



TALKING WITH HANDS

GESTURES & INFANT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

INFORMATION BOOKLET

FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

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INTRODUCTION

EVERY DAY...



We use gestures in life to communicate with one another. Gestures help us to convey the underlying thoughts and emotions behind our verbal messages. For parents and caregivers, it is important to note that the key step to communication and language development happens before the child's first words and that lies in gesture development.

In this booklet, you will find information on how gestures can help both monolingual and bilingual language development in children (from 0-5 years), questions that you might have and tips to encourage gesture development.





QUESTIONS

The following section will help to answer questions that you might have for gesture development.

#1

When should parents expect the start of gesture use in their child?

Typically, a child will start using gestures between ages 8-12 months [1]. Below you can find some key milestones in gestures development [2]:



1. The earliest form of gestures used by children are known as 'showing off'

so as to receive the attention of an adult and to comment or laugh at what they are doing, infants will demonstrate certain behaviors repeatedly.

2. At approximately 10-11 months, children begin to use 'deictic gestures' - to point or bring attention to objects or events

Before they start talking, children use the following gestures: to **show** (by holding up an object) to get an adult to look at it, then **give** (by handing someone an object), and ultimately **point** to draw people's attention (towards a specific event, location, or object).



Milestones

Continued

3. During the period of 9-13 months, children begin using gestures to make requests (Ritualized Requests)

This is a more mature form of requesting as children use gestures to do so instead of throwing tantrums. These gestures consist of reaching toward the desired object with an 'opening and closing' hand grasping action, placing an adult's hand on an object, and tugging an adult's hand to the direction of the wanted item to get help.

4. Before they are able to say 25 words, a child has typically developed some "iconic" or representational

The representation of the word's meaning were demonstrated by these gestures, meaning that the child has started to think symbolically. Examples of iconic gestures include: Opening and closing their mouth may be used to represent a fish or flapping their arms as a representation of a bird. Certain cultures have some distinctive icon gestures, such as holding a finger over the lips to indicate 'shush' (be quiet) and shaking the head side to side to indicate dislike or refusal.

5. By approximately 18 months, children start to mix words and gestures together

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#2

Will encouraging children to gesture hinder their speech development?



NO

Absolutely not!

In fact, the use of gestures was proven by several studies that have shown that it can positively impact a child's language development.

● GESTURES 100% OK ●



1. Babies who display more gestures early on at 14 months will develop larger expressive vocabularies at age 3 and half years.

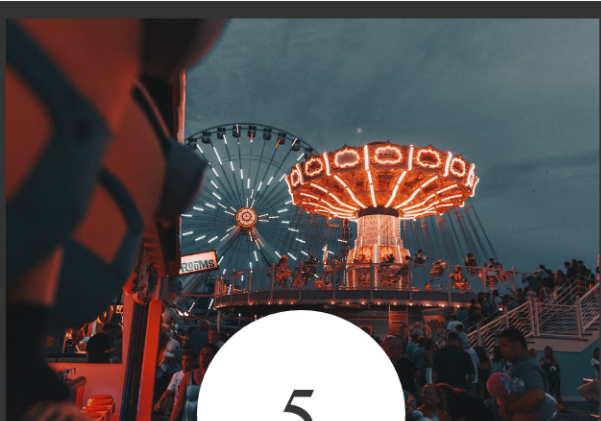


2. A child who shows or points to an object will most probably learn the word for that object within 3 months.

3. Children who displayed more gesture use as toddlers have higher scores in language tests as compared to those who did not.



4. The use of gestures in children predicts their narrative structure in speech later on [7].



5

Children who had early on frequently incorporate words and gestures together that mean different things (eg. says 'big' while pointing at a car) are most probable to use fairly elaborate sentences a few years later [6]



6

Children with delays in expressive language have gained greater linguistic knowledge such as increase in vocabulary size & grammatical structure when their parents use words and gestures simultaneously while interacting with the child.



Thus, by encouraging your child to learn gestures, their language abilities and overall communication development improves as well. Before children can express themselves verbally, gestures provide the child a way to convey their thoughts and thus offering an insight to their cognition.

Children also pick up new words faster when they use gesture as it prompts parents to identify the object that was pointed at. Judging from children's gestures, parents could respond to them verbally and thus providing the child with more language input that they could learn from.

For example, if your child points at a cup, you could respond by saying 'cup' repeatedly for a few times. Through repetition, the child will have higher chances of remembering the word.

#3

How can parents aid the child in using gestures?

Here are some tips for you [8]:



TIP #1

To use gestures to focus your child's attention

Read story books with vivid pictures with your child.

Imagine that you are reading a book and you want to teach your child a new word 'fox'. There could be many aspects of the book that could be distracting the child if you do not point toward the fox when you say it.

The child might think that the word 'fox' could be referring to the color of the fox or some other surrounding things in the picture.

Therefore, be sure to remember to gesture towards the object while simultaneously saying the word so that the scope narrows down on what the word might mean. This way, your child learns the word more effectively and reinforces the meaning strongly.





Use 'iconic' gestures that show the word's meaning

Showing the function or shape of an object is the best iconic gesture to help your child learn the meaning of the word.

For example, you can say "ball" while you hold your hands in a ball's shape or performing an action like throwing while saying "ball" so it connects with your child's mind that you are referring to the concept of "ball".



TIP #3

Acknowledge your child when they gesture

by mirroring the gesture and at the same time say the corresponding word that it shows. But don't stop there; continue talking and narrating things related to the word.

For example, if your child reaches towards a toy car, you can say something like:

*'Are you pointing to that car over there?
Do you want to play the car?
Look at how shiny that silver little car is!
Do you want to see how fast it can go? Oh no! The
car just hit the wall!
That's okay though, perhaps we will play with the
car again next time.'*


So, whenever your child gestures towards something, try to talk about it and say as many things you can about it as possible. Your child's language acquisition will speed up with the increased language input. Especially in Singapore, your child will most likely be bilingual.

To ensure that your child is learning both languages equally well, be sure to apply the same techniques mentioned above to the target language that you want your child to learn.



#4

What happens if my child does not gesture at all?



A lack of gesture use may suggest atypical development. There is research that indicates that even though children do not use deictic gestures such as pointing by 18 to 24 months are not at risk for a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, there still might be a chance that the child has it [9].

Thus, it is important for you to bring your child to see a doctor to get a diagnosis as early treatment can be very helpful for your child.



CONCLUSION

You don't really need to specifically set a time and place to teach your child to gesture. You can gesture whenever you're talking to your child and that will help with their communication skills.

There are just a few key notes to remember; the more your child gestures and the more you talk, your child's language acquisition will definitely speed up.

If you wish to look for more information and learn more about gestures, you can check out the resources section of this booklet and visit the following website:

<http://beforefirstwords.upf.edu/precursors-of-language/pointing/>



RESOURCES

- [1] Bates E. Language and context. Academic Press; New York: 1976.
- [2] Goldin-Meadow, S. (2015). Gesture as a window onto communicative abilities: Implications for diagnosis and intervention. *Perspectives on Language Learning and Education*, 22(2), 50–60. <http://doi.org/10.1044/lle22.2.50>
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- [8] Lowry, L. (2017). The Importance of Gestures. Retrieved October 10, 2017, from <http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles/The-Importance-of-Gestures.aspx>
- [9] Johnson, C. P., & Myers, S. M. (2007). Identification and evaluation of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics*, 120(5), 1183–1215.