

Everyday Use of Sign and Gesture

by Elizabeth Brownlie and Karen Bloomberg

1. CREATING A SIGN ENVIRONMENT:

For sign and gesture to be effective it needs to be used as consistently as possible by a variety of people in a range of situations. It is important for signs to be accurate and not be learned "second hand" from the child. This involves some degree of co-ordination. It may be necessary for one person to take on the role of co-ordinator.

Issues involved in co-ordination are-

- **Target the vocabulary** - Choosing the target vocabulary for the child. Learn the correct sign from an experienced user.
- **"Sign matching"** - this involves periodically checking that everyone is still using the same sign or gesture for the target vocabulary.
- **Support** - it may be difficult to maintain the motivation to use signing when children are not using a lot of signs themselves, and when it has been a while since you went to a workshop. Teachers and caregivers need regular sign updating and mutual support to maintain a consistent environment for the use of sign and gesture.
- **Resources** - a variety of teaching resources are commercially available from:

Makaton (Australia) - Special Education Centre - University of Newcastle - NSW - 2308

Telephone: 02 4921 6293 - Fax: 02 4921 6939 - International Fax: +61 2 4921 6939

Email: makaton@newcastle.edu.au

2. STRATEGIES FOR CAREGIVERS / TEACHERS:

The most important factor in the child's development of signing skill is the degree to which those within the child's environment use signing consistently and fluently. A child will not develop functional use of sign unless s/he sees signing used. Teachers and caregivers need to be able to use sign and gesture to comment on naturally occurring events and activities. The following strategies are useful in developing signing fluency:

Target specific situations - think of a familiar situation and write down the language used. Check to see whether the language is appropriate and whether the vocabulary for the key words can be signed. Pick a regularly occurring situation and focus on using sign and gesture all through that situation whenever it occurs for the coming week. When you feel comfortable in that situation, pick another one.

Target key signs to expand personal vocabulary - Prepare for a forthcoming event by listing potential vocabulary items and practising them.

Teach "significant others" in the child's environment - eg co-workers, other family members and friends.

Using signing in familiar songs, rhymes and stories - pick a new song or rhyme each week and sign it often.

Use Mime - use simple miming for concepts or objects when the correct sign is unknown or does not seem to make sense visually in that particular situation.

3. EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR THE CHILD:

When using or teaching sign and gesture it is important not to teach the child a series of labels i.e. just naming things. The goal is for the child to be given a basic means of communicating what they want or need to in a range of situations.

Targeting the vocabulary - involves planning the vocabulary the child may want or need to use in different situations.

Formal Teaching - involves the "significant others" in the child's life selecting the vocabulary of key signs for objects, actions and events. Techniques can incorporate the use of pictures, photos or structured play situations to teach the child the association between the activity or object and the sign or gesture being taught. This will initially involve teaching some naming words but once a link is established it is important to teach and use a whole range of language structures eg verbs, adjectives, question words, prepositions etc in everyday situations.

The best teaching strategies are modelling, moulding, sign shaping, expanding and sign modification.

- **Modelling** - involves providing the child with a clear and accurate sign or sequence of signs as a model for his or her sign attempt.
- **Moulding** - involves using a concrete object with the visual and or tactual features which are associated with the sign eg "drink" - moulding the child's hand around the shape of the cup and getting the child to maintain this shape when the cup is removed.
- **Sign Shaping** - involves improving the accuracy of the child's sign by gradually accepting and encouraging clearer approximations of the sign. There are three components of sign production: the movement involved (generally achieved first), the place of production and the handshape (usually hardest to achieve).
- **Expanding** - involves commenting on the child's speech attempt or gesture by clearly modelling the sign and adding additional information eg the child signs "car" - the caregiver says and signs "Yes, that's daddy's car" (words underlined are signed).
- **Sign Modification** - sometimes children have motor coordination problems that interfere with their ability to produce signs. Often children will adapt signs themselves or will create idiosyncratic gestures for things that are motivating to them. Their production of signs/gestures will inform us as to how a sign needs to be modified. The important factors here are that the child produces the modified sign consistently and that those in the child's environment are aware of the modification.
- **Informal Teaching** - involves using sign and gesture as a natural part of everyday activities.