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The First 10 Signs

ONE OF THE FIRST decisions you'll need to make as you begin signing is which signs to try first. In this chapter, you'll find my top 10 signs to start with, which are separated into two categories: *useful signs* and *playful signs*. Useful signs are the signs that parents and caregivers typically think of when signing with babies, like **MILK** (page 25) and **EAT** (page 26). Playful signs are important because they work with baby's interests and motivations. Some popular early playful signs are **DOG** (page 31) and **BALL** (page 33).

Choosing the right signs to start with will have a direct impact on how quickly your baby signs back. Most parents come to baby sign language for the promise of improved communication and reduced frustration, and signing definitely delivers on both. However, when first starting out, you'll need to think a little outside the box if you want to fast-track your success. In this chapter you'll also learn how many signs to start with and when to add more.

But most importantly, in this chapter you'll learn *how* to teach the signs to your baby. You'll find my top tips and strategies for success, including how to incorporate signing into your day and how to capture your baby's attention to make signing fun and engaging for both of you.

USEFUL VERSUS PLAYFUL SIGNS

As parents and caregivers, we tend to think of the very practical words we use every day when thinking about signs to start with. The signs you might already have in mind are things like **MOM** (page 125), **MILK** (page 25), **DIAPER** (page 56), and **BED** (page 29). Because feeding, changing, and getting your baby to nap are the things that consume your days lately, am I right? Totally understandable!

I call these kinds of signs *useful signs*. These are the signs that will make life with your baby a whole lot easier because he will be able to tell you when he's hungry, when he's sleepy, or even when he needs a diaper change. Another great thing about useful signs is that you have the opportunity to use them over and over throughout the day at every feeding, changing, and nap. This gives you lots of chances to practice signing to your baby.

Useful signs you'll learn in this chapter are **MILK** (page 25), **EAT** (page 26), **MORE** (page 27), **ALL DONE** (page 28), and **BED** (page 29). You'll find tips on introducing these signs and more in the following pages. The signs about diaper changing, like **DIAPER** (page 56), **CHANGE** (page 56), **POOP** (page 58), **CLEAN** (page 58), and **DIRTY** (page 59), are a bit more advanced, so these will come later in the book and in your sign language journey. And while useful signs are really practical, you might be surprised to learn that they might not be your baby's first signs.

In fact, **the biggest secret to signing success is working with your baby's interests** to fast-track the process. Playful signs are those that will motivate your baby to start signing back, and they are different for every baby. Think about it this way: If you were getting your basic needs met by communicating one way (crying), what would motivate you to communicate another way? The playful signs motivate your baby to form signs so she can "talk" to you—and once she realizes you understand her, she will learn the useful signs, too. Picking the right playful signs boils down to figuring out what tends to capture your baby's attention, which you might already know. Does she kick her legs every time she sees something? Or does she point, or smile, or make noises? If you're not sure, spend a little time today or tomorrow observing your little one. Here are some questions to help get your wheels turning:

*Is there something your baby seems mesmerized by? The ceiling **FAN** (page 85) or **LIGHT** (page 32)?*

*Look at your home environment. Do you have a large **FISH** (page 108) tank? Or a pet **CAT** (page 105) or **DOG** (page 31)?*

*Does your baby have a favorite toy? Maybe a chewy **GIRAFFE** (page 116) or a favorite lovey **BLANKET** (page 75)?*

While playful signs will be different for every baby, I have some tried-and-true favorites that are consistent winners, so don't worry if

nothing comes to mind right away. I've got you covered. The playful signs you'll learn in this chapter are the ones I've seen reliably work as first signs. They include **DOG** (page 31), **LIGHT** (page 32), **BALL** (page 33), **BOOK** (page 34), and **CAR** (page 35). You'll find instructions on how to do these signs, as well as suggested activities, in the following pages.

HOW TO TEACH SIGNS

Teaching your baby sign language sounds hard, but I promise that it's actually really simple. Baby signing is about building on a baby's natural ability to gesture—to wave, reach, or clap. Have you ever heard anyone talk about how hard it was to teach a baby to wave bye-bye? Of course not! If you wave and say “bye-bye” to a baby enough times, he'll start to mimic you and eventually do it unprompted. Baby sign language works in the exact same way. I've included some tips below to take the intimidation out of the teaching process. Remember, it's supposed to be fun!

choosing signs to start

When first starting out, I recommend starting with **four** signs: two Useful Signs (page 24), and two Playful Signs (page 30). This is a manageable number to learn and use often.

Four well-chosen signs give you good odds that you've picked at least one or two that will

spark your baby's interest and get the learning process started. However, if you'd like to start with one or two more, feel free to do so. Just remember that your baby's early signs might not be easy to understand, so if you start with lots and lots of signs and the little one starts doing what you think is an early attempt at signing, it will make it harder to figure out which sign it is.

when to add more signs

After you've been signing regularly with your baby, you might wonder when it's time to add more signs to the routine. There are two good times to add more signs: The first is when you've been at it for a while and feel ready to branch out a bit. Just remember to add to the signs you started with—don't drop any of the ones you're already using! For example, if you started signing when your baby was 3 months old and you've been signing four signs for a few weeks, you may be ready to add some more. The second time to add more signs is once your baby starts signing back. Then it's go time! Once signing “clicks” for your baby, you want to build on the momentum by expanding your signing vocabulary and introducing more signs.

How many signs you add really depends on your comfort level for learning signs yourself and working them into interactions with your baby. You might want to introduce one new sign each week, or you might find yourself adding a new one each day. There's no “right” way, so do what feels right for you.

5 ways to capture baby's attention

One of the challenges of teaching sign language to babies is that they have to be looking at you in order to see the sign. This can be tricky if they are focused on the item you are trying to sign for them. For instance, what if you want to teach the sign for **CAT** (page 105), but every time the cat enters the room, your baby's eyes are glued to the furry object of his affection?

Not to worry! Here are some pro tips on getting your baby to look at you so you can successfully teach new signs.

Bring the item to you

One way to bring your baby's eyes to you is to gently take the item she's focused on and slowly move it toward you so her gaze follows the object. For example, if the baby is holding a ball and you can't get her to look at you, gently take the ball away from her. Put the ball in your lap, sign **BALL** (page 33), and pay attention to where she is looking. If she is looking at the ball in your lap instead of at your hands, move your hands into her line of sight. Or try holding

the ball in your hands and sign **BALL** with one hand. The objective here is not to frustrate or upset your baby, but rather to show her the sign, so be sure to tread lightly and return the object quickly.

Make some noise

Another great way to get a baby's attention is to make interesting sounds. Your baby loves your voice and will look to you when you do something unusual. You can capture his attention by making funny or silly noises. You can bark like a dog or gently gasp as you reveal something you think he would be interested in discovering. Also, if you have something that makes noise, like a jingly set of keys or a toy that squeaks, you can use the noise of the object to get your little one's attention. When he looks at you to see what's going on, seize the opportunity to show him a sign.

Get touchy-feely

You can also sign right on your baby's body. Certain signs, like **DOG** (gently pat baby's

thigh; page 31) and **BATH** (gently “scrub” your fist on baby’s chest; page 71), are perfect for this technique. This is a great way to introduce signs to a little one in a multi-sensory way.

You can also move your baby’s hands to help her do the sign. For example, bring your baby’s hands together to show her how to sign **MORE** (page 27). A word of caution, however: Some babies really don’t like this (they’ll show they don’t like it by tensing up and pulling back). If your baby isn’t a fan, skip this approach—it’s not worth creating a negative association with signing. Also, if you do use this technique, don’t fuss over helping your baby do the sign “right.” Just move her hands in the general motion of the sign so she gets the idea.

Get up close and personal

It’s important to sign in close proximity (within a few feet) to babies during the first year, as their vision is still developing. One of

the great things about ASL is that you can move your hands to bring the sign right into your baby’s line of sight. Instead of waiting for your baby to look at you, you can simply bring the sign right to him without interrupting his activity. This is a very effective way to introduce a sign. Your baby will simply absorb the signing information along with the other information he is taking in.

Wait for it

Another option for introducing a new sign is simply to wait for your baby to look at you. Babies frequently check in visually with their parents or caregivers to see how they are reacting to any given situation. Babies do this to gauge their own emotional response to their environment. If you get in the habit of signing when your baby looks at you, she will likely check in with you visually even more to see if you are signing. This creates more opportunities to teach new signs!

sign and say the word together

When signing with your little one, always sign and say the word together. Babies learn language by watching and hearing you speak. Saying the word every time you sign it will increase your baby's exposure to spoken language and also provide an opportunity to associate the spoken word with the sign. Throughout this book you'll notice that some words are in **ALL CAPS**. This signifies that the word is meant to be signed while being spoken out loud.

sign in context and repeat key words

As parents and caregivers, we naturally narrate our activities to babies as we move through our routines. You might notice yourself repeating key words as you talk to your baby, for example, "Do you see that *bird*? What a colorful *bird*! Do you see the *bird's* blue feathers? That *bird* is looking for a worm. I bet that *bird* is hungry!" This speech pattern is often referred to as "parentese," which is a melodic and repetitive way of speaking to young children that offers lots of exposure to common words. Adding signs to those key words when speaking is an excellent way for babies to see and learn new signs.

When you are first starting out, you should always sign in context. That means if you are

signing **BALL** (page 33), there should be a ball within sight, or if you are signing **CAT** (page 105), the cat should be nearby or visible in the book you are reading. Signing in context will help your baby make the connection between the sign and its meaning.

sign in baby's line of sight

Obviously, it's important for the little one to be able to see what your hands are doing in order to learn to sign. Often when you're talking to your baby, she'll be looking at your face. Sometimes in order for her to see the sign, you might need to modify the sign to get it into her line of sight. For example, the sign for **MORE** (page 27) is signed in front of your torso. However, with a baby, you might want to move your hands up and closer to your face to make the sign easier to see. In order to pick up a new sign, babies need to see it in action.

keep it fun

The most important rule for signing success is to have fun! Approaching signing with a playful attitude will make it a positive experience for both you and the child. For babies, playing is learning. If signing feels like a chore to you, it probably will to the baby, too. Keep it light-hearted. Use silly voices and animated faces. Lose your inhibitions and sign like nobody is watching. And if one of you is having an off day,