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Many parents are teaching their babies to speak first with their hands

Experts tout the long-lasting benefits of early language skills

By CECELIA GOODNOW
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

At 11 months, Madeleine Campbell is about to say her first word, but her mom will believe it when she sees it.

Because that word, when it comes, will be in sign language -- a new parenting tool that is shaking its faddish connotation as parents and baby experts sing its praises.

"Sign language is not just for deaf kids anymore," said Seattle neonatologist Dr. Jeffrey Stolz, a spokesman on infant hearing for the Washington chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"What we see," he said, "is the preverbal or emerging-language kids find it's much easier to talk with their hands at first than their mouth."

Already, Madeleine's twin sister, Esmé, can make the signs for "milk," "more" and "all done" -- the basic currency of frustrated toddlerhood.

"Esmé is so eager she does the milk sign with both hands," said the twins' mother, Jane Schmidt Campbell, a former Starbucks employee who took a course after learning about baby sign language from a friend.

"It captivated my imagination," said her husband, Scott Campbell, an attorney whose repertoire includes more than a dozen signs.

Conceived as a way to reduce frustration among hearing toddlers who can't yet speak -- but have plenty to say -- baby signing has grown into a full-blown industry. Books, videos and classes have proliferated since the late 1990s, spurred by word-of-mouth reports of the benefits of this research-based communication.

But it took the hit movie "Meet the Fockers" to catapult baby signing from the trenches of parenthood to broad cultural awareness.

The film, No. 1 at the box office for several weeks, features an extended shtick involving "Little Jack" signing copiously -- and accurately, by all accounts -- to his doting grandpa, played by Robert De Niro.



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Jane Schmidt Campbell tries to get her twin daughters Esmé, left, and Madeleine to mimic her making the sign for "milk."

aids.

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On the Web

- www.sign2me.com -- Joseph Garcia's Sign With Your Baby learning kit and other materials. Click on "classes" to link to Nancy Hanauer and other local instructors.
- www.babysigns.com -- "Baby Signs" books and other products by Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn.
- www.mybabycantalk.com -- Baby video that combines entertainment and instruction for parents and toddlers.



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Jane Schmidt Campbell gets her daughter Esmé to sign "all done" while holding Esmé's twin, Madeleine, in their Mount Baker home on Tuesday. The girls are 11 months old.

"It's nice to see Hollywood finally catching on!" said Melissa "echo" Greenlee, whose Seattle business, Visually Speaking, teaches American Sign Language to hearing children of all ages.

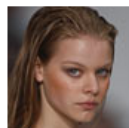
"I was very impressed with Little Jack and thought he did a great job, as did De Niro and (Ben) Stiller," reported Greenlee, who is deaf, via e-mail.

The film has generated a mini-windfall for companies that sell instructional

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"We're seeing an uptick since 'Meet the Fockers,'" said Vince Kiteley, director of sales and marketing for Seattle-based Northlight Communications.

Northlight markets one of the two major baby-signing methods, "Sign With Your Baby," created by longtime sign-language interpreter and researcher Joseph Garcia of Bellingham.

"Our phones are just going crazy," said Kathleen Waidhofer of Monterey, Calif., co-founder of My Baby Can Talk videos. "People will want to teach their baby to sign if they actually see a baby sign."

In a sense, that's how it all began. In 1982, researcher Linda Acredolo was fascinated, as any new mother would be, to watch her baby daughter's spontaneous attempts to communicate. But, as a psychology professor at the University of California-Davis, her interest was more than maternal.

"She began to make up signs of her own," Acredolo said. "I was a developmental psychologist, so I paid attention."

She later teamed with another California researcher, Susan Goodwyn, on two major studies funded by the National Institutes of Health. In 1996 they parlayed their research into a best-selling book, "Baby Signs," which has sold a half-million copies in the United States and been translated into 14 languages.

"We found out that most babies make up signs just on their own," Acredolo said. "Parents weren't encouraging it at all, because they thought it might slow down learning to talk."

The truth, they discovered, was just the opposite. And while parents still ask about possible verbal delays, the issue has been laid to rest among child-development professionals.

"I don't think anyone believes this delays oral speech," said Stolz, the Seattle physician.

In fact, in a follow-up study of second-graders, Acredolo and Goodwyn found that former baby-signers had a mean IQ of 114, compared to 102 for children in a control group, after matching for income, education and amount of vocalizing at 11 months.

New research shows that the more signs babies use, the higher their sixth-grade vocabulary scores on the Stanford Achievement Test, Acredolo said.

But she cautioned against pursuing a super-baby track.

"The reason to do signing with babies," she said, "is for the emotional benefits -- especially the reduction of frustration and allowing the baby to share his or her world with you. That enhances the attachment bond."

Despite the popularity of "Baby Signs," its initial reliance on made-up, baby-friendly gestures rankled advocates of American Sign Language, giving rise to researcher Garcia's ASL-based method, Sign With Your Baby. (In response to criticism, the revised edition of "Baby Signs" now includes many ASL signs.)

"Why reinvent the wheel?" reasons Nancy Hanauer, Seattle's best-known baby-sign instructor, who uses Garcia's approach in her business, Signing With Your Baby.

Besides, some parents hope to continue signing indefinitely in hopes their child will become fluent in ASL, the third-most common language in the United States, after English and Spanish.

"As a deaf woman who grew up mainstreamed (in) public schools, I was always searching for friends who I could communicate with," Greenlee said. "I often felt very alone and isolated among my hearing peers. So you ask me, what do I think about teaching young children 'made up' sign language? The very idea hurts me ..."

While some ASL signs require mature motor skills, Greenlee said babies can learn to approximate them, just as they approximate spoken words.

(On the other hand, even Garcia's ASL-based book invites parents to "invent a sign" if they can't find what they need in the book's vocabulary section.)

At any rate, it's true that baby signing can help form connections with the deaf community. Dani Hemmat of Bainbridge Island said her son Jackson, nearly 2, is so proficient in ASL he recently drew the attention of two deaf passersby in a park.

"He was signing 'more berries!' " Hemmat said. "They stopped and talked with him."

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When to begin signing is another issue. Parents who take classes when their babies are only 6 months old find that, at first, they're the ones doing all the talking. No problem -- that's the way it goes with spoken language, too. But the lag can be hard on parents.

"That's a couple of months too early," said Greenwood mom Abby Brockway, who persevered with daughter Sienna, 2, now a veteran signer. "Most of the people I took the class with got frustrated because (their babies) weren't signing back."

"It's pretty early -- I don't expect a lot," said Tish Iwaszuk of Port Orchard, who signs with her granddaughter, Madison, nearly 7 months old, and hopes to teach classes.

"I saw a definite reaction the other day," she added hopefully. "She watches me very closely when I do the signs. I think we're getting close."

Hemmat said it took four months for her son to begin signing after his first exposure at 6 months. Now he knows about 70 signs.

"People say he's so sweet and well-behaved, and I firmly believe it's because he signs," she said. "He's never thrown a tantrum, he's never freaked out."

At 18 months, Candace Kennedy's son, Billy, is even stringing signs together. "He tells me 'more bath,' " said the Lacey mom.

As parents get with the program, some couples begin signing to each other at parties and other social settings, where it's easy to flash simple messages like "Get me a drink?" across a crowded room.

No matter the age, mastery comes in baby steps. In an embarrassing faux pas, one of Hanauer's students, a child-care provider, found that close enough doesn't always cut it.

While the caregiver thought she was signing "Mommy and Daddy are at work," Hanauer said, "She actually signed, 'Mommy and Daddy are having sex.' "

Now, there's some baby talk the Fockers would appreciate.