

## Module 4: Launching Language and Communication Through Sign

### Section: Learning to Sign



### Activity 4.6: Teaching ASL to Families: Considerations and Resources

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#### A. Getting started

- Talk with the family about their learning style. Do they prefer formal classes in person, self-paced learning through books and videos, learning by interacting with others, or something else? Use this discussion to guide families to the types of resources they will find most beneficial. (See possible resources and supports to learning American Sign Language [ASL] below.)
- Acknowledge that it may feel overwhelming to learn a new language. Assure families that if they start slowly, learning a few signs a week, they will be surprised at how quickly their sign vocabulary and competency will grow.
- Consider the family's ability to pay for classes, access to transportation, native language, work and personal schedules, and technology access. Help families find the best match for their needs.
- Discuss with families how comfortable they feel accessing various resources. For example, identify what would help them feel comfortable going to deaf events. You may suggest going with the family or encouraging two families who know each other to go together.
- It helps for you to have personal experience with each of the community resources you recommend, so take the time to visit them before encouraging the family to attend. You'll be able to tell which are more child and family friendly, whether sign classes use ASL or some other type of signing, the ease of accessing different resources, and which are better for beginners.

- Follow up and monitor the family's progress in identifying supports to learn ASL. Get feedback from them on what they thought about the supports they tried. Use this feedback to recommend continued supports as needed and to guide your work with other families in the future.
- Remind families that:
  - The more they use ASL, the more opportunities their child will have to access and learn language.
  - It is important to include extended family members, siblings, and friends in learning ASL.
  - Family members should be encouraged to sign as much as possible to provide their child with opportunities for incidental learning.

#### B. Identifying Community Resources

- Become familiar with local resources available to provide family sign language classes in ASL. Some possible places to find ASL classes include:
  - schools for the deaf
  - universities
  - community colleges
  - continuing education programs
  - deaf organizations
  - community ASL classes
  - ASL storytelling at libraries
- Connect families with Deaf Mentor Programs in your area. These programs provide an opportunity for families to interact and learn with deaf adults who are native ASL users and have training and experience in guiding families in learning ASL. (For more information about these programs: [National Center on Hearing Assessment and Management: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Adult Involvement Learning Community](#).) Build inclusion in a Deaf Mentor Program into a child's Individualized Family Service Plan.
- Connect families to supports and services that may be available in the local Deaf community. For example, there may be events such as family socials where hearing families new to the Deaf community can interact with deaf adults and learn tips in how to communicate with their deaf child.

- Check into the availability of baby sign classes (e.g., city parks and recreation departments, new parent groups, libraries, children’s museums). While these classes are typically not seeking to teach ASL as a full language to families of children who are deaf or hard of hearing, they can provide a jumpstart for families in learning ASL when other resources are limited.

#### C. Identifying Media and Online Resources

- Identify self-paced, online opportunities for families to learn ASL when community opportunities are not available or to support face-to-face opportunities to interact with ASL. Sit side by side with the family as they become comfortable with using the resource. Follow up with the family regularly to review what they are learning and provide feedback to keep their learning functional and related to daily routines. Possible online learning opportunities include:
  - websites that feature ASL dictionaries (e.g., [ASL Pro](#), [Signing Savvy](#), [Handspeak](#), [Lifeprint](#), [ASL Dictionary App](#))
  - websites that offer ASL classes (e.g., [Lifeprint](#), [Start-American-Sign-Language](#))
  - websites with ASL videos (e.g., [ASL Nook](#), [California School for the Deaf Toddler YouTube page](#))
  - videos that teach signs (e.g., [Signing Time](#), [Shared Reading Project Book Bags](#))
  - other distance learning opportunities (e.g., Skype or iChat with deaf mentors)
- Use sign language board books to provide portable easy-to-share materials that allow family members and other members of a child’s community to incorporate signs they have learned.

#### D. Techniques to Include

- Use the [VL2: Visual Communication and Sign Language Checklist \(VCSL\)](#) to discuss the emerging visual language milestones a caregiver can expect to observe in a baby or toddler who is exposed to ASL.
- When picking new signs to teach families, choose words that a family uses frequently during the day. If a sign is functional, it will be used more often. Introduce signs related to favorite people (e.g., mom, dad, pets), daily routines (e.g., eat, sleep, change diaper, bath), favorite foods, toys, or signs that may decrease frustration (e.g., all done, help, more). By choosing signs that represent the words a family uses daily, they’ll quickly have a functional vocabulary to model for their baby.

- After families become comfortable with their basic signing skills, have them build their skills to a higher level by bringing together two or three signs to form phrases (e.g., “Time for bed,” “Get your shoes,” “Do you want milk?”).
- Educate families about the importance of presenting signs in the baby’s visual field. This includes being thoughtful about positioning a child when reading a book or about obtaining eye contact before communicating.
- Have silent dinners or other identified family activities where the family focuses on using ASL.
- Guide babies in signing by using a “hand-over-hand” strategy to form/shape a sign.
- Provide suggestions for how families can apply learning ASL to real-life experiences (e.g., go to a food store and sign about the food and other things in the store).
- Encourage families to practice signing with other family members and friends who are also learning to sign. Not only can they support each other and practice, but while they are practicing the child will have the opportunity to observe sign language being used in natural communication.
- Use the ASL version of Module 4 of *Setting Language in Motion* to expose the family to what fluency in ASL looks like.

**Additional Resources:**

- Resource List on [Visual Language](#) in the Early Intervention Network: Supporting Linguistic Competence for Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
- [A Plan for Mentorship of Minnesota Families with Deaf and Hard Of Hearing Children](#)
- [Deaf Mentor Curriculum](#)
- [The Deaf Mentor Program: A New Generation](#) (EHDI Presentation, 2014)
- [Deaf Professionals & Community Involvement with Early Education](#)
- [VL2 Storybooks](#)
- [VL2 Parent Package](#)

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