

# Sing & Sign for Young Children

A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals



Anne Meeker Watson, Ph.D., MT-BC



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A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals

by

**Anne Meeker Watson, Ph.D., MT-BC**

Founder of SING.PLAY.LOVE.®

Managing Member of Meeker Creative, LLC

Kansas City, Missouri

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# Contents

About the Online Materials .....	ix
About the Author .....	xi
Foreword <i>Becky Bailey</i> .....	xiii
Acknowledgments .....	xv
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>xix</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Mealtime and Manners.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Mealtime Mess	
Picky Eaters	
May I Have Your Undivided Attention?	
Taste and Talk	
SONGS TO SING AND SIGN.....	4
“Fill the Basket” .....	4
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “Fill the Basket”	
Fun Activities to Share With “Fill the Basket”	
“My Kitchen Door”.....	14
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “My Kitchen Door”	
Fun Activities to Share With “My Kitchen Door”	
More Signs for Mealtime and Manners .....	22
Books to Read and Sign .....	24
Eat	
Foods	
Dance	
Hungry	
Manners	
More	
<b>Chapter 2: Let’s Play!.....</b>	<b>27</b>
May I Have Your Attention, Please?	
<i>Sing &amp; Sign</i> Is a Family Affair	
<i>Sing &amp; Sign</i> for the Senses	
“Take a Walk On the Wild Side”: <i>Sing &amp; Sign</i> in Nature	
SONGS TO SING AND SIGN.....	30
“Mommy Go ’Round the Sun” .....	30
Signs to Sing	



Tips for Introducing “Mommy Go ’Round the Sun”	
Fun Activities to Share With “Mommy Go ’Round the Sun”	
“Roll the Ball” .....	38
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “Roll the Ball”	
Fun Activities to Share With “Roll the Ball”	
More Signs for Playtime .....	42
Books to Read and Sign .....	43
Aunt and Uncle	
Ball	
Brother and Sister	
Chair/Sit	
Daddy and Mommy	
Grandma and Grandpa	
Moon and Sun	
Outside	
Play	
Sorry	
<b>Chapter 3: Fostering Relationships, Relaxation, and Rest .....</b>	<b>45</b>
The Feeling Is Mutual: Mutual Versus Self-Regulation	
Emotional Literacy	
Supporting Parent–Child Attachment	
SONGS TO SING AND SIGN .....	50
“What’ll We Do With the Baby?” .....	50
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “What’ll We Do With the Baby?”	
Fun Activities to Share With “What’ll We Do With the Baby?”	
“Birdie, Birdie” .....	58
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “Birdie, Birdie”	
Fun Activities to Share With “Birdie, Birdie”	
More Signs for Relationships, Relaxation, and Rest .....	62
Books to Read and Sign .....	64
Baby	
Bath or Wash	
Bed, Sleep, or Night-Night	
Bird	
Blanket	
Calm	
Feelings	
Home	
Kiss	
Music, Sing, or Song	
Pajamas	
Rooster	
Splash	

<b>Chapter 4: Utilizing Sign and Song for Routines and Transitions .....</b>	<b>66</b>
Routines	
Transitions	
Piggyback Songs and Strategies for Routines and Transitions	
Singing the Praises of Visual Schedules	
The Best and Briefest Advice I Can Offer	
SONGS TO SING AND SIGN.....	70
“Walking Song” .....	70
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “Walking Song”	
Fun Activities to Share With “Walking Song”	
“We’re Having a Bath” .....	76
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “We’re Having a Bath”	
Fun Activities to Share With “We’re Having a Bath”	
More Signs for Transitions and Routines.....	84
Books to Read and Sign .....	85
Bear	
Brush-Teeth and Comb-Hair	
Bubble	
Car	
Go and Stop	
Jump/Hop	
Loud and Quiet	
Run and Walk	
Shirt, Shoes, and Socks	
Wait	
<b>Chapter 5: Sing, Sign, and Read .....</b>	<b>87</b>
The Perfect Combination: Songs, Signs, Books, and YOU	
Singing Picture Books	
SONGS TO SING AND SIGN.....	90
“Grandpa’s Farm” .....	90
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “Grandpa’s Farm”	
Fun Activities to Share With “Grandpa’s Farm”	
“What Color Am I?” .....	96
Signs to Sing	
Tips for Introducing “What Color Am I?”	
Fun Activities to Share With “What Color Am I?”	
Books to Read and Sign .....	103
Colors	
Farm Animals	
Friend	
Girl and Boy	
Rainbow	
Books to Sing and Sign	

**Chapter 6: Following the Young Child’s Lead**..... 106

- Face Time
- Wait Time
- Playtime
- Self-Confidence and Competence
- Child’s Choice

SONGS TO SING AND SIGN..... 110

- “Saturday Morning” ..... 110
  - Signs to Sing
  - Tips for Introducing “Saturday Morning”
  - Fun Activities to Share With “Saturday Morning”
- “My World” ..... 116
  - Signs to Sing
  - Tips for Introducing “My World”
  - Fun Activities to Share With “My World”
- “I Take the Music With Me” ..... 122
  - Signs to Sing
  - Tips for Introducing “I Take the Music With Me”
  - Fun Activities to Share With “I Take the Music With Me”

More Signs for Supporting Independence ..... 128

Books to Read and Sign ..... 131

- Bicycle
- Books
- Clean and Dirty
- Cold and Hot
- Help
- Hurt, Sick, and Safe
- Toilet/Potty

Pictorial Sign Dictionary ..... 133

Suggested Readings..... 145

References..... 147

Index..... 149

# About the Author



**Anne Meeker Watson, Ph.D., MT-BC**, Founder of SING.PLAY.LOVE.<sup>®</sup>, Managing Member of Meeker Creative, LLC, Kansas City, Missouri

Through her writing, product development, and workshops, Anne Meeker Watson shares information about the benefits of music and play for supporting early learning and kindergarten readiness and gives easy and practical strategies for embedding both into the daily lives of young children. Her program is being used all over the country and across the globe, most recently making its debut in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Anne has taught music to students from preschool through college levels. She received the Excellence in Teaching award given by the Learning Exchange, Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, and the Kansas City Star. She was a commission member of the Vision 2020 *Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education* sponsored by the Music Educators National Conference.

Anne is particularly interested in developing the self-regulation and social-emotional skills of young children. She was invited to share her work at the National Training Institute Addressing Young Children with Challenging Behaviors. She has been a frequent trainer and presenter across the United States, including conference presentations for the National Center for Parents as Teachers, National Association for Music Education, Zero to Three, Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, NAEYC Professional Institute, Head Start's national organization, and the American Music Therapy Association. Her research on music to support early language was published in the *International Journal for Research in Music Education*.

She is the author of the popular *Baby Sing & Sign* book series. Her music CDs for children won National Association of Parenting Products and Parent's Choice Honors awards.

Anne lives in Kansas City, Missouri, with her husband and two furry dogs. When not on the job, she enjoys kayaking, snacking, and dancing to the song "Uptown Funk" in her kitchen. She believes the world would be a better place if everyone would just take an afternoon nap.

# Foreword

Current research tells us that infants have surprising, adult-like capabilities in the way they perceive and attend to musical stimuli.

Much of today's brain research has focused on infants and toddlers. The good news is that the continuing explosion of new information in this area has validated a lot of what we have always known to be true: The responsive, rhythmic dance of communication and connection between caring adults and young children drives development. Ultimately, it is connection—not the right toy or colorful mobile—that is at the core of human growth and development. We know that talking, singing, reading, and playing are essential for the healthy development of cognitive, social, language, and motor skills. We know that responding to our baby's cues and clues is the essence of good parenting. What we haven't known until more recently is the degree to which babies are capable of guiding and facilitating these processes.

Every parent, grandparent, caregiver, and teacher has played their fair share of guessing games trying to figure out what an infant or toddler wants or needs. We have our standard guesses: food, cuddles, diaper changing, and other needs. Eventually, we decode the child's gestures, gurgles, and grunts as we fine-tune our clue-reading skills. The temperament of the child determines how well they tolerate our learning curve. In *Sing & Sign*, Anne Meeker Watson uses the latest in brain-based learning and up-to-date knowledge of infant development to facilitate communication by empowering infants with sign language.

When I heard about teaching infants and toddlers sign language, my first thought was that we've exaggerated the benefits of brain research again. Closely following was my second thought: *This makes perfect sense!* Infants and toddlers understand more than they can communicate, and they already use gestures as a language system. Why not provide opportunities to deepen the language experience, empower the infant, and strengthen the adult-child bond?

I became an advocate when Anne first gave me her *Sing & Sign* book and music CD. I passed it along to my neighbor, who had adopted a beautiful 18-month-old girl from China. After about a month, frustration had set in as the communication system between this loving family and their wonderful new addition was challenged by stress, mismatched cues, and cultural barriers. After 2 days with *Sing & Sign*, harmony returned to the home as baby Melissa learned the signs for MORE, EAT, and STOP.

What Anne has done with *Sing & Sign* is nothing short of brilliant. She has joined current research with the wisdom of the ages. The book you are holding combines music, teaching signs, and play to create fun activities that unite adults and children. There could not be a more powerful combination to foster infant learning. Current research tells us that infants have surprising, adult-like capabilities in the way they perceive and attend to musical stimuli. Human beings of any age are rhythmic, social beings with an innate need to communicate and connect. *Sing & Sign* takes what nature dictates and

creates activities that foster the developmental needs of children from 6 months to 5 years old. By pairing music with sign teaching, Anne provides a way to build in repetition and a meaningful context for learning a sign language vocabulary. This has special meaning for me because I still find my way around all tasks that require alphabetization by singing the “A-B-C” song from my childhood.

As an author and speaker, I have come in contact with thousands of educators and parents seeking to strengthen their bonds with the children in their lives. They intuitively know that strong connections foster a plethora of developmental benefits. *Sing & Sign* is an exceptional tool that empowers both children and caring adults to communicate. Communication is the key to life. *Sing & Sign for Young Children* takes our precious children on a journey from surviving to thriving.

I wish you well on your journey with them.

—Becky Bailey, Ph.D.

Author, educator, and creator of *Conscious Discipline*,  
an evidence-based program of social-emotional learning,  
discipline, and self-regulation  
[www.ConsciousDiscipline.com](http://www.ConsciousDiscipline.com)  
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FOR MORE, go to: <https://bpub.fyi/Sing-and-Sign>

*To my folk-singing family of four and all of the ways that  
“music was love and love was music” every single day of my  
childhood, as expressed so aptly by Mac Davis in his song,  
“I Believe in Music.”*

*I am especially grateful to my little sister Donna Lynn for  
more reasons than will fit on this page.*

# Introduction

Teaching hearing children to sign is an extension of the types of nonverbal communication they already use to get your attention: facial expression, gesturing, making noise, crawling, toddling toward an object of desire, and more.

Andy and I are playing a guessing game.

This determined young boy of 13 months wants something from the toy shelf, and I am trying my best to figure out what that might be. I list from memory all of the toys I have seen him play with this week that might be his current obsession: blocks, cars, puzzles, stuffed animals, action figures. With each of my incorrect guesses, Andy's angst escalates. He soon adds foot stomping and loud screeching to his pointing game. His discontent is obvious, and both of us are becoming more frustrated with each passing moment. Various versions of this "game" are repeated throughout the day during our other daily routines, including snack time, book choice, diaper changes, and outdoor play.

Andy is a man of strong opinions regarding his wants and needs. However, he lacks the verbal skills to communicate those desires in a way that allows me to understand and help him.

There is another more precise and effective way for babies and toddlers to get their needs met. They can communicate their wants and needs using gestures before their vocal mechanisms are mature enough to verbalize. When you teach young children key signed vocabulary words such as PLAY, EAT, BED, HUG, BOOK, HELP, and MILK, you are giving them tools to solve some of their own problems. They can then let you know what they want, and you can respond consistently with the particular type of help needed: provision of a snack, more snuggle time, outdoor playtime, or reading a favorite book cover to cover three times in a row.

Child psychologists Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn (2006) first introduced the practice of using sign language with babies and toddlers in their book, *Baby Signs: How to Talk with Your Baby Before Your Baby Can Talk*. They found through their research that using sign language with children at an early age supported the natural development of their ability to speak. They found that babies who learned to sign were less frustrated and often verbalized sooner than their peers. And, importantly, sign language strengthened the bond between caring adult and child. Acredolo and Goodwyn's "baby signs" are gestures they modified from American Sign Language (ASL) to best fit the hand shape and developing fine motor skills of infants.

Teaching hearing children to sign is an extension of the types of nonverbal communication they already use to get your attention: facial expression, gesturing, making noise, crawling, toddling toward an object of desire, and more. Most children create their own "signs" to tell you what they want and need, such as pointing to a desired object or waving their hands across their bodies with a grumpy look on their face to share their displeasure. These types of signs are ambiguous and can

often contribute to even more frustration for the child. With practice and maturation, many children can learn and use the signed words you teach to request and comment. It is your task as a caring adult to interpret these early gestures and respond in a consistent and encouraging way.

In my first three *Sing & Sign* books, I introduced a program that is equal parts sign language instruction, music, picture book, play-filled activity, and fun. Caring adults use these engaging tools to intentionally teach their young children key signed vocabulary from ASL, the language commonly used by the Deaf community. *Sing & Sign* requires no special training or equipment. All that is necessary is a willingness to sing, sign, and play one word, one song, and one day at a time and to have fun while enhancing the bond you share with your children in the process.

There are multiple language and other developmental benefits your children will experience when you share this program, and we will discuss those in detail in the following pages. My first *Sing & Sign* books included the subheadings “Communicate Early With Your Child” and “Improve Your Child’s Vocabulary.” As you will learn while reading the book you hold in your hands, my focus has changed dramatically from *communicate earlier and better*.



My priorities for you now are face time, fun, and friendship—in that order! I want you to sing and sign in order to connect meaningfully with the children you love.

The *Sing & Sign* program is an outgrowth of my work as a music therapist for a public school system in the Kansas City area. A colleague asked me to explore the use of music as a way to help infants and toddlers learn and practice simple signs. I wrote or arranged some child-friendly songs with lyrics that included basic vocabulary words. These often-repeated words made sign language practice simple and fun. Music proved to be a powerful and motivating tool for teaching sign language. Not only were babies and toddlers responsive, but their caring adults were having fun as well!

Here are some of the benefits of signing with infants:

- The ASL hand shapes form “pictures” of the objects or ideas they represent. For instance, the sign for EAT is performed by tapping gathered fingertips to the lips, pantomiming the act of eating food. Babies expand their communication strategies quickly once they learn to use some key signed words.
- The movements of the caring adult’s hands while forming the signs are engaging and visually interesting to a baby. This expressive “hand dancing” combines with the animated face of the adult who is in close proximity and speaks with a voice that is truly music to Baby’s ears.
- Babies may not use signs to express their wants and needs. However, they are developing their receptive language skills, or their ability to understand the words they hear. They also gain awareness that conversations require turn-taking. Caring adults speak and sign, and it is then Baby’s turn to babble, coo, smile, squawk, holler, clap, wave—or another of his adorable baby banterers.
- Many schools and centers are teaching ASL signs to children birth to 2 years of age. It then becomes easier for caring adults and parents to communicate with a child if they both use sign to communicate. Also, when a child needs to move from one center or school to another, the transition is enhanced when both centers are using the commonly accepted ASL-based approach.

Even after toddlers begin to use spoken words to communicate, sign language continues to prove beneficial.

- Sign language is a visual representation of spoken words, helping toddlers master new, more abstract words that represent feelings or ideas.

- When toddlers are able to sign as well as say the word, sign language helps caring adults understand words that are not clearly articulated.
- Sign language helps toddlers feel “heard.” The child has figured out that caring adults are crucial for obtaining the objects and experiences he desires. He craves an adult’s undivided attention to help him navigate his world. When you sign to a young child, you are making eye contact, smiling, and talking as you convey your message. Even if a child doesn’t always fully understand the meaning of the spoken words, experiencing a moment of shared listening and looking with you is calming and reassuring to him.
- Signs help toddlers retrieve words from their memory that are familiar but may temporarily be forgotten. For instance, the child may not recall how to say “elephant” but he can perform the sign. Seeing his own hands press together and rotate as he signs the word CHEESE triggers his memory of how to speak the word “cheese.”
- Sign language supports toddler communication efforts when he is tired or too frustrated to communicate quickly and clearly, thus heading off temper tantrums and meltdowns.
- Sign language aids toddlers in developing fine motor skills. As he imitates your hand shapes, he is learning to coordinate his little fingers into the poses the signs require.
- Toddlers begin to construct meaningful sentences by combining signs, such as WANT-CRACKER or WHERE-DOG? This is an important milestone for toddlers and sets the stage for their future grammar development. Signing songs gives toddlers plenty of opportunities to practice combining words because one key word that is signed and spoken naturally flows into the next.

There are a number of great reasons to use sign language with preschoolers as well. Here are just a few:

- Continued language learning and vocabulary enrichment
- Literacy development and book engagement
- Enhanced visual engagement during circle time and other group activities
- Effective way to reinforce rules and expectations, self-calming, and emotional regulation
- Creation of an inclusive environment for children with language delays, autism, or Down syndrome

Teaching basic vocabulary words in ASL to any child at an early age may enable him or her to use these skills with toddler- or preschool-age peers who have hearing impairment or deafness. Because siblings often continue to practice their signed words with their younger brothers and sisters, many children starting preschool or elementary school are familiar with basic signs. The same words they use with the babies in their family may come in handy at play centers or on the playground with peers who are deaf or hard of hearing: “Do you WANT to PLAY with ME?”

## WHAT SCIENCE SAYS ABOUT SIGNING AND SINGING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

For those who are interested in findings from the scientific community regarding infant and toddler language acquisition, here are a few excerpts from some notable research studies. Reference information is included at the conclusion of this book.

Dr. Elizabeth Kirk and her colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire examined the impact of teaching infants to gesture to communicate on their language development and a dimension of parent-child attachment they call “maternal mind-mindedness” (Kirk et al., 2013). The latter is described as a parent’s tendency to treat their children as individuals with minds of their own. They found no group differences for the effect of signed gestures on the language development of children participating in the study. However, parents in the sign learning group shared more reassuring comments with their babies and encouraged their initiative to explore. They hypothesized that sharing a gestural system of communication may have enhanced the attention and responsiveness of parents to the desires of the child.

Drs. Kelsey Lucca and Makeba Parramore Wilbourn (2018) studied the relationship between a child’s pointing gesture and early vocabulary size. This is of interest to our discussion of sign teaching because it highlights a primary way that children gesture to communicate before they are able to articulate spoken words. Lucca and Wilbourn noted that their 18-month-old participants more readily remembered and labeled objects that they had first pointed to during play. Pointing outperformed eye gaze and reaching and may indicate a readiness and interest in learning about the things in the child’s world he cares about.

Dr. Erica Cartmill and fellow researchers examined the “socio-visual” context parents provide when they speak to their toddler-age children (Cartmill et al., 2013). According to

the researchers, parents differ in the amount of visual information they naturally provide to a child as they talk to him. Children pay close attention to the gestures and facial expressions of their parents as well as their gaze at objects they are labeling when they are learning new words. The researchers surmised that this quality of vocabulary instruction was as important as the quantity of words taught. They found that the amount of visual information parents and caring adults provided to toddlers—including gesture and facial expression—was positively related to vocabulary size at 3 years of age.

Dr. Michael Brent, a researcher at Washington University in St. Louis, found that children younger than 15 months learned words primarily spoken by their parents in isolation (Brent & Siskind, 2001). For instance, when they heard single words such as “go,” “carrot,” or “mouse,” they learned the words much easier than if they heard them in a longer sentence. The frequency with which the parent spoke a word was also a critical determinant of whether the child would know the word later. This finding supports the use of sign language because repetition and the practice of saying and signing words in isolation are natural elements of the sign teaching process.

Dr. Jayne Standley, whose pioneering work in the field of music therapy has led to new techniques for treating premature babies, noted,

The research literature on music enrichment for infants and toddlers has been prolific. We know that music participation teaches music skills, perception, and cognition. Simultaneously it also promotes child development areas such as listening skills, language development, motor coordination, cooperative social skills and reciprocity, demonstrating the power of music to be a highly beneficial reinforcer for children from the moment of their birth. (2001, p. 70)

Standley’s research included the *Sing & Sign* program as a treatment variable to optimize language and other developmental outcomes of infants born prematurely.

Music psychologists Drs. Anthony Brandt, Molly Gebrian, and L. Robert Slevc (2012) likened an infant’s discrimination of the sounds of speech to a type of specialized musical hearing that contributes to the child’s ability to learn language. They believe that a baby’s attention is first drawn to the emotional context of the language they hear as well as the rhythmic and phonemic patterns. Music as a form of “creative play with sound” captures the attention of infants as they organize what they hear on the basis of musical elements such as pitch, melody, and rhythm. As children grow, they begin to map sounds according to their meaning, but infants first experience language as a subset of music. They claim that “the rhythmic and

expressive nature of gesture and sign babbling might be a sort of visual parallel to the music of speech” (2012, p. 12).

I joined my music therapy colleague Dr. Cynthia Colwell as co-principal investigator for a research study to examine the effectiveness of music and sign language as tools for promoting infant and toddler communication and enhancing parent–child interaction (Colwell et al., 2014). Parent–child pairs were assigned to one of three play-based group interventions: Music Alone, Sign Language Alone, and Music and Sign Language. Groups of parents and their infants or toddlers met for 45-minute sessions weekly for 4 weeks. Outcomes for infant–toddler communication were measured utilizing the *Early Communication Indicator* (Greenwood et al., 2006). Outcomes for parent–child interaction were measured utilizing the Indicator of Parent–Child Interaction (Baggett et al., 2003).

Significant effects were not observed for either research hypothesis. However, the following trends were noted for the Sign Language and Music group that may contribute to improved communication and enhanced parent–child relationships.

- The Music and Sign Language group is the only group that maintained all of its 10 child participants. The group actually added parents because it was common for the second parent to arrive and ask to join in the planned activities.
- The researchers noted better consistent attendance and on-time behaviors for the Music and Sign Language group.
- More parents in the Music and Sign Language group asked questions about developmental stages and the utility of music to support early learning.
- The Music and Sign Language group was the only group that saw an increase, albeit slight, in all four areas as measured on the Early Communication Indicator.

This finding reflects what I have consistently observed during 20 years of singing and signing with thousands of young children: Sign language instruction, embedded within the meaningful contexts of music, books, and play, positively impacts various developmental outcomes.

There have been numerous other studies examining the efficacy of infant sign language for “improving” typically developing infants, with mixed reviews and some finger-pointing as to whether the methodology and research questions of these studies pass muster.

There is also the obvious question we must ask ourselves: What about little children should we try and improve?

Let's take a deep breath and remind ourselves of the following truths summarized here from the large body of accumulated knowledge regarding language, music, and early childhood development.

### Developmentally Appropriate Practice

All young children benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction with frequent repetition of key concepts. They need the “deep dive” into a few words each day that you share repeatedly across the activities and environments of their day. For instance, they want you to show them a real apple as you say and sign the word APPLE. They want to see pictures of apples and apple trees in books. They would like to watch you slice apples at snack time, feel the slippery apple skin, and listen to you talk about the stem, core, and seeds of this fruit. They would love to show you how good they are at sorting real apples of various colors into different containers. A simple word like *apple* is not that simple for a young child. Explicit vocabulary instruction gives children a more complete understanding of the nuance and dimension of word meanings. It also paves the way for young children to be able to label, classify, and describe with the words you teach.

Early face-to-face interactions with caring adults are critical for later oral language development according to the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998). Young children also benefit from singing, reading, talking, doing fingerplays, and interacting with materials and toys that allow for exploration. *Sing & Sign* provides all of these opportunities within the nurturing and responsive relationships with adults that are so necessary for infants and toddlers to thrive. Signing key vocabulary words is a lovely way for fingers to play!

### Joint Attention

Joint attention is the shared focus of two individuals on an object or experience, and it is a precursor to spoken language. A child uses gesture or eye gaze to direct the attention of a communication partner to something that interests him, like a toy or a school bus. The child gazes upon the object of interest, then gazes at his partner, and then returns his gaze to the object again. Joint attention is the infant-toddler equivalent of commenting. The child can gaze at a wagon and then return his gaze to you, as if to say “You really should take me for a ride in that thing. It's cool.” Perhaps he looks at the door, asking this question with his purposeful gaze: “When will my grandma be arriving to take me home?” Bids for joint attention by a child

give caring adults the chance to respond and provide lots of great information such as, “I like wagons also. I especially like red wagons. Did you see the wheels on the wagon? They go around and around when the wagon rolls. Who would you like to have join us in the wagon when I take you for a ride?” This powerful means of nonverbal communication is necessary in order for children to master spoken language. Sign language can provide a beautiful bridge between joint attention and spoken language by enabling children to label, organize, request, question, and comment with increasing specificity using their signed words.

### You Are the Most Interesting Person in the World

I hope you do not mind me saying this to you, but you are infinitely more interesting to young children when you add signs, gestures, motions, and facial expression to your spoken words. Singing and signing amplifies your potential to engage your young children in learning. I am not ashamed to say that I have worn battery-operated Christmas lights around my neck like sparkly jewelry to make myself more fascinating to watch as I read books aloud to groups of young children. Singing and signing songs as you dazzle your young audience with your most animated facial expression is the equivalent of a thousand kilowatts of Christmas light finery.



Engagement matters. If a child is not attending to the activities and information you offer, then he will not learn and grow. Here are a few reasons why *Sing & Sign* helps children engage in the learning opportunities you provide.

- Singing and signing supports nonverbal participation for all children. Toddlers love to “show they know” information about the song or story you share. They love signing a word in anticipation of singing it as it occurs in a familiar song to show that they remember what comes next. Signing makes it possible for children to “sing” the song with their hands until their voices are able to approximate the lyrics. The circle time songs I plan always include one of three ways for children to participate that do not require that they sing: 1) dancing, gestures, or signs; 2) manipulatives such as scarves or kitchen band instruments; or 3) personal visuals that allow children to point to pictures on a page that correspond with our song repertoire. Some children require alternative ways to join the learning community of your classroom or center. Singing and signing allows all children to participate, irrespective of ability or disability.
- Each child you serve has his own preferred learning style. He may learn best when he looks, listens, or moves to learn. *Sing & Sign* provides opportunities for young children to learn visually, verbally, and kinesthetically all at the same time. “Kinesthetic kids” love to feel the signs on their own fingers as they form the gestures. Providing activities and environments that incorporate all three learning styles helps young children stay focused, engaged, and interested in what you share.
- According to Dr. John Feierabend (2000), the author of *First Steps in Music for Infants and Toddlers*, young children can learn motions but must assimilate melodies. This means that young children beginning at around 8 months of age can imitate some simple signs, motions, and gestures almost immediately. They love to add those movements to any song you care to share. However, singing takes time and maturation to accomplish, and it requires coordination of lips, teeth, tongue, and breath. Signing allows young children to share themselves musically through motion. Think about how a tiny baby expresses his pleasure. He squeals and kicks his feet or claps his hands. Sign extends the “dance” as children use their hands and bodies as instruments to sway, sign, and “sing” along with the melodies they love.

## Self-Regulation

There is a strong connection between language and self-regulation, described by early childhood researcher Dr. Megan McClelland as “the conscious control of thoughts, behaviors and emotions” (McClelland & Tominey, 2016, p. 4). Here are several effective ways to support a child’s emerging self-regulations skills through music and sign.

- You are an important “tool” for the self-regulation of your young children. Your voice, facial expressions, reassuring touch, and calming words can make all the difference to a child who is in the throes of a meltdown. There is even a special vocal quality called “motherese” that is universally shared by adults to comfort, connect, and converse with babies and toddlers. According to Elise Piazza and her colleagues (2017), this shift in “vocal spectra” results in a speaking quality that is resonant, melodic, and higher in pitch. The voice of a caring adult is indeed music to a child’s ears, whether the adult is speaking or singing.
- Teaching children to express feelings with signed and spoken words such as FEEL, ANGRY, SAD, HAPPY, and SCARED helps them develop emotional literacy. We want children to be able to complete this sentence: “I feel \_\_\_\_\_.” By narrating children’s emotional experiences



throughout their day with reminders such as “You sure are HAPPY to see your FRIENDS” or “I know the sound of thunder SCARES you,” we help them realize that all feelings are okay. They can also begin to anticipate and manage their self-regulation as they experience the events and experiences that may likely challenge them every day.

- Using the spoken and signed word for CALM can help children recognize when they are feeling “just right.” Saying and signing the word helps them remember that when their body and mind are calm, they are ready to learn and play with others. Using the sign for CALM can also serve as a prompt for a child to take a deep breath, ask for a hug, find a quiet place to stop and think, or count to 10. Sharing the sign can be a cue for children to ask for support or utilize a strategy you have taught them to help them manage their emotions.
- Sign and song aid in the practice of self-regulation during social play. By encouraging children to use their spoken and signed words, such as PLAY, SHARE, WANT, STOP, HELP, THANK-YOU, YOU’RE-WELCOME, PLEASE, and SORRY, they are practicing problem solving, flexibility, and empathy. They are also learning the fine art of negotiation within their relationships with peers. Friends who sing and sign together enjoy a special kind of connection that only music makes possible!

Mutual regulation and emotional literacy will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, *Fostering Relationships, Relaxation, and Rest*.

## Neurological Enrichment

Signs, songs, books, and play-filled activities are great sources of “brain food” for young children. Think of a newborn baby’s brain as a dense garden filled with vegetation. The garden continues to grow denser and lusher for a full year. However, the health and quantity of the plants in the garden are impacted by the amount of water and sunlight they receive. Some plants will flourish, whereas others will wither away. Babies are born with an entire “garden” of nerve fibers waiting to send and receive messages in response to stimulation. Thanks to educational psychologist Jane Healy and hundreds of other researchers who have studied infant neurological development, we understand that early experience matters. Healy said, “The strength and efficiency of synaptic connections determine the speed and power with which your brain functions. The most important news about synapses is that they are formed, strengthened, and maintained by interaction with

experience” (1990, p. 52) There are many core experiences that music and language share, including critical listening and processing of sung or spoken sounds over time. Music psychologist Diana Deutsch (2019) said it best: “Music and language are so intertwined that an awareness of music is critical to a baby’s language development” (p. 37).

## Songs, Books, and Word Learning

Songs and books are rich sources of rare words children will not hear in daily conversation. According to Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2013), children’s books contain more rare words than we use in conversation. Songs are also a rich source of vocabulary words, including nonsense words like “dickory” and “eency weensy” that allow rhymes and phonemes to roll deliciously from the child’s tongue. And we know from lead researcher Jessica Logan’s important study on the significance of early vocabulary exposure that young children whose caring adults routinely read aloud to them will hear in excess of one million words by their fifth birthday (Logan et al., 2019). The words children hear and learn about in books and songs matter for future language, learning, and literacy development.

## Dual Language Learners

Is sign instruction an effective tool for supporting vocabulary development of children learning a second language? The intersection of sign language, early communication, and second language acquisition has not been explored by the research community to date, with the exception of one study authored by Itzel Mejia-Menendez (2016). She examined the effect of sign language on the ability of primary-age students to learn new Spanish words. She noted a significant increase in the ability of children to recall new Spanish words when instruction was paired with the ASL sign for each word.

To probe this question further, let us create our own intersection of best practices for supporting second language learning with *Sing & Sign*. These practices were selected from a list provided by Jennifer Gonzalez (2014), a master educator and *Cult of Pedagogy* blog contributor.

- Pair spoken words with visuals. ASL is inherently visual; we create pictures of words with our hands. Adding signs can help children understand and remember the corresponding spoken words.
- Provide instruction within a social context. Children who sing and sign together are able to reference their peers in order to model the words they hear and see. The music and

fun create social connection. Children can then apply their new language learning as they share important information with friends about needs, feelings, ideas, and preferences.

- Honor a child's silence. Children who are learning a new language are often silent observers initially. They want to speak perfectly before they try to say new words. Just as babies and toddlers must first work on their receptive language skills to gain an understanding of key words and their meanings, second language learners need time to listen to, observe, and study new words. Expression comes with time and opportunities to practice. Singing and signing make participation irresistible. Language learners cannot help but join in the chorus with their best word approximations.
- Make teaching risk-free and fun. Joining friends to sing, sign, and play makes participation less intimidating. It is easier to share words a child may feel unsure about, including in conversation when he is caught up in the joy and momentum of singing and signing with others.

## Purposeful Parenting

Grandma Annie Meeker Watson is worried. I fear that parents have become far too distracted from the tasks of raising young children due to overuse of cell phones and tablets. When a parent's eyes are on their phone, their eyes are not on their child. Parents can miss out on many of the early language cues infants and toddlers provide, including vocalizations, gestures, attempts to draw closer, playful initiations such as clapping or singing, and early word approximations. Once a child has exhausted this entire repertoire of lovely and adaptive strategies to get a parent to engage, he understandably melts down. And that is likely the time that the parent reengages, thus increasing the likelihood that Baby will skip all those lovely steps and go directly to meltdown mode. Visit [www.singplaylove.com/distracted](http://www.singplaylove.com/distracted) to watch a video of a parent and child that highlights the consequences of distracted parenting.

Parenthood is challenging. The demands one small person can place on the time and energy of his mother, father, grandparent, or other caring adult is often exhausting. I have discovered over the years that sign teaching often provides the purpose that some parents or caregivers need for sitting on the floor with their little one to play, talk, sing, love . . . and sign. As early childhood professionals who enjoy good relationships with parents, we can recommend to parents that they

stick their phone in a kitchen drawer and take some time to slow down and take delight in the wonder of their child today. Signing is just another way to connect sensitively with a young child. And in exchange, he will dazzle his grown-up with his clever toy play, funny faces, surprising favorite book choices, and first sign approximations.

## Singing the Praises of JOY

Mr. Webster defines the word fun as “what provides amusement or enjoyment; playful often boisterous action or speech.” I have my own working definition of the word, which incorporates this acronym: *Full of Unusual Nonsense*. I always “roll” with a suitcase filled with an assortment of fantastic items, typically purchased from the local dollar store, when I visit early childhood centers. These accumulated treasures may include brightly colored bandanas, kitchen band instruments, or enough little stuffed animals for everyone to hold and love their own.

I like to think of myself as a specialist in Early Childhood Joy. There is nothing that gives me more pleasure than watching youngsters laugh at my ridiculous 3-year-old humor or sing and sign with their entire wiggly bodies. The best measure of my success as a “fun-ologist” is when we complete a song and at least one child exclaims, “Again!”

Dr. Beth Troutman, an extremely fun and knowledgeable infant-toddler attachment expert, reminded us that joy is associated with curiosity and exploration, which are important correlates of learning. Attachment researchers call shared joy the “shared positive affect,” and this benchmark is, in Troutman's words, “one of the cornerstones of healthy, secure attachment relationships between children and parents.”

I will turn to the poets and philosophers for additional valid “data” to support the importance of contributing joy and fun to the lives of young children. Here is a sampling of wisdom on joy and fun:

“To get the full value of joy, you must have someone to divide it with.” —Mark Twain

“I want a life that sizzles and pops and makes me laugh out loud.” —Shauna Niequist

“Music . . . will help dissolve your perplexities and purify your character and sensibilities, and in time of care and sorrow, will keep a fountain of joy alive in you.”  
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Never, ever underestimate the importance of having fun.”  
—Randy Pausch

And finally, I hope that you and I will always act upon this truth for the self-esteem and daily happiness of young children:

“When your child walks into a room, does your face light up?”

—Toni Morrison

## The Combined Benefits of *Sing & Sign* and YOU

When you share sign instruction by utilizing the engaging tools of music, books, and play and “deliver the goods” within the nurturing and responsive relationship you provide to each child, you are providing a benefit that is greater than the sum of each part. I laughingly suggested to my wonderful editor that the title of this book should be *SING & SIGN for Young Children Who Are Typically and Atypically Developing to Support Early Language, Self-Regulation, Social Relationship, Mindfulness, Self-Determination, Literacy Concepts, Multi-Sensory Experience, Vocabulary Development, Parent-Child Attachment, Joy and Laughter but Mostly FUN*. She tactfully reminded me that this title would not fit on the spine of the book.

Julia Luckenbill is the coordinator of the Infant-Toddler Program at the Center for Child and Family Studies Laboratory School, University of California-Davis. She had the following to say about the potential of song and sign to enrich the lives of young children:

Infants and toddlers learn so much in the context of relationships. They learn that we value their ideas by making the effort to get on their level and talk about the things that they show us. They learn that a conversation has a back and forth when we are respectful and wait while they reply with a sound, a gesture or a spoken word. They learn the words to express themselves when we sing with them, model gestures, read them stories, and narrate what we are doing along the way. (Luckenbill et al., 2019)

Music and sign language provide powerful and important ways to communicate and connect with others. Mr. Fred Rogers spoke fondly of music when he said, “Finding ways to harmonize our uniqueness with the uniqueness of others can be the most fun—and rewarding—of all” (2003, p. 131). I have made a career of teaching children identified as having special needs. However, I have never met a young child who doesn’t have “special needs.” Each is unique in his strengths and challenges, his favorite foods and colors, the way he prefers to learn, what makes him laugh out loud, and the unique way he looks at his world.

No two people—or voices or songs—are identical. Celebrate the unique and amazing qualities of your children.

## A Few Reasons Why You Should Never *Sing & Sign*

*Sing & Sign* is a program to teach young children key signed vocabulary words through playful face-to-face interactions with caring adults. Our goals are face time, friendship, and FUN. We have discussed at length the potential benefits of the program, addressing our why for sharing *Sing & Sign* with the children we care for and teach.

Our how is equally important, because the objective is to never teach sign language in isolation. The context of our sign teaching is always engaging and neurologically rich, and it utilizes the important teaching tools of music, picture book reading, and playful activity within nurturing relationships with caring adults.

You know your goals, teaching style, and personality, and you may find singing and signing to be a chore instead of a pleasure.

*Sing & Sign* may not be the program for you if either of these two reasons applies:

1. You are uncomfortable singing in front of others, even your most devoted and fervent toddler fans. I promise you that your youngsters are truly not tiny American Idol judges. They believe that the musical stylings of Carrie Underwood and Taylor Swift are unimpressive compared to your



glorious singing voice. The practice of sharing your voice with your children is a lovely and generous way of offering your most authentic self. If you are still unconvinced that singing and signing could be fun for you as well as your children, then take your children on a nature walk instead or let them help you make blueberry pancakes.

2. Your goal is to make sure that your children talk better or sooner. There is very little research evidence to recommend infant sign language solely for that purpose. More importantly, focusing on accelerating child development is ill advised and can actually be detrimental to your youngsters. Childhood is not a destination; it is a journey. It is our task as caring adults to create environments that allow children to gradually unfold to become the truest and most genuine version of themselves. The reality is that sign language instruction during infancy and toddlerhood is seldom required for children to learn to talk. However, the beauty of *Sing & Sign* is that it offers a combination of engaging activities that joyfully engage children in language loving within nurturing adult relationships. And in the process, you are creating memories that will last a lifetime.



## TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN TO SING AND SIGN

The *Sing & Sign* program is a fun collection of songs, play activities, and picture book suggestions that can be used to help infants and toddlers learn signed words to communicate their wants and needs before they are able to speak. As young children grow, they can continue to enjoy the music and play of the program with both speech and signs. There are numerous benefits to sharing the *Sing & Sign* program with preschoolers as well. They love to “do” the songs and books with their hands as well as their voices. The visual nature of sign helps children retrieve and recall word meanings as they interpret the “pictures” they form with their small hands. Abstract concepts, like feelings, can be difficult for preschoolers to understand and verbalize. Signing is a great strategy to teach words such as HURT or HAPPY in a concrete way. This gives real meaning to the words preschoolers hear and say.

*Sing & Sign* is a unique approach to teaching sign language to young children. The program uses music, picture books, simple play materials, and games to help you and your young children learn and practice a variety of easy and essential words from ASL that can be used in meaningful communication. *Sing & Sign* teaching resources include a printed guide, repertoire of 13 recorded songs, and instructional videos that include sign instruction and full signed performances of the song repertoire. In addition, there are supplemental visuals to share with your children to support their participation.

The songs feature basic ASL words that children can learn and practice as they enjoy listening to the songs. *Sing & Sign* helps a child make important connections between the objects and events in her life and their meaning.

Let’s review a few essential practices to start you off right!

- I recommend that you begin sharing some signed words with babies at around 6 months of age, corresponding with their ability to sit up independently. This allows their hands to freely move and begin to imitate some of your movements such as clap, point, wave, and pat.
- It is important to always say the words as you sign them. You are teaching your hearing children to speak as well as sign.
- Remember that communicating with signs includes facial expressions, so encourage your children to imitate your face as well as your hands. Share your most gleeful expression when you sign HAPPY. Make sure to look miserable when you sign HURT, SICK, or SAD.

- Make your sign teaching a natural and consistent part of your day. Language learning requires a meaningful context that you provide through songs, books, play, and your nurturing and attentive relationship with children.
- Repetition is good, repetition is good, repetition is good. Sing the songs often. Practice may not make perfect, but it certainly does help children learn to sign words as they listen to the music. The song helps to organize and energize their sign performance and creates momentum that contributes to their sign success.
- Take “baby steps” in incorporating the ideas from this book into your practices. Play with a song or a sign for as long as it takes for both of you to feel confident.

## About the Signs

The signs and words included in the book were specifically selected to help children express their wants and needs. Using signs such as WANT and HELP gives youngsters the power to let caring adults know specifically what they desire. As children learn new signs, they begin to combine them to better communicate their intentions: PLEASE-FOOD, HELP-TOY. Animal and food signs are included because they are very motivating for young children to learn and use. Children love to point out animals they recognize in picture books, or at the park or zoo, and sign their names. And we all love our FOOD choices—me included!

There are three common terms used to describe the gestures of children as they learn to sign. They are ASL signs, sign approximations, and invented signs.

*ASL signs* are the words of the complete and complex visual language used by deaf adults that includes gestures, facial expressions, and postures of the body.

*Sign approximations* are the child’s best try at imitating a signed word as it is modeled for her. With maturation and opportunities to practice, a child’s motor imitation skills typically increase in precision and more closely match the model you provide.

*Invented signs* are gestures, motions, or facial expressions a young child creates and consistently uses in communication with others.

## About the Songs

The 13 songs written or adapted for this book vary in style and tempo or speed. I want your children to be soothed and nurtured by the music as well as energized and alerted. The

melodies are simple but musically interesting to your children. They will recognize and respond to the tunes, each with its own distinctive rhythm and instrumentation. They will have their favorites they will want to hear over and over again. You will grow tired of these songs before your children ever do! With each repetition, they will gain confidence and precision over time as they add signed and spoken words to your performance. They will delight in any new verses you would like to create to personalize the songs and extend the fun and learning. For example, the “My World” song could include a “DUCKS for quacking” or BATH for SPLASHING” verse.

When used as a language development program, I recommend singing these songs with children from birth to 6 years of age. However, the songs are inviting to children of all ages, and many parents enjoy singing them at home. Our *Sing & Sign* families have shared with me that the benefit of including music in their life has endured long after their children have learned to speak.

With each song presented in the book, you and your child will learn new signs and practice musical as well as communication skills that are playful and developmentally appropriate. And don’t worry: no special training or equipment is necessary other than a device for downloading and playing the recorded music. The materials you need for the play activities are typically at hand in your center, school, or home. All that is necessary is a willingness to play and an interest in allowing your children to direct their own learning adventure!

## About the Sing & Sign Book

This book is much like Thanksgiving dinner: it is not intended to be consumed all in one sitting. The best plan for using, enjoying, and reaping the benefits of Sing & Sign with your children is to learn the songs and signs one at a time.

Chapters 1 through 6—the centerpiece of the book—focus on selected themes in early childhood development and education. Each chapter includes two or three songs that relate to the focus of the chapter. For instance, Chapter 1 describes challenges around feeding and includes signs and strategies for mealtime routines and expressing manners. The two songs in the chapter are “Fill the Basket” and “My Kitchen Door.”

For each song shared, the following resources are included:

- *List of targeted, bonus, and review signs to sing.* Targeted signs are key vocabulary words that children may use to express in conversation with you. Bonus signs are words that children might be interested in signing if they have a particular interest in or preference for them. Review signs

are those already taught in Sing & Sign songs previously presented.

- *Explanation of the origin of the song.* A short story describing the origin of the adapted song or the author and composer's inspiration for writing the melody and lyrics is included here.
- *Song lyrics with suggestions for gestures, motions, or signed words* to include as you listen and sing along. The suggested gestures are also bolded in the song lyrics. Note: A complete performance with suggested signs is provided in the instructional video for each song.
- *Musical score* with guitar chords
- *Signs to Sing* provides photographs along with directions for performing each sign you may use to accompany the song, as well as the description of a possible child approximation of the sign. A photograph of an adult model signing the word is included along with a photograph of a child model demonstrating a possible approximation of the sign. Due to the limitations of little hands, it is difficult to perform some hand shapes and combinations of movements.
- *Tips for Introducing the song* gives ideas for how to teach the song as well as the signs listed at the beginning of the chapter.
- *Fun Activities to Share* describes additional activities designed to extend music and sign language learning while helping to maintain the child's interest. The activities can be customized to suit the developmental stages of your children. As a supplement to the infinite number and types of commercial toys, these simple play strategies utilize materials you have readily at hand and are creative and inexpensive. Using homemade toys for play also teaches children that toys do not have to come from a store.

Each chapter also includes a list of additional useful signs that support the theme of each chapter. And finally, "Books to Read and Sing" contains a list of picture books recommended for infants and toddlers that fit the theme and vocabulary of a given chapter. Let this list be a starting point as you explore other titles at your local library or bookstore. Book engagement is an important predictor of reading success, as well as another effective way to practice sign language vocabulary.

The *Pictorial Dictionary* is included at the back of the book. There you will find all of the signs and photos of the adult model shared in the book. These pages can be duplicated for quick reference.

The pronouns *he* and *she* are used alternately in each chapter to refer to young children who will use the program.

*Early childhood professional* refers to any person who directly works with young children from infancy to age 8. These professions include teacher, caregiver, social worker, educational assistant, parent educator, early childhood consultant, administrator, instructional coach, early interventionist, or therapist.

"Caring adult" refers to any adult who enjoys a nurturing relationship with a young child in their role as an early childhood professional, parent, or other guardian inside or outside of the home. Given the growing diversity of families, please modify the song texts and other activities as needed to fit the family structures of the children you serve.

## Get Started Singing and Signing

Here is the step-by-step plan for using all of the resources provided to share the *Sing & Sign* program pronto!

1. *Take the time to peruse your Sing & Sign book. Read this Introduction thoroughly to gain an overview of the program.* Review the songs in Chapter 1 to prepare to share them with your children. Practice some of the targeted signs as you read the song lyrics.
2. *Download the songs you will sing with your children.* See the About the Downloads page in the front of this book. You can then easily import your songs into any digital music player or desktop software you use, such as iTunes. Be certain to save the song files to an alternate location for safe keeping.
3. *Sing a tune with or without the recorded performance until you know the lyrics well.* I suggest that you share one of the Sing & Sign songs first during your circle time routine. Add patting, swaying, or clapping as you listen to the recorded version of the tune. You could also play the song as a transition activity as your children arrive at your school or center, clean up toys, or finish their snack.

When you believe your children are familiar with the song, add one or two signed words to your performance. To do so, take your cues from your children. Decide what signed word suggestions included in the guide fit the interests and preferences of your children. The "Kitchen Door" song includes many signs for animals as well as food choices and other basic words such as EAT, MORE, and HUNGRY.

Limit the number of signs you teach so that you do not overwhelm your children with motor activity or take away

from their musical enjoyment. They also need enough processing time to be able to hear the targeted word in the song lyrics and respond by imitating your modeled sign.

Observe the faces and actions of your children as you sing and sign for the following:

- Are they smiling?
- Are they watching you?
- Are they looking at their friends?
- Are they imitating the signs and motions you share, or at least an approximation of the movements?
- And most important of all, do they appear to be having fun?
- Will they ask to sing the same song again tomorrow?

These are the measures of your *Sing & Sign* success. Add new songs and signs over time so that you are always enjoying something new and something mastered.

4. *Watch the instructional videos for the songs you will sing and sign first.* See the About the Downloads page in the front of this book. There is also an instructional video specifically for teaching the additional useful signs that support the theme of each chapter.

You can quickly navigate to the section of each video



you would like to review by noticing the title colors as you fast forward: yellow for target sign instruction, red for bonus sign instruction, tan for sign review, and blue for the song performance.

5. *Add a Sing & Sign routine to your daily schedule.* *Sing & Sign* is a process that allows you to capture the attention of your children with music and teach sign language in such a playful way that children never realize they are learning new skills. The program is designed to enhance, rather than complicate, your child's and your daily routine. Be consistent so that your children can predict that they will sing, sign, play, and have fun with you and their friends every day. Your *Sing & Sign* routine should never last longer than 10 minutes. Add a picture book of your choice to read and include some key signed words. Then, it is time to transition to an activity the child loves, such as free play or outdoor time.

Reproducible song cards are available for you to create your own visual schedule for your *Sing & Sign* routine. See the About the Downloads page in the front of this book.

6. *Use Sing & Sign across the routines and environments of your day.* Use the signs you teach in conversation with your children at snack, free play, outdoor time, arrival, and dismissal. The songs are infinitely portable and don't require the recorded version for you to add a song as a transition activity or while you are waiting for friends to wash hands or setting up for snack. Mastering the meaning of words requires repetition and deep understanding of a word across its contexts. For example, balls come in all different sizes, colors, and textures. Point out pictures of balls in books, make balls available at play centers and the outdoor play area, plan a ball-rolling game for circle time, and ask children to tell you about the balls they play with at home. Songs provide one meaningful setting for contextual information about words. Think of all of the other ways you can reinforce word learning by signing as you read, eat, play, and interact.
7. *Print the supplemental song pages provided to augment your Sing & Sign routine.* with another fun way for children to "show they know" the songs and signs you teach. A second version of each page is also available in Spanish. See the About the Downloads page in the front of this book. Show the pages to your babies and toddlers, or print individual copies of the pages to distribute to your preschool-age children. Model how to isolate your pointer finger to touch the animals, foods, or other objects on the pages that

represent the signed words you teach. Your children can demonstrate their receptive language skills by pointing in response to your questions, such as “Touch the HORSE” or “Where is the PEACH?” They can also flex their expressive language “muscles” when you ask them the name of something on the song page. You and your young child will both be proud when you point to MOUSE and she touches her nose to sign this word.

## Teaching Young Children to Sign

Here is a step-by-step guide for teaching sign language to young children. You will observe this progression in most of your young signers. However, you and I both know that there may be nothing typical about the growth and change of some of your typically developing children. Many begin to speak before they use signed words expressively. There are still wonderful receptive language benefits for participating in sign learning with you, including focused listening and learning and a deepened understanding of word meanings.



### *Step One: Children Imitate Gestures*

Remember how excited we are as parents when our child first waves “bye-bye” to Grandma or raises her hands above her head to show you she is “so big”? These simple gestures are examples of ways we commonly teach children to imitate our playful motions. Your first assignment as a sign language teacher is to help your children imitate the movements you make with your hands. By engaging their attention with your facial expressions and your speaking or singing voice, your children will watch you intently as you speak and sign. With lots of repetition of this Imitation Game, children will likely copy your motions when they are ready and able.

When children are able to look at your hands and then copy your motion with their own hands, they can begin to plan their motor motions and improve the precision of their imitation skills. By watching you gesture and then taking a turn themselves, they also learn that language is a reciprocal process; each person takes a turn. Praise your children for taking a turn signing the word you are teaching or “talking with your hands.”

To begin teaching signs to your children, think about the typical activities of your day together. Do your children have preferred toys, activities, foods, or family members? Pick a set of five to six signed words to begin teaching to your child. I suggest you start with words that are highly functional, such as EAT, PLAY, and MUSIC. They are broad enough and can be repeated many times during the children’s day. There are always opportunities to eat, play, and listen to music. Let your children direct you in selecting words that have importance to them. Start with what children care about the most.

Early childhood development includes acquiring fine motor skills, or the movement and coordination of the fingers and hands. There are some characteristics of typical fine motor development that can make sign imitation challenging for infants and toddlers.

Here are a few you can anticipate:

- Gestures that allow infants and toddlers to use their whole hand are much easier for them than those that require them to isolate their fingers.
- Infants and toddlers like signs that mirror the same motion on either side of their body, such as ALL-DONE or PLAY. They may add their second hand to mirror a sign you model. For example, they may sign CAT by adding “whiskers” on both side of their face instead of just one side.
- Signs that include different gestures performed on either side of the body are also problematic, like SHEEP and SOAP.

Infants and toddlers may perform one of the two different motions on both sides of their bodies.

- Words that require two gestures, like DOG or BROTHER, are challenging. Infants and toddlers will likely pick one gesture or the other to sign instead.
- Crossing the middle of their body with one or both hands is also difficult for infants and toddlers. This is called crossing midline and is necessary for signed words RAINBOW and MUSIC. You will probably see them perform the sign on either side of their bodies and skip the crossover motion. They may also imitate the gesture in the center of their bodies rather than crossing to either side.
- Infants, toddlers, and many preschoolers do not know where to place a sign, particularly if it occurs on or near the face. Try gently touching the child's face or body to show them where to place their own fingers to imitate the sign. For instance, you can touch their chin when you say and sign the word MOTHER.

Some children may require one-to-one time with you in order to master the imitation necessary for signing. Consider where a child responds best to your voice and hands.

- Perhaps she would like to sit in your lap, in a rocking chair, or on the floor with her back to your chest so that she can hear you sing or speak and see you sign the words in front of her body. She may place her hands on your hands or arms and “take a sign language ride” as her hands simply hold on while you sign.
- She may want to sit in your lap facing you so that you are close and she can feel and smell you as she watches your hands. You will have the benefit of eye contact with her and can add your animated facial expression to amplify her interest in your shared signing.
- She may enjoy watching you sign as she sits in her high-chair. She can listen to you narrate your snack preparation with your hands as well as your voice. You typically have her undivided attention because she is an immovable but willing audience.
- Transitions are great opportunities to engage her in sign learning. Welcome her to school with a hug and a sign or two. Ask her to WAIT to first put away her backpack, and then GO to PLAY. Praise her for doing a great job of WASHING her hands after POTTY. Remind her that she makes you HAPPY as you buckle her into her car seat at the end of your day.

## Step Two: Children Understand Spoken and Signed Words

Before children can express their wants and desires using sign language, they must first understand the words and signs. The ability to receive and understand information is called receptive language. You are checking her receptive language skills any time your child responds to your spoken words by looking at or reaching for the item you have requested.

- For instance, put a bottle or cup of water in front of a child and tell her, “Here is your WATER. Take a drink.” Does she follow this simple direction?
- Does she look at the horse or touch the picture with her finger when you read a book together and you ask her, “Where is the *horse* in the picture?”
- Give her several toys and ask her to hand you the *ball*, the *dog*, or the *bear*. Does she hand you the toy you request?

Practice these types of simple receptive language tasks with your children. Their responses to your questions or requests may be subtle: a glance at the object you discuss, a raised eyebrow, a startled look, a smile. What words do your children understand?

After your children can imitate your motions and understand your spoken words, they learn the connection between the gesture and the meaning of the word itself. Your children may believe you are praising them because they are so adorable when they tap their little chins and fail to realize that the chin tapping is actually the sign for WATER. By repeatedly pairing the gesture with the spoken word, you teach your children that their purposeful movement is connected to something they want or desire. It is your task to immediately provide your children with the object or experience the signed word symbolizes when they perform the gesture you model. Your contingent and consistent response supports the emerging receptive language skills of your children.

## Step Three: Children Express Using Signs

And now, with no further ado, here is the event you have been waiting for! Your children are imitating your gestures and clearly understand the words you say and sign. Be on the lookout for their first expressive signed word. You may not recognize the sign at first. The first signs of infants and toddlers are often easy to miss. The sign will likely look very different than the way you modeled it for them.

So how do you know if a child is signing? Here are some clues:

- *She repeats the same gesture.* She may make the same gesture whenever she listens to music, and the context of her purposeful and often repeated motion helps you determine her meaning. Once you understand what she requests, you can begin to provide music for her when she asks.
- *The gesture appears to have a purpose and is performed with passion.* What starts as a small movement may intensify in speed and size when her need is not met. This may feel like a guessing game for you, but it is your job to provide the spoken and signed word she is approximating. You will know when you are successful by the look of relief on her face, as if she is stating, “Finally you understand, silly person!”
- *She repeats the same vocal sound each time she signs a word.* It is often the initial consonant of the spoken word. This is a wonderful development because she is sharing a spoken word approximation and adding the sign to make sure that you understand.
- *Her proximity to an object provides a clue.* She can locomote toward the object of her desire but may need your help to actually procure the item. For instance, a box of crackers on the counter may be out of her reach. She begins to pound one fist on top of the other or another likely sign approximation for her desired snack food. She may offer other clues such as pointing, vocalizing, or directing her gaze toward her beloved cracker box.
- *Her physical or mental state provides the context you need to determine what she will request.* Perhaps she is tired and begins to repeatedly perform a sign approximation for BLANKET by touching her chin as she lays prone on the floor. As early childhood professionals, we are masterful at recognizing her distress and quickly responding with the support she likely needs. Show your appreciation for her signing efforts in the throes of her discomfort by thanking her for “using her words” to ask for her blanket.
- *The situation provides the tip-off.* If she pats her tummy every time she sees you begin to prepare snack, she is likely signing HUNGRY and anticipates food. She may touch her forehead when she hears her father’s voice in the hallway to share that she hears DADDY. And she may remind you to always bring the BUBBLES outside during play time with her signed word approximation for that fun activity.

After your children have used one sign to communicate with you, they will likely learn several signed words fairly quickly. They love how happy you are that they asked for something using their hands. They also like getting what they want

at the wave of a hand—or the squeeze, tap, pat, or wiggle of a hand—whatever the sign requires.

Now that your children are imitating signs and using them to request and express, try asking something with your spoken words only. For example, when a child can consistently imitate your ALL-DONE sign, say: “We are all done now.” Then ask: “What are we?” and wait for her to show you her ALL-DONE sign. This technique will help her learn to ask for what she wants or needs without having to see you sign the word for her. She will be able to recall the gesture all on her own to ask for what she needs without your prompt.

After young children can imitate gestures and understand that there is a connection between hand shapes and words, their sign vocabulary typically takes off. I have known children who waited 6 months before using their first signed word, and 1 week later they added a dozen more signs to their conversations with others.

Continue to follow the lead of your children in adding new signs. Focus on their interests and preferences and observe a child’s most frequent requests. Try combining words into two-word phrases such as PEACH PLEASE or PLAY BUBBLE when children are consistently using single signed words expressively.

## Using American Sign Language with Hearing Young Children

The *Sing & Sign* program uses ASL, which is defined by the National Association of the Deaf (2021) as “a visual language in which visual information is conveyed by the shape, placement, and movement of the hands, as well as facial expressions and body movements.” ASL is not a universal language. Just as different languages are spoken across the globe, each country has its own sign language with unique rules for grammar and syntax.

Why should ASL be the visual language of choice for supporting the early communication skills of hearing infants and toddlers?

- Teaching young children to communicate using ASL signs provides a way for them to share their wants and needs before their vocal mechanism can articulate words.
- Young children have remarkable facility for learning multiple languages. Adding key signed words allows youngsters to communicate with their peers who are deaf or utilize sign as an alternate form of communication due to autism, Down syndrome, or other language disorders.
- Parents who sign during the infancy and toddlerhood of each new child make signing a family affair. Siblings are

often the preferred “sign teachers” of the youngest family member. This creates opportunities for older children to continue to practice and use sign in their conversations as a family. Those skills can then be used in a variety of community settings with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. This may create an early interest in continued study of ASL. Many high schools now offer ASL as a course that fulfills the foreign language requirement for students.

Signs in song are often repeated for the duration of the phrase to enhance the musicality of the experience and may be performed with larger gestures than when signing speech. ASL words that are spoken instead of sung are typically repeated once for verbs and twice for nouns. It is important to mention that repeating a sign may change the meaning of the ASL word. For instance, signing FEEL repeatedly may be understood as EXCITED by a person fluent in sign language. Given that the audience of our *Sing & Sign* program includes young hearing children and their early childhood teachers and caregivers, this is not a particular concern for our ASL use. Young children need to be able to repeat the signed words to be able to master them. Music allows them the time and engaging context for that repetition.

Teaching fingerspelling and extensive ASL vocabulary is beyond the scope of this book. If you are interested in learn-

ing ASL in more depth, there are courses that may be available to you in your community that teach grammar, syntax, and vocabulary unique to ASL, which is used in communication with deaf adults.

Many parents find that web-based sign language dictionaries are helpful to learn words to augment those taught in the *Sing & Sign* program. You might want to include signed vocabulary around some of your child’s favorite objects or activities, such as WHALE, WAGON, or WAFFLE.

Here are a few web resources to recommend for that purpose:

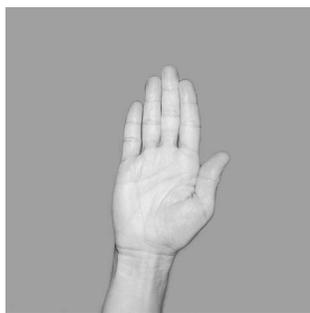
Hand Speak, [www.handspeak.com](http://www.handspeak.com)

Signing Savvy, [www.signingsavvy.com](http://www.signingsavvy.com)

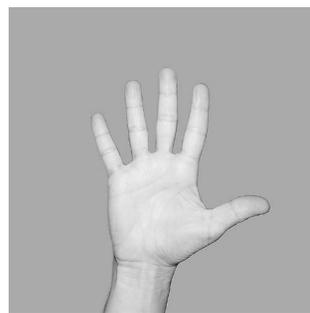
American Sign Language University, [www.lifeprint.com](http://www.lifeprint.com)

## Hand Formations

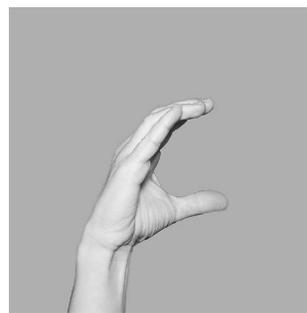
The adult model in pictures throughout the book demonstrates the vocabulary using ASL. Here are some key hand formations that you will use to perform basic sign vocabulary. When referred to in the book, hand formations appear in italics.



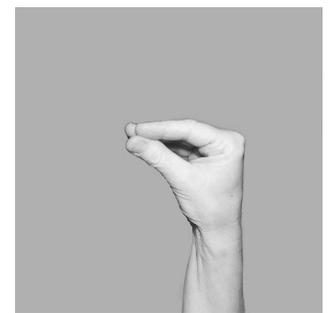
Closed hand



Open hand



Cupped hand



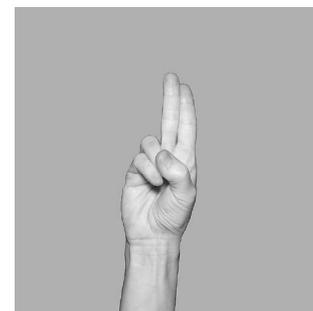
Gathered fingertips



Closed fist



Two open fingers



Two closed fingers

## Speech Development

Teaching babies and toddlers sign language has been shown to support the development of their emerging speech. You are giving them the opportunity to “flex their language muscles” as their vocal mechanism and language processing skills develop, so it is essential that you combine your signs with spoken words.

Parents often worry about what to expect regarding their child’s development of speech. When should my child be talking? How many words should she be saying and how often? This is particularly true when their first- or second-born child provides a point of comparison for their baby’s language skills. Perhaps big brother or sister talked sooner or more often than the new baby. Most experts agree that, in general, firstborn and girl babies are the earliest talkers, and there is a wide range of what is considered to be typical language development in young children.

Parents should pay attention not only to what infants and toddlers express through sign language and speech but also to how well the child understands and responds to what others say to her (“Where is the monkey on the page of your book? Point to the monkey in the picture”). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) suggests that by 24 months, toddlers should be able to combine two or three spoken words into sentences. They should also be able to follow simple instructions and repeat words they hear in conversation.

Children stop crawling when they learn to walk because walking is easier. The same is true for sign and speech. Children typically stop signing when they can say a word so that it is understood by others. They may return to a default word on occasion if they are tired (*please, more, milk, bed*) or not certain you can understand their spoken word (*elephant, encyclopedia*).

The goal of the *Sing & Sign* program is to create activities that you can enjoy with your children while connecting with them in a more meaningful way. Although research does suggest that the use of singing can enhance overall communication skills for children, this may not be the case for every child. The activities and information in this book are in no way intended to substitute for the expertise and assistance of a speech-language pathologist and are not meant to replace speech or language therapy. If you have any concerns about the development of a child, particularly in the area of communication, please refer the child’s family to their pediatrician or recommend that they contact their local infant-toddler program or school district for screening information.