

# Using Sign-Supported Speech with Children with Down Syndrome

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## A few words of background info

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- ❖ I have studied ASL, Deaf Studies, and ASL interpreting
- ❖ I have worked as a sign instructor for past 15 years, working with kids age 0-25, half w/ Down syndrome
- ❖ Many points in this presentation will apply to other situations, but focus today is specifically on kids with Down syndrome
- ❖ My information is primarily from first-hand experience (25 children altogether), backed up by research
- ❖ This approach assumes only a mild to moderate hearing loss

## What is sign-supported speech?

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- ❖ Use of grammatically correct spoken English (or other spoken language), augmented with use of signs
- ❖ Conceptually accurate ASL signs in English order
- ❖ Can be used with kids with enough hearing to learn grammar through spoken language
- ❖ Sign use can be flexible to the extent of the signer's knowledge; some ASL grammar can be used

## Some facets of Down syndrome

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- ❖ Cognitive/developmental delays and challenges
- ❖ Low muscle tone, shape of tongue and palate
- ❖ Speech delays and challenges
- ❖ Visual learning style, rather than auditory
- ❖ High incidence of hearing loss (sensorineural, or functional, due to ear anatomy and fluids)

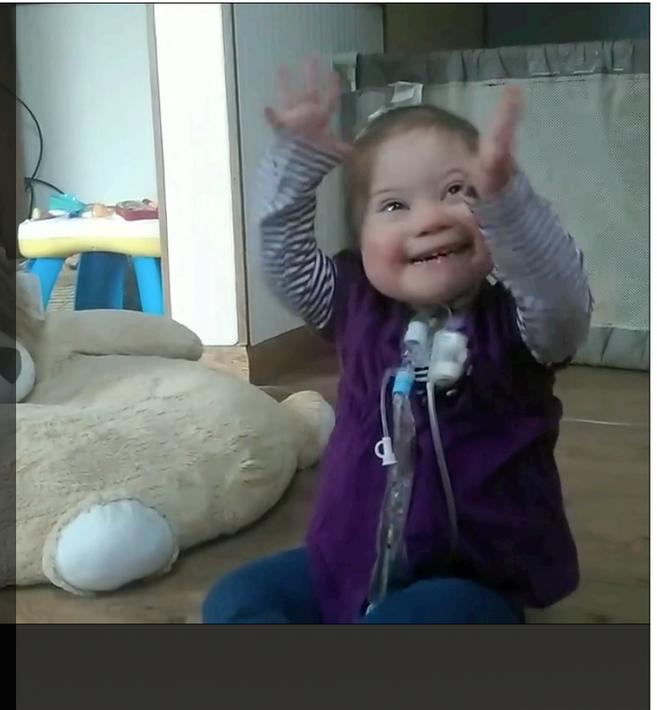
## Why use sign-supported speech with kids with Down syndrome?

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- ❖ Spoken language gives exposure to grammatically correct first language during critical early learning period
- ❖ Gives children a mode of expressive communication until they're able to speak, reducing frustration
- ❖ Visual language helps kids receptively, especially with new or complex information, or challenging situations
- ❖ Signs can clarify or augment auditory information
- ❖ By the time the child is able to speak, they've been communicating effectively for some time, making the task easier ("scaffolding")

## Kaya

Kaya's family began sign visits when she was 10 months old. Due to issues with her trachea, she was unable to use her voice at all until she was about 5. This video was taken when she was 28 months old, showing off some of her 24 signs with her sister.



## "Won't this impede spoken language development?"

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- ❖ Assuming no substantial hearing loss or other additional barrier, children with DS will be inclined to speak as soon as they are able to do so
- ❖ First spoken words are usually ones the child has already signed expressively
- ❖ Research shows that early use of sign language results in clearer speech at later ages (perhaps due to clarity of word separation and/or early ability to express thoughts)

## Strategies for teaching/learning/using sign-supported speech

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- ❖ Basis is parents' (and other caregivers') fluent use of spoken language (can be English or another language)
- ❖ Signs can be added as adults learn them
- ❖ Use mixture of conversational language and targeted language
- ❖ Focus first on needs of the child to request, comment, or refuse, and then on information adults need to convey

## Benjamin

Benjamin first encountered signing at age 4, and avidly embraced it, and was communicating at a 24-month-old level within 5 months. He has a hard time managing strong feelings, so at school we taught him the sign for “different” so he could communicate that he didn’t like what was happening and wanted something to change. He signed it to his mom, who hadn’t learned the sign yet, so she made this video and sent it to me.



## Respect for ASL/Deaf culture

- ❖ Importance of parents/school staff understanding differences between ASL and signed English
- ❖ Need to recognize that this system borrows signs from the language of Deaf people, but uses them in a different context
- ❖ Sign instructor should have knowledge of and respect for Deaf culture and history, as well as ASL linguistics

## Uses of sign support with older kids

- ❖ Teaching complicated/new concepts
- ❖ Clarifying/practicing grammatical rules (SEE)
- ❖ Help in learning/distinguishing sight words
- ❖ Fingerspelling to learn/remember spelling
- ❖ Silent/visual reminders for behavioral issues
- ❖ Tool for the child to clarify what they’re saying

## Jenna

Jenna started signing at 22 months, and used sign as her primary mode of communication until she started speaking at age 4. Then, for a few years, we focused on signing for grammar work, sight words, and spelling practice. In later elementary years, signing was used for instruction in math, science, and humanities vocabulary and concepts. Watch for:

- ❖ Use of signing to help organize thoughts and to moderate speaking tempo
- ❖ Use of SEE signs to differentiate pronouns
- ❖ Use of fingerspelling for infinitive “to”
- ❖ Use of ASL grammar for dog kisses



## Where do I find instruction?

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- ❖ Early Intervention, school district
- ❖ Hands & Voices: [handsandvoices.org](http://handsandvoices.org)
- ❖ American Society for Deaf Children: [deafchildren.org](http://deafchildren.org)
- ❖ NCHAM/EHDI National Technical Resource Ctr: [infanthearing.org](http://infanthearing.org)  
Sign It! ASL curriculum: [infanthearing.org/signit/index.php](http://infanthearing.org/signit/index.php)
- ❖ Signing Time: [signingtime.com](http://signingtime.com)
- ❖ my YouTube videos: [tinyurl.com/kmhsigning](http://tinyurl.com/kmhsigning)

## In conclusion...

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Of course, each family needs to determine what will work best for their child, but given the particular shared circumstances of children with Down syndrome, including the universal delay in speech, sign-supported speech can be a life-changing tool in the lives of these kids, who have much they wish to communicate.

When Jenna had just turned 2, her mom emailed me a list of the 29 signs she was now using and commented:

*Signing is her primary mode of communication and I can't even imagine where we all would be without access to this amazing way of "talking."*

## References and resources

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