

Read All About It: Linking the Baby Signs[®] Program and Literacy Development

Linda Acredolo, Ph.D. and Susan Goodwyn, Ph.D.
Co-founders, Baby Signs, Inc.



The buzz word is literacy.... All around us we hear about the importance of literacy. Parents are told to read, read, read to their children—whether it's cloth books, board books, or chapter books. With all this emphasis on literacy, it seems particularly important to review the connection with the Baby Signs[®] Program.

Although the phrase “learn to read” seems pretty straightforward, the truth is that learning to read requires the development of a whole host of subsidiary skills. For example, the “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001 defines reading as “a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following:

- the skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print
- the ability to decode unfamiliar words
- the ability to read fluently
- sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension
- the development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print
- the development and maintenance of a motivation to read



Along with appreciation of these and other sub-skills has come recognition that many of them, given a supportive environment, can begin developing well before the school years. And what makes an environment “supportive?” In addition to the obvious importance of parents reading to their children, it turns out that adding signing to the mix makes a significant contribution by helping jumpstart development in a number of critical reading-relevant domains. Some examples:

- **Verbal language skills:** Research shows that children who are strong in verbal language skills have an easier time learning to read. Reasons for this relationship include the following: Knowing lots of words helps children comprehend what is read, guess at words that are difficult to decode, explain problems they are having, and understand explanations and instructions teachers provide.

And how does the Baby Signs[®] program help? Our NIH-supported research showed that infants exposed to signs during infancy had better receptive and expressive

language vocabularies by the time they were two and three years old. In fact, the infants who learned to use signs as infants had verbal IQ scores that remained high well into the elementary school years.

- **Phonemic Awareness:** This term refers to recognition of the fact that words are comprised of separate sounds (or phonemes) -- that “cat,” for example, is made of “c” + “ah” + “t.” Because individual letters stand for individual sounds, it’s easy to see why knowing that words are composed of separate sounds is important to learning to read. And one of the best ways to help children develop this awareness is through the use of rhymes. When a child becomes familiar with a rhyme (e.g., Jack and *Jill* when up the *hill*), he or she learns that words can differ in how they begin but be the same in how they end. This realization, by definition, involves recognizing that words are made up of individual sounds. Voila! Phonemic awareness.

And how does the Baby Signs® Program help develop phonemic awareness? One of the most popular ways that parents teach signs is through rhymes and songs, like “Twinkle Twinkle,” “Itsy, Bitsy Spider,” and the many songs and rhymes created specifically for the Baby Signs® Program. These rhymes and the rhythm that we expose children to while we are singing and signing help children develop this crucial emergent literacy skill.

- **Familiarity with print and enjoyment of books:** Ask any Baby Signs® family and you are likely to hear that their children love books. The reason is because the ability to use signs enables babies to take an active role in book-reading. Instead of simply listening passively as their parents name things on the page, signers can provide the names themselves long before they would be able to do so with words. And the praise they receive in return makes them eager to keep exploring new books. In fact, parents even report that their toddlers sit down and read their books by signing to themselves!



So, the next time someone asks you how the Baby Signs® Program is related to literacy development, you will have good information to share. And, if you’re interested in learning more about early literacy, here are some good sources of additional information:

<http://www.famlit.org/Resources/ReadingTips/Parentsguide/Index.cfm>

http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/facts_overview.html

<http://www.getreadytoread.org/early.html>

<http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/reader/index.html>