

American Sign Language: A New Strategy to Integrate into Your Current Teaching Practices

by Jennings Prevatte

*During an outing with my 18-month-old son to a local park, he appeared frustrated when he couldn't climb a certain play structure. I went over to offer assistance. I asked him, "Do you need help?" While I asked him this question I also signed the word **help** in sign language. He immediately responded and signed **help** back. For the rest of the day he used his new sign — **help** — whenever he needed assistance climbing a play structure. It was incredible to see him respond so quickly and to use his new sign to solve his challenges.*

Getting started

An educator's first step to integrating ASL into their teaching practices is to introduce three to five words in ASL into their daily routines and activities. Children as early as four to six months can be introduced to signs. Signs that are easy to execute and are simple and meaningful are good to start with. Some suggestions are:

- milk
- eat
- more
- all done or finished
- stop

Other suggested ways to add ASL into your curriculum include:

- Labeling objects and activities in the classroom.
- Using ASL finger spelling to teach the alphabet and children's names.

Teaching ASL signs to support vocabulary during story time and to incorporate into themes and play time. For instance, if a child is playing in the housekeeping

American Sign Language in ECE

For over 30 years research has continued to prove that American Sign Language (ASL) is a valuable addition to an early education curriculum:

- It supports receptive and expressive language development in typical hearing children as well as children with disabilities.
- ASL incorporates kinesthetic, visual, and auditory learning and makes language more tangible.
- ASL supports developmental milestones and children's developing self-esteem and problem-solving skills.
- ASL is also a wonderful way to support early literacy and language development in all children.

Children learn through what they see, hear, and do. By incorporating ASL into your curriculum you are capturing the whole child — every child. You do not need to learn the structure of the language to incorporate ASL into your curriculum. What is important is to highlight the vocabulary you want children to know. An educator would emphasize the word that they want the child to remember. For instance, if you are asking an infant if they would like milk, you say, "Do you want MILK?" As you say milk you would also sign MILK. Then offer the milk to the child. This allows the child to start making concrete connections and builds their vocabulary.

— Contributed by Jennings Prevatte,
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Jennings A. Prevatte, M.Ed. received her Masters in Special Education with emphasis on infants and young children from Arizona State University. Jennings is a member of the Sign2Me presenter's network. Jennings is currently Level 1 certified under the Sign2Me presenters network and a certified Career Level trainer with S*CCEEDS of Arizona. Jennings is an early childhood educator and mother. She utilizes sign with her Kindergarten students and children with special needs. Brennen, her four-year-old son, has been signing since he was 9 months old. Jennings has also presented at VSAEYC 2006 Fall Conference, Association of Supportive Child Care (ASCC) "Young Child's Conference" Spring 2007, ASCC Self-Study 2007 Spring Conference, and the Arizona Early Learning Institute Summer 2007. Jennings's passion is to bridge the gap in parent-child communication, promote early childhood literacy and help others provide a healthy and developmentally appropriate environment.



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Benefits of American Sign Language to Children

Incorporating ASL into an early education literacy curriculum as a valuable intervention is a meaningful and enlightening choice. The effect it has on children's learning is powerful and long-term. When early education programs utilize ASL:

- Children learn at an early age that speech has visual representations. Understanding that speech has visual symbols makes the development of reading skills come along easier as children enter school. A child learns the word "milk" could look like a glass of milk or like the ASL sign "milk" which is created by opening and shutting your hand like you are milking a cow.
- Motor coordination and language development can happen simultaneously. This is helpful to both families and caregivers. A signing child is able to continue developing their gross motor skills while continuing to communicate his or her needs. This helps decrease frustration and stress for the child and the family or caregiver.
- Children have an easier time expressing their needs and having them met. ASL is a visual language and is easier for preverbal children to utilize to communicate their needs. Using ASL with children incorporates their natural tendency to gesture and gives that gesturing or pointing a purpose — an effective way to communicate.
- Children's pre-reading skills are supported during story time, free play, and music time through the use of ASL: vocabulary development, print awareness, print motivation, letter knowledge, and narrative skills. Children learn first through what they see and do; ASL supports that learning by being a visual language.
- All learning styles are supported. When you use ASL in your curriculum you are reaching the whole child — every child — by having them hear, see, and move to express the concept or vocabulary you are teaching.
- A bridge of communication is built with preverbal children. When young children's needs are met consistently and with ease the bonding process moves along with simplicity, both with families and caregivers.
- ASL is an effective intervention model for developing pre-literacy skills since it is incorporated into all aspects of language development.
- ASL is not just a language boost for our children; it is also a brain boost. A child that has the opportunity to learn ASL benefits from increased brain development. ASL supports early brain development in the areas of: communication, attention, bonding, and visual learning.
- ASL is easy for educators to integrate into their curriculum as an addition to current teaching practices. It is important to understand that educators are not teaching ASL as a language, but utilizing the gift of ASL to support language development and enrich vocabulary development by adding a visual stimulus to an auditorial input.

— Contributed by Jenning Prevatte, *Sprouting New Beginnings*

area and is dressing a baby, an educator might say, “Oh, the BABY looks so cute dressed in that pink shirt!” While the educator says, “Baby,” she signs BABY simultaneously.

Educators who utilize ASL as a teaching strategy use it primarily as a tool to support language. Incorporating it into current teaching practices as an additional resource has been successful for many educators. It is important to remember that you are not teaching the language of ASL, but utilizing the vocabulary of ASL to highlight targeted words that you would like to emphasize in your curriculum. For instance, if you were studying a farm unit you would want to emphasize the farm animal words in ASL to support children’s learning.

ASL Resources and Research

Memory

Marilyn Daniels, in her book, *Dancing With Words: Signing for Hearing Children’s Literacy*, explains why sign language is an effective intervention in literacy (Daniels, 2001).

First, researchers understand that memory is related to language storage and retrieval, and languages are stored in the left hemisphere of the brain. Hoemann (1978, as cited in Daniels, 2001) found that ASL had a memory store and English had a memory store. This study and others concluded that “all languages, whether spoken or signed, are categorically coded and housed in distinct memory stores even in the earliest stages of their acquisition” (Daniels, 2001). This is an important fact, because “as a result of the way the human brain stores all languages, the young student learning a new language has two places to look for the information.” This dual memory store is beneficial to young children because it creates a “built-in redundancy that establishes two independent language sources for

children to use for search and recall” (Daniels, 2001).

Brain Development

The visual components of sign language create “an increase of brain activity by engaging the visual cortex and presenting an additional language to the young learner” (Daniels, 2001). With increased language activity the brain is stimulated and the formations of synapses — or connections among the brain cells — are created. “Using sign language and English in tandem provides a much richer language base of brain activity and brain growth and development” (Daniels, 2001).

Additional Support for ASL

There are several reasons why sign language is an effective intervention for young children, such as visual, movement, meaning, play, and hand. The visual aspect of sign language has a close link to brain growth and memory. “Research on ASL shows sign is perceived in a visuospatial manner by the right hemisphere of the brain and subsequently processed by the left hemisphere.” (Daniels, 2001). We understand now that children and people have different

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNING PREVATTE



What teachers and families say about American Sign Language

"I love the idea of adding ASL into nursery rhymes and other childhood favorite stories to enhance their early literacy, specifically narrative skills. Great hands-on learning!"

"ASL is incredibly helpful for classroom management. Saying and signing "Stop, listen, and look together" is an easy and very visual transition phrase for my preschoolers."

"I use ASL to help my two-year-olds to understand their feelings and how to use their hands to show caring and gentleness. They love to sing and sign, 'When you're happy and you know it.' This helps them label what they are feeling and supports their development."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNING PREVATTE

"It has been much easier to bond with my second child than it was with my first daughter, who we didn't use ASL with. It's a great addition to my 'parenting toolbox.'"

"My one-year-old son signs three signs: MILK, MORE, and EAT. He doesn't need to scream for what he wants, he simply signs his requests and I provide it for him. This was the best thing I could teach him."

"I work with infants and we encompass MILK, MORE, and EAT into our daily routines with children. When we are about to offer a bottle of milk to a child, we ask them, 'Do you want MILK?' as we sign MILK. We have had children as early as 6 months sign milk back to us. It is the most delightful thing to watch them grow and understand language."

"I choose to use ASL with my son because I wanted a way to communicate with him before he could speak. It was such a simple thing to add to our daily routines that made a huge difference in our lives."

"I use ASL with my daughter when we read together and sign the story. ASL is a skill that grows along with your child. Using ASL with her has helped her build early literacy skills."

— Contributed by Jennings Prevatte, *Sprouting New Beginnings*



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learning styles. ASL is an effective intervention in an early education literacy curriculum because it meets the needs of all children at their level and supports their individual learning styles.

Summary

ASL is beneficial for all learning styles and stimulates and increases brain growth through a fun and entertaining activity for children. We want children to

become invested communication partners and ASL is a fun, interactive, and easy way to accomplish this goal. It builds community and gives children ways to connect with their caregivers.

References

Daniels, M. (2001). *Dancing with words: Signing for hearing children's literacy*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

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For more information

ASLpro.com [Teacher resource] [Online]
www.aslpro.com

Dennis, K., & Azpiri, T. (DATE). Enhancing early literacy with American Sign Language. CITY, STATE: Publisher.

Garcia, J. (2007). Early expressive communication. [Online] www.Sign2Me.com/about.php

The mission of Sprouting New Beginnings is to promote the cognitive, physical, emotional and social development of children while strengthening their bond between families and educators. Our focus is on fun and interactive ways to support the development of healthy minds and healthy children through play, music, and communication to promote school readiness. *We are devoted to planting the Seeds for Early Learning.*