

## TALKING WITH HANDS – THE POWER OF GESTURES

You know that feeling when a word or a name is on the tip of your tongue and it just won't come out? You find yourself saying "you know, the, the, the..." and then you move your arm or hand and the word finally pops out. It turns out that gestures not only help us remember something in the moment but also help us when we are learning.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines a gesture as "a movement of your body (especially of your hands and arms) that shows or emphasizes an idea or a feeling." Most babies start communicating through gesture at about nine months of age. For the earliest gestures, the meaning is non-specific (for example, a reach that means "I want that"). Other gestures have a more specific meaning, like a word that you say with your hands (for example, "thumbs up" means good).

Some parents add to natural gestures by teaching their children sign language. One common myth is that signing with your child will reduce their desire to say words. But the opposite is true: children who gesture or sign a word start saying that word shortly after (and sooner than they would if they hadn't learned the sign or gesture). Still, some parents are unsure whether to teach their baby sign language. There is no right or wrong answer - it's a matter of personal choice. If you do sign, just make sure you always say the word when you do the sign.

Gestures are an important part of communication for everyone. A 2006 study in the Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research showed the development of gestures from nine to 16 months predicts language abilities two years later. This is significant because preschool language skills predict educational success. Wondering if your toddler is on track? An important rule of thumb is that by 16 months of age children should use at least 16 gestures.

Here are a couple of tips to boost learning for young children. Teaching your toddler or pre-schooler a new word? Add a gesture to make it easier for them to remember. Giving your school-age child instructions about chores? Make a gesture for each instruction to help them remember.

Interior Health's community speech-language pathologists help families support the communication development of their children from birth to school entry. If you have any concerns or questions about a child's communication development contact a speech language pathologist at your local health centre.

<http://www.interiorhealth.ca/YourHealth/InfantsChildren/Pages/SpeechLanguage.aspx>

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