

Using your hands to talk - Key Word Signing

by Karen Bloomberg

Suitable for people who need help understanding speech and suitable for some people as a means of communication.

For some people the use of sign and gestures can be an important way to develop communication. Signing will not stop speech developing if the person is going to learn to speak. No augmentative or alternative means of communication can stop speech developing. An augmentative means of communication like signing, or the use of a communication aid can take the pressure off having to "talk" while still giving the person a way of communicating, of interacting and of becoming social.

The use of signing may be suggested for 4 main reasons:-

- to help the persons understanding
- to help the person communicate effectively if speech is slow to develop.
- as a way of supplementing speech attempts eg. if the person cannot say "drink" clearly but can accompany "drih" with the gesture for drinking.
- signing can be used as an alternative for someone with no speech.

Speech is the fastest, most efficient and most readily understood way that we have of communicating in our verbal society. Alternative or augmentative means of communication will not replace speech but they will relieve frustration and aid communication.

Everyday we use our hands to help us get our message across from a simple wave for goodbye to more complex mime when talking to people who speak a foreign language. We use body language, facial expression and gesture along with speech. We also use tone of voice and nonspeech sounds to aid our communication. Use of signing takes all these factors into consideration and adds some formalised hand-shapes and movements to the collection of non-verbal skills that we already have. About 60% of our social communication is communicated non-verbally.

Use of Signing

Most children learn to talk because they hear speech around them all the time. People will learn to use sign and gesture if they see it around them all the time. It is never too early or too late to start. That does not mean having to learn to sign every word that is spoken. There are a number of factors to keep in mind if signing or gestures are to be used as an augmentative means of communicating.

A commitment to the use of sign/gesture.

Starting to use any augmentative system is a long-term endeavour. Staff and caregivers need to learn the signs and gestures and learn how to use them effectively. People need to practise

signing and make sure they are giving good, clear models. It can take a long time to get over our inhibitions about using our hands for communication. And it can be very discouraging signing to someone who doesn't sign back. But remember, parents spend hours a day for a year or more talking and babbling to babies before a recognisable word is heard.

Children of deaf parents who see signing daily in their environment produce their first sign around 9 months. Children of hearing parents produce their first word around 1 year. Signing is physically more simple than speech.

If a person has an intellectual or learning disability he or she may learn at a slower pace. It is very important that these people see signs and gestures produced in a consistent and clear manner. It might seem like a long time before anything comes back. But, it is best to persevere and remind yourself that things take time, especially if the person is just starting to use signs and gestures as their means of communication. You need to keep on signing even when the person starts to sign.

Value and respect the person's means of communication. Give examples of the next step by expanding their sign attempts e.g. if they sign "toilet"– you say and sign "Yes – you go to the toilet".

Use a selected vocabulary.

The potential for using sign and gesture is unlimited so where do you start. It is too much to start at "A" in the dictionary and work through all the signs to "Z". One of the most important things about using signs is for everyone to be using the same signs and to be providing good clear models of the signs. Some vocabularies of words have been developed which allow for the graded teaching of objects and concepts. One such vocabulary is the Makaton vocabulary and another is the Interactive Vocabulary (Brownlie, 1998). Both offer a ready made set of words to use with gestures or signs and the bonus is that everyone has a rough idea of the words being used and taught.

One of the big problems in starting any program is that it doesn't stop when the person goes home or goes to work or goes to a respite unit on the weekend. Communication happens everywhere and all the time. Even if caregivers and staff only know 40 signs – but they are the same 40 signs seen in all places – the person is much more likely to learn and generalise those signs. It also means that the person's memory is not overloaded. Of course, it is possible to select a unique set of vocabulary items for each individual. However, it means careful liaison with all the significant people in the person's life to make sure that a consistent approach is maintained.

No matter what vocabulary is selected it helps to divide it in to manageable stages. Having approximately 30-40 items in a stage is a reasonable number for people to learn and to use effectively. It also means that a record of when new signs are introduced can be kept.

Formal and informal teaching.

Many of the early signs that are used are the same as natural gestures. There are approximately 160 natural gestures that we take for granted. These are signs or gestures like "me", "you",

"here", "there", "stop", "come", "yes", "no", "hello", and "good-bye". But remember, these were all learned at some stage. Think about how a baby learns to wave "Good-bye". At first, the mother gives total assistance and gradually reduces this to a nudge of the elbow or a verbal prompt like "Wave bye-bye". In just the same way, when we first introduce a new sign or teach a gesture we may have to physically assist in its production. This is the formal side of teaching where we may actually have to help the person to form the shape of the sign with their hands. Sometimes there will be some feature of the concept or the object that is present in the way the sign or gesture is produced. For instance, "drink" where a drinking motion is made with a "c-shape" hand, or "banana" – where "peeling" the index finger like a banana is mimed. And, sometimes, it is a matter of pairing the hand-shape and movement of the sign with the photo or picture of the object, or concept that it represents. The best time to teach signs is when they are being used, in their usual context.

The formal teaching needs to occur alongside the informal use of signs, gestures, facial expression and body language in everyday activities. That is, use of signing and gestures from getting up in the morning, getting dressed, having breakfast, going to school or day programs, washing, toileting, eating lunch, daily activities, going home, to going to bed at night. Communication occurs in all activities through the person's waking hours.

Use a key word approach

When we use signing and gesture, we are using it for 2 main reasons. Firstly, it is a way of teaching an alternative or augmentative form of communication. We all learn by example and learning to sign is no exception. Secondly, signing and gesture is often used with people who not only have a severe communication problem but also have an intellectual or learning disability. An intellectual disability will mean a delay in learning language and a difficulty with understanding various concepts. The world can be a very fast moving and confusing place for someone with difficulty learning language. Information needs to be presented slowly, simply and clearly and signing is a way to do this.

Caregivers and staff can help understanding by learning to sign and speak simultaneously but the difference is that only the key words are signed. This is a key word approach where the crux of the message is emphasised by speech and by the use of signs and gestures. For instance, if the sentence "Go and wash your hands and then eat your lunch" was said, the words to be highlighted would be go, "wash your hands" and "eat" all associated with natural gestures and then "lunch" – a more formal sign. At the same time, there would be accompanying facial expression, body language and a commanding tone of voice. The timing is implied in the order-stated – that is, wash hands first and then eat lunch. And, a lot more information is given because of the visual detail. A picture says a thousand words.

Another important factor is that the use of signing and speech helps to slow us down. People with intellectual disabilities can take a while to understand things. They need time to take in what is being said (and signed) and sometimes mull it over a bit before giving a reply. When we use signing and gesture and speech all together we tend to slow ourselves down a bit to make things

simpler. We don't use as many long and complex sentences because we don't know all the signs for them. We'll tend to use simpler and more repetitive structures. This is just what someone with comprehension problems needs to understand ideas and routines.

Directionality and Placement

Whenever we talk to people we use things other than just the words we say to get our message across. Some people and some cultures use a lot more facial expressions and gestures to give extra emphasis. Think of the difference between saying "I'm angry at you" with a pleasant smile and placid expression or with fists raised and a scowling face. The fists raised are sure to have more impact! It's another way of showing how visual cues can say a lot more than just the words. Try describing a spiral staircase without using your hands. It is almost impossible!

Directionality means giving visual cues to help someone know what to do or where to go. "Give me the ball" – means a lot more if you start with your arms outstretched and then draw them in to yourself because whoever is giving you the ball would already know that. You only have to gesture "give" and gesture "ball" and the message is obvious. If you were to say "Go to the toilet" it means a lot more if the gesture to "go" is made in the direction of the toilet. The gesture provides a lot of information. A similar visual tool is to use placement as well.

Placement is like pretending there is an invisible surface in front of you. If you want 2 things put next to each other you can create that idea by miming it on your invisible surface. "Put the ball and the box on the table". The whole sentence is spoken, the key words are signed and added emphasis is given by putting the objects just where you imagine they would be placed on your imaginary surface.

Using signing and gesture will benefit not just those people who need to see signs and gestures to learn to use as their form of communication. Using signs and gesture is just as useful for people who can't sign back but who are very young and language delayed, or who have an intellectual disability or even those who have English as a second language. The purpose is to encourage communication and participation.

Who benefits from key word sign and gesture

Unintentional communicators

- may benefit from the effect that sign and gesture has on simplifying the communication partner's speech
- may benefit from seeing gesture to help them understand their day

Intentional informal (Stage 4) communicators

- will benefit from seeing limited sign and gesture to help them understand their day
- may use a sign or gesture eg. point, wave hello or good-bye, indicate "more"

- may produce "signals" – these are not a real signs. A signal is used in specific situations eg. may touch chin when he or she sees food, may sign "toilet" not to mean "toilet" but as a response or request for anything

Intentional symbolic – basic (Stage 5) communicators

- will benefit from seeing sign and gesture to help them understand their day
- may use up to 5 signs functionally
- may use signs to indicate "finish", "more"

Intentional symbolic – established (Stage 6) communicators

- will benefit from seeing sign and gesture to help them understand their day
- will learn and use signs functionally (if in an environment where signing is used consistently and if physically able)
- will begin to put two signs or a sign and gesture together

References

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