

Module 4: Launching Language and Communication Through Sign

Section: Communicating with a Baby

Communicating with a Baby Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing Using Signs



Activity 4.2: Encouraging Families to Communicate with Their Babies in an Accessible Way

- A. Share with families the following key concepts related to language access for babies who are deaf or hard of hearing:
- a definition of what “access” means (e.g., the ability to connect with language to interact and learn);
 - the importance of language access occurring early in a child's life and the critical nature of quality parent-child communication to support language development;
 - the urgency of providing early and accessible language to children who are deaf or hard of hearing via multiple pathways (e.g., visually and/or auditorily) to avoid linguistic gaps that are difficult to overcome;
 - the benefits of using visual language to promote language acquisition when a child cannot fully access language through his or her auditory pathways;
 - the importance of identifying and putting in place strategies for deaf and hard of hearing children to have the necessary access to parent-child interactions for timely language acquisition; and
 - the importance of including language and communication assessment in both visual and auditory modalities to guide individualized planning for how to address development and use of each modality in the language acquisition process.

For associated evidence to support these concepts:

- [Early Intervention Network: Supporting Linguistic Competence for Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)
- [Maximizing Language Acquisition: ASL and Spoken English](#) (webcast)

B. Discuss the following considerations and strategies related to promoting visual access to communication for babies who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- Babies who are deaf or hard of hearing start learning about their world by observing and taking in information visually. It is important for families to understand that the more they visually communicate with their baby and use visual communication with other family members, the greater the opportunities will be for their baby to access and learn language.
- Babies who are deaf or hard of hearing have the capacity to access and understand language through their eyes. Therefore, language development may be best accomplished visually to avoid language delay and provide a foundation for other areas of development (e.g., cognitive, social-emotional).
- It is unknown to what level a child will be able to access and understand language through his or her listening. Listening technologies can be explored from the start to see what benefit they may provide for a child, but visual communication should not be delayed.
- It is beneficial to include explicit strategies to guide a child who is deaf or hard of hearing in connecting visually with his or her environment (e.g., making sure you are in the baby's sight when communicating, developing a visual cue to let the baby know if you are leaving the room).
- Gain eye contact and meet the child at eye level when communicating. It is critical that deaf and hard of hearing babies see faces and hands to understand the communication intent of the moment.
- Include use of signing, gesturing, and other visual communication when the child is present (even when the communication is not directed specifically to the child at that moment) so he or she can have incidental access to language and learning.

- Recognize the importance of touch in communication (e.g., gently tapping to get attention).
 - Visual language through signing and gestures is beneficial to (and popular with) children who are hearing. Hearing babies who use sign language learn to speak without delay. There does not appear to be any evidence-based reason to withhold visual language to children who are deaf or hard of hearing. (For more information about signing with hearing babies: [Signing with Your Baby or Toddler](#).)
 - There is no evidence to indicate that use of visual language negatively impacts spoken language development. (For evidence to dispel myths related to ASL impeding spoken language: [President Cordano Dispels Myths of Language Acquisition: Reference List](#).)
 - It is important to include extended family members, siblings, and friends in learning how to visually communicate with the baby.
- C. Consider the following for families of a deaf or hard of hearing child with identified disabilities:
- Is the child’s visual pathway functioning? If not, explore resources to promote access to language and communication for children who are deaf-blind. (For more information: [Deaf Blind Education](#) or [National Center on Deaf-Blindness](#).)
 - Does the child have a physical disability that could impede his or her vocal and/or sign communication? Communicate with other service providers working with the child who are involved with the child’s physical development (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist) to explore how these physical challenges may impact language and communication and to identify strategies to support the child.
- D. Considerations for families speaking a language other than English:
- Connect signs to the family’s native language (e.g., connecting the spoken Spanish word GATO to the ASL sign for CAT).
 - Capitalize on the advantage of some native languages that already include extensive use of gesture and facial expressions.

Other Resources:

- [Dispelling Myths of Language Acquisition](#) (video)
 - [#whylsign](#) (personal stories)
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