



USING SIGNING TIME® WITH CHILDREN WHO HAVE DOWN SYNDROME



Written for Two Little Hands Productions by
Annie Young, M.Ed.
Colleen Brunetti, M.Ed.



USING SIGN LANGUAGE WITH CHILDREN WHO HAVE DOWN SYNDROME

The use of American Sign Language (ASL) can open up the world of communication for children who have Down syndrome because it supports the development of expressive language, functional communication, and social skills. In this guide, you will learn

- how Down syndrome may affect language development
- how signing supports language development
- easy tips for signing at home
- strategies for signing in the classroom

We'll also introduce you to some Signing Time resources that will make it fun and easy for you to bring the benefits of signing to your child at home or in the classroom.

ABOUT TRISOMY 21/DOWN SYNDROME



Down syndrome is a genetic disorder caused by having an extra copy of chromosome 21. Down syndrome occurs in every one out of 733 births. Individuals with Down syndrome generally have some impairment of cognitive ability and physical growth, weak muscle tone, and a hallmark set of facial characteristics. Health concerns for individuals with Down syndrome include: a higher risk for congenital heart defects, gastro esophageal reflux disease, recurrent ear infections, obstructive sleep apnea, and thyroid dysfunctions. With the support of modern medicine and emerging interventions, most people with Down syndrome can lead long healthy lives.



HOW DOES DOWN SYNDROME AFFECT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

While there are many areas of potential need that are targeted by early intervention services, supports in language development have proven to be particularly crucial for children with Down syndrome. This is because they tend to have more difficulty with language than any other developmental skill. In particular, children with Down syndrome often experience the following:

Speech delays

Children with Down syndrome often learn to talk later than typically developing children. In some cases, spoken language is severely impacted to the point where the child has limited vocabulary or a great deal of trouble with articulation. Other children are able to learn to express themselves verbally, but this process may take more time and intervention than it does for typically developing children.

Uneven language development

When it comes to language, it is important to understand that there is no single pattern of development. Some areas of language skills will be more advanced than others, and development across several areas can be uneven. This means that when it comes to

spoken language, children with Down syndrome tend to understand what they are hearing more than they can express what they want to say verbally. For example, your child may use vocabulary appropriate to a six-year-old but have the receptive language skills of an eight-year-old. Because of this split in ability, it is easy to underestimate what a child with Down syndrome knows and understands.

Articulation difficulties

Children with Down syndrome often have difficulty with articulation - their speech is often difficult to understand, and production of sound can be inconsistent. They may struggle with the proper phonological sounds and often have some level of dysfluency (stuttering).

Hearing loss

In addition to challenges with expressive language, an estimated 60–90% of children with Down syndrome

have some degree of hearing loss, primarily due to fluid in the ears. Because this fluid can shift, the hearing loss is not always constant. However, it does have a significant impact on the child, perhaps making it difficult at times to hear instructions in the classroom or important social interactions amongst their peers.





WHAT IS SIGNING TIME?

Signing Time is a family of products (DVDs, Music CDs, books, and flashcards) that teach American Sign Language (ASL) vocabulary. Signing Time products are created for children from infancy through age 8, but appeal to all ages and abilities. Signing Time DVDs feature children and adults who model each sign, original music, real-life scenes, and animated segments. The combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic teaching results in an effective, multi-sensory approach to learning. Each DVD in Series 1 teaches approximately 25-30 signs.

At the time of this publication, there are 34 DVDs available for purchase. The co-creator and host of Signing Time is Rachel Coleman, who is a mother to two girls: Leah, who is deaf, and Lucy, who has cerebral palsy and spina bifida. Rachel and her husband Aaron began signing with Leah when she was diagnosed as profoundly deaf at 14 months old.

Prior to learning that Leah was deaf, Rachel was a singer and songwriter. She has personally written all the songs in the Signing Time series and her fascinating life story has been featured in numerous national publications and media programs, including NBC's TODAY show.

Signing Time appeared on public television stations from 2006-2009, for which Rachel received an Emmy® nomination for the category entitled "Outstanding Performer in a Children's Series." Coleman co-created the series with her sister, Emilie Brown, who is the mother of two boys, Alex, and Zachary. (Cousins Alex and Leah are both featured in Signing Time along with Rachel.)

As the host of Signing Time, Rachel teaches each sign and then uses the signs in an original song, featuring video clips of infants, toddlers, young children and parents who sign the targeted words in a real-life context. The added visual component of the printed vocabulary word, along with an illustration, increases retention and comprehension of the new word and its sign. Verbal vocabulary often increases as ASL vocabulary increases.



The key mission of Signing Time is to make basic sign language simple and engaging, not only for the child, but for everyone in that child's life.



HOW CAN SIGNING SUPPORT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

Communication and language are an important part of everyday life. Think of all your child may have to do in a day: express wants and needs, socialize with peers, greet adults, work in groups in the classroom, relay information, understand instruction . . . the list goes on. Typically developing children usually do not need to concentrate on learning these functional language skills as they often come naturally. However, for children with Down syndrome, assistance and direct instruction may need to be provided in order to ensure that they have the skills necessary to navigate a big wide world of communication.

Using signs with children who have Down syndrome:

- makes communication possible
 - or easier
- capitalizes on learning strengths
- allows more time for processing
- supports memory
- reduces frustration

Signing makes communication possible – or easier

Some children with Down syndrome may never learn to speak clearly – or at all. ASL signs open up a world of communication which allows them to express wants, needs, interests and preferences. For verbal children with articulation difficulties, signs help them clarify their spoken words.

Signing capitalizes on learning strengths

Children with Down syndrome are visual learners. Since sign language is a very visual form of communication, it naturally capitalizes on this learning strength. When verbal instructions and social interactions are supported by signs, it helps them better understand what is being communicated and allows them to better express what they already know, but may lack the actual vocabulary for.

Signing allows more time for processing

Children with Down syndrome often need more time to process verbal information. With signs, you can actually pause the hand shape and hold it in front of the child, or repeat the motion to give a child extra time needed to process the message.

Signing supports memory

Children with Down syndrome have difficulty remembering, categorizing, storing, and retrieving information in the same way as other children. Think of it like storing information in a bucket instead of a file cabinet. When learning is supported with signing, children are engaging visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning modalities, thus making it easier for them to remember what they learned. In addition, because signing is fun and engaging, it's easier for parents and

teachers to provide practice activities that involve repetition. This allows the information that is being taught to be brought to the top of “the bucket” repeatedly and in an orderly fashion, thus supporting the memory and retrieval process.

Signing reduces frustration

A child who struggles to communicate often exhibits frustration in the form of tantrums, outbursts, and stubbornness. A child who is given a communication system that works for them, such as signing, often has a marked reduction in frustration-related behaviors and an increase in positive interactions. When children are free from frustration, they are more likely to engage in learning important language skills.



SIGNING AT HOME: TIPS FOR PARENTS

Start simple. Begin with basic words your child uses every-day such as MILK, EAT, DRINK, MORE, SLEEP, etc.

Say the word as you sign it. Children will retain the information better when they see and hear the word.

Ask everyone to use signing with your child. Signing Time DVDs can help everyone who interacts with your child learn to sign. Encourage your library to carry them.

Invite friends and family over for Signing Time! Enjoy the natural playfulness and fun that signing can provide. Visit www.SigningTime.com for fun activities.

Encourage and praise your child for any communication attempts after you have responded to her signs.

Be consistent. Use the same signs in the same location. Mealtimes are a great place to start as you get to practice at least three or four times a day.

Provide “wait time” for processing, just as you do with spoken language. Allow 5-10 seconds for your child to respond to a request. This will give him the extra confidence he may need to continue to sign with you.

Be patient. It takes time for children to get used to a system of communication. They may learn at a slower rate or

Recommended Resources for Parents

Children learn best when they have a high interest in the subject matter. Signing Time DVDs, books and flashcards provide fun activities, songs, and stories that keep your child interested and engaged. In addition, Signing Time products provide the repetition and practice opportunities needed to help children learn to sign on their own.

Functional Skills

It is very important to teach functional skills to your child to encourage independence in daily living. Offering signs that have to do with personal likes, dislikes, food, and simple tasks around the house offer your child the opportunity to take initiative and express personal interests in meaningful ways in everyday situations. This increased sense of independence may give your child a sense of pride and self-worth. Sometimes knowing “I did it myself!” is priceless.

Signing Time DVDs that support functional skills include:

- My Day DVD (Series 1, Vol. 10)
- Helping Out Around the House (Series 2, Vol. 10)

Socialization

Children who have Down syndrome often enjoy social interaction and play a great deal. Introducing signs targeted to social interaction will help build vocabulary and facilitate interaction with peers and family.

Signing Time DVDs that support social skills include:

- Playtime Signs DVD (Series 1, Vol. 2)
- Family, Feelings & Fun DVD (Series 1, Vol. 4)

Other Products that Support Language and Visual Learning

- Everyday Signs DVD (Series 1, Vol. 3)
- ABC Signs (Series 1, Vol. 5)
- My Favorite Things DVD (Series 1, Vol. 6)

not show you a sign for a few weeks. But with repetition and consistency, they will get it.



It is okay to provide hand-over-hand assistance as long as you guide rather than force. Make it fun and natural.

Do not worry when your child's sign is not perfect. As long as you know what they are trying to communicate and you are consistently modeling the correct form, the signs will improve over time.

If other people involved in your child's education and care are new to signing, **share this guide** with them and point out the Tips for Educators that follow.

SIGNING AT SCHOOL: TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

When children with Down syndrome learn to sign, they easily engage in meaningful social interaction and cooperative learning in the special education classroom and in mainstream settings. If you are working with children with Down syndrome, use these strategies to help you start using signs across your curriculum:

Use signs with your whole class during academic instruction.

Signing benefits all children, so sign with everyone in your class (see Teacher Resources box above). This supports students with Down syndrome in their learning and provides benefits for children with other needs. When their typically-developing peers are also signing, it encourages children who have Down syndrome to feel "normal" and part of the group. When children are able to communicate and understand each other, they realize how similar they really are.

Start out slow. Research has shown that the effective signing teacher does not need to be fluent or even know many more signs than their students. Learn right along with them! Choose a few basic signs, like signs for classroom directions or signs that encourage independence (such as choosing a meal/snack or a favorite activity).

Use the sign and the word together. Remember that most children, and especially children with Down syndrome, are visual learners. Always pair a visual sign with the verbal cue. By doing so, you will encourage speech.

Use signs to focus attention.

Since children with Down syndrome can also be more easily distracted than a typically developing child, you can break up longer lessons with short signing activities that reinforce the key vocabulary/concepts of the lesson. Signs are also useful for transition times because they require a student to stop what they are doing in order to sign back. This helps children redirect their attention to the upcoming activity.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

The Signing Time Classroom Edition has everything preschool and elementary teachers need to fully integrate signing into existing curriculum. It features 8 DVDs and 16 units of themed lessons with original songs, poems, games, and activities to help teach and reinforce ASL signs. It includes tips for using signs in during transition times, for classroom management, and enhancing literacy. Lessons and activities meet national standards and are useful in both mainstream and special education settings.

Visit <http://www.signingtime.com/classroom-edition/> to download free samples from the Signing Time Classroom Edition including Outline, Teacher Tips, Introducing Signs, Games and Activities, and Flashcards.

Free Guides for Teachers

- Sign Language in the Classroom Using Signing Time
<http://www.signingtime.com/classroom-edition>
- Enhancing Literacy Instruction using Signing Time
<http://www.signingtime.com/early-literacy>



SUCCESS STORIES

Signing with an Adopted Child

We just recently adopted a little girl with Down syndrome from a Spanish speaking country in June of this year. Someone gave us the recently re-done version with the first 3 videos which were released right before we flew out of country to complete the paperwork. I added it to my “things to pack” list and I am so thankful I did! Our daughter was 4.5 years old at the time of the adoption and had a good comprehension level but was not speaking. We played the first video over and over and as we spoke different words in Spanish we would add the sign in during daily activities. Within just a few weeks she had mastered many signs which allowed her to communicate her needs and desires with us. At this present time we have only had her home for five weeks and with us 13 weeks. She is now able to sign over 42 words and is making up her own signs for words she hasn’t learned yet.

I have to close with two situations to show you where we have come in such a short time! We were eating pizza together and she wanted more. She signed, “MORE CHEESE BREAD PLEASE.” Great improvisation, don’t you think? A few weeks after we returned

“Within just a few weeks she had mastered many signs which allowed her to communicate her needs and desires with us.”

Anna Wallis, Milton, FL



home I had started playing the videos twice, once in Spanish and then a second time in English. That is when she spoke her first word (other than Mama and Dada). She signed and said APPLE! Now when its time to put the videos in she does a happy dance and sings out “Apple Apple!” The next aha moment was just a few days ago she signed “HOT!” when I placed her in the tub. I was so glad to know that even though the water felt just fine to me that it made her feel uncomfortable.

Words cannot express what these videos have done for our daughter and family. Now upon meeting people she shows them many signs and they are shocked. We’ve had so many people comment, “WOW! She is so smart!” It really brings joy to my heart that she finally has a voice! I am sad that she had to wait this long but want to thank you for being part of the “team”.

Anna Wallis, Milton, FL

Authors’ note: We received an update from Anna at the time of publication telling us that her daughter now knows 71 signs!



Signing in a Mainstream Classroom

When we received the diagnosis of Down syndrome after my son Robert was born we were inundated with information. One piece of advice that was given to us was to accept that he would not hit his milestones along with other children, but he would get there eventually on his own time. At 6 months of age he started at his Early Intervention Center, and they stressed the importance of sign language. We are so grateful that we started this right away. He was able to use signs before many of the other kids were talking. He could share with us when he wanted to “eat”, “drink”, or if he needed “more”. By signing, we avoided many meltdowns that can occur when a child is not being understood.

“We are so grateful that we started right away. He was able to use signs before many of the other kids were talking”

Teri Voorhes, Pacifica, CA



Around the time Robert turned four, the first Signing Time DVDs were released. Before then, we only had one VHS tape that was geared towards adults. From the first moment of putting on “My First Signs”, Robert was hooked. He was immediately engaged by the music, colorful backgrounds and, most importantly, Leah and Alex. Here were kids, using sign language! I also enjoyed it as a mom. Kids’ music can get a little silly, but Rachel has a knack for writing music that is enjoyable to parents.

Robert is now 12 and still using a combination of sign language, limited verbal words and a communication device to get his point across. He has spent his school years in a public school in a general education setting. We have been so fortunate to be at a school where they welcomed us in and let us teach his classmates sign language, starting in Kindergarten. Signing Time products have been a huge hit with the students. Robert loves to show his friends “Silly Pizza Song”. His friends love learning sign language along with him using the DVDs.

Signing Time has made the process of learning a second language fun for all! I’m so glad this was introduced to us early on.

Teri Voorhes, Pacifica, CA



Signing with Adolescents

I've taught many ages as a teacher for children with Down syndrome. My most challenging times have been working with preteens with Down syndrome. This was a time when hormones and body changes were happening. My students, who functioned at a preschool level, could not understand the emotions and changes that came with their 12 year old bodies. I used this as an opportunity for teaching. We learned all the feelings signs and I encouraged them to sign their feelings when they refused to work, or hit someone, or even when we were having fun. They were able to acknowledge their emotions, felt that I valued what they were going through and show empathy when others had negative feelings as well. The results were amazing. My students were more compliant and willing to accept themselves for the beautiful children we saw them to be.

Annie Young, Santa Ana, CA

“The results were amazing. My students were more compliant and willing to accept themselves for the beautiful children we saw them to be.”

Annie Young, Santa Ana, CA



Down Syndrome Daily Support Bundle
SigningTime.com/down-syndrome

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Annie Young, M.Ed. holds a Masters Degree in Education as well as three teaching credentials, which includes a Special Education credential. She is currently a transition teacher in Fullerton, CA for students with severe disabilities including those with Down syndrome, autism, and orthopedic impairment. Annie has been an educator for 10+ years for children with special needs from infants to high school. Annie is an Advanced Signing Time Instructor with the Signing Time Academy.

Colleen Brunetti, M.Ed. holds an undergraduate degree in Special Education and a Masters Degree in Reading. She is currently an instructor for the Community College of Vermont where she teaches education courses. Her past experience with children includes those with Down syndrome, autism spectrum, and learning disabilities. She has also worked as a mentor to teachers on designing and implementing literacy curriculum. Colleen is an Advanced Signing Time Instructor with the Signing Time Academy.