter or other hearing babies. She feels it stimulated her daughter's ability to communicate her needs and observations before she was physically able to do so.

"Often, babies who can't express themselves end up getting frustrated," she said. "In signing, you don't have that. Babies are just like us; they want to communicate their needs and signing allows them to easily do so."

Hayes believes it can also help deepen the bonds between parent and baby. Besides easing frustration, baby sign language is fun and easy to learn, she said.

While baby sign classes have proliferated around the world, some parents wonder whether sign language delays speech. A study by the National Institutes of Health puts that worry to rest. It found signing is a motivating factor that actually facilitates learning to talk. When babies have sign language as a tool, "they look for better ways to communicate and spoken words are the next step," the study said.

Hayes has found these findings to be true, both through her work as a speech pathologist and sign instructor.

"When a child starts learning to talk, their cognitive function is greater and their vocabulary level is higher when they have used sign language," she said.

"They already have the language, so all they have to do is articulate what they have been signing, in many cases for several months."

The NIH study also showed other advantages, including an increase in intelligence. The study found second graders who had signed as babies had higher I.Q.s than their peers did by 12 points or more. Other studies found signing babies had larger vocabularies, understood more words, scored higher on intelligence tests and enjoyed more sophisticated play than non-signing peers.

Hayes says other important benefits of baby signing are social and emotional. "Signing makes daily life easier for the baby and for the family," she said. "It creates a very special bond between parent and child and that is so important for emotional development," she says.

Hayes shares her knowledge with parents at St. Dominic Hospital's "Sign with Baby" class. The four-week sessions are geared to expectant parents as well as those with

newborns and older children. For more information, contact St. Dominic's Maternal & Newborn Care at 601-200-6934 or register at [www.signingwithtots.com](http://www.signingwithtots.com).