



## Using Your Hands to Talk

**Karen Bloomberg (2013)**

Speech Pathologist, Scope Communication and Inclusion Resource Centre

For some children use of signs 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 alternative means of communication can stop speech developing. Speech is the fastest, most efficient and most readily understood way that we have of communicating in our very verbal society. Alternative or augmentative means of communication will not replace speech but they will relieve frustration and aid communication.

Alternative 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.

Use of signing may be suggested for 4 main reasons.

1. To aid comprehension in the child;
2. As an interim step if speech is slow to develop;
3. As a way of supplementing speech attempts eg. if the person cannot say “drink” clearly but can accompany “drih” with the gesture for drinking;
4. As an alternative to speech if no speech develops.

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. Signing takes all these factors into consideration and adds some formalised hand-shapes & movements to the collection of non-verbal skills that we already have. About 60% of our social communication is exchanged non-verbally.

## **Use of Signing**

Children learn to talk because they hear speech around them **all the time**. Children will learn to use sign and gesture if they see it around them all the time. It is never too early 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.

### **A commitment to the use of sign/gesture.**

Educators and caregivers need to learn the signs and gestures and learn how to use them effectively. Everyone needs to practise signing and make sure they are giving good, clear models. It can take some time to get over our inhibitions about using our hands for communication. 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. While children of hearing parents produce their first word around 1 year. Signing is physically more simple than speech.

If the person has an intellectual 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. Sometimes it seems a lot of hard work 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 primarily as their means of communication. You need to keep on signing.

Value and respect their means of communication.

Give examples of the next step by expanding their sign attempts

e.g. if the person signs **“more”**  
you say and sign Yes – **“you”** want **“more”**  
or  
if the person signs **“more”**  
you say and sign **“more”?**  
You want **“more food?”**  
Here you go - **“more food”**.

### **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. Some vocabularies of words have been developed which allow for the graded teaching of objects and concepts. In Australia there is the Australian Key Word Sign Vocabulary (2011). This offers a readymade set of words to use with gestures or signs and the bonus is that everyone has an idea of the words being taught.

Communication happens everywhere and all the time. Communication does **not** stop when the person goes home or goes to school or goes to a residential unit on the weekend. Even if caregivers and educators 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. It is possible to select a unique set of vocabulary items for each individual. Irrespective though,

it means careful liaison with all the significant people in the person's life to make sure that a consistent approach is maintained.

The Australian Key Word Sign vocabulary is based on an Interactive Vocabulary (Brownlie 1998), vocabulary frequency studies and expert opinion. It is the first evidence-based vocabulary designed for use with manual sign.

### **Use a key word approach**

We all learn by example and learning to sign is no exception. Sign and gesture is often used with people who not only have a severe communication difficulty but also have an intellectual 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 an intellectual disability. Information needs to be presented slowly, simply and clearly. Signing is a way to do this.

Caregivers and educators 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 example, the message is

“Go and wash your hands and then eat your lunch.”

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. It would be

“**Go**” and “**wash your hands**” (all natural gesture)

“**Eat**” your “**lunch**” (a natural gesture, and then the formal sign for lunch).

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.

A lot more information is given because of the visual detail. A picture says a thousand words. The caregiver has reduced the length of the messages, and it is now 2 messages, often allowing a pause in between for a response by the person.

Another important factor is that the use of sign and gesture with speech helps to slow us down. People with intellectual disabilities or very young children can take a while to understand things. They need time to take in what is being said (and signed) and sometimes think 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 all use simpler and more repetitive vocabulary and sentences. This is just what someone with comprehension problems needs to help 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 seem to 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. People who are deaf use a lot of body language and gesture and this includes what is called directionality and placement.

**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.

**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.

### **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;	Come;
You;	Yes;
Here;	No;
There;	Hello;
Stop;	Good-bye.

But remember, these natural gestures were all learned at some stage.

Think about how a baby learns to wave “Good-bye”. At first, the mother models the gesture, and waits for the baby to take his turn. The mother may give total assistance to “wave good-bye” 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 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.

### **In summary**

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 may be 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 have fun.

Brownlie, E. (1998) Teaching Key-word Sign and Gesture: Another Approach. Australian Communication Quarterly. p. 22 – 24.

Caithness, T., Brownlie, E. & Bloomberg, K. (2012) Getting started with Key Word Sign. University of Newcastle, Special Education Centre, Callaghan Drive, Newcastle NSW 2308.