

Helping Toddlers at a “Loss for Words”: The Baby Signs® Program and Social Development

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

Every parent wants his or her child to enjoy other people and to be well-liked. In Developmental Psychology, we include both these goals under the term “social development.” Although most parents are aware that innate differences in temperament contribute importantly to individual differences in social development, other significant factors are less obvious. One often-overlooked factor is language development. It turns out that, just as is true for adults, children who feel “tongue-tied” (in their case due to poorer verbal skills) in social situations tend to avoid them altogether rather than stand awkwardly in silence. Here’s how we know. In study after study, Dr. Mary Ann Evans from the University of Guelph in Canada has found that children as young as 36 months who are shy, also tend to be less facile with language than their more out-going peers. Because their language skills are no match for their more verbal playmates—or for the unfamiliar adults who try engaging them in conversation at the grocery store—they quickly learn to withdraw completely or to rely on their parents rather than risk being judged as inadequate or dumb.



What’s a parent to do? Of course, we here at the Baby Signs® Program have some excellent advice – at least for how to help prevent the problem in the first place. By encouraging their babies to use signs, parents can help them get a jumpstart on learning to talk, thereby increasing the chance that they will be comfortable talking with their peers as they move into the toddler and preschool years.

Another plus when it comes to peer interaction is the effect of signing on aggression. Because the ability to use signs enables children to get their needs met through calm communication, they are less likely to feel the frustration that so often fuels biting and hitting during the toddler period. In fact, being able to sign also benefits potential victims



of attacks by enabling them to sign an emphatic “Stop!” or a reminder to be “Gentle!” If all else fails, they at least have a way to explicitly ask for “help” from an adult and indicate where they “hurt.”

Finally, the sense of being effective in the world that signing allows increases the chance that children will develop self-confidence and self-esteem – two vital ingredients in the recipe for social success.



For all these reasons, the Baby Signs® encouraging babies to sign via the Baby Signs® Program is a great first step toward helping them be comfortable in their social worlds and avoid the feelings of self-consciousness, fear, and loneliness that all too frequently plague the “shy” child.

Visit www.babysigns.com for more information about Baby Signs® resources to help you and your baby enjoy all the benefits that signing can bring.



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