

NEW THERAPY FOR AUTISM GIVES KIDS A SIGN OF HOPE

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Daniel, a 5-year-old with autism, can string together only a few words at a time. So when he really needs to get something off his chest, he hits his fist into the palm of his other hand, the sign that he needs help.

Researchers began studying in the 1970s whether infants and pre-verbal toddlers could be taught to communicate using sign language. This spurred the development of a "baby" sign language, with the accompanying books and videos for parents. But speech therapists and child psychologists see a new application for sign language: helping children with autism express their emotions.

"A lot of my kids have trouble articulating or getting in touch with any kind of feeling state, and I thought if there was a way for them to communicate it would improve their relationship with their parents," said Esther Hess, a clinical child psychologist in West Hollywood who's been working with kids with autism for 17 years.

She began to incorporate an adapted form of American Sign Language into her practice about a year ago after meeting Etel Leit, a language specialist and founder of SignShine, which runs signing workshops for babies and toddlers.

"The kids caught on to it. Autism is a spectrum disorder 7/8 they are not retarded."

Autism is just one in a group of brain

development disorders that afflicts one in every 150 American children, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It's generally diagnosed by age 3 and lasts a lifetime, substantially impairing social interaction and communication skills.

Leit explained that sight is the strongest sense in children with autism. Sign language allows them to rely on this strength while reducing their reliance on weaker audio-verbal senses.

Just as they do with the deaf, practitioners working with autistic youngsters always speak aloud as they sign to promote speech, the ultimate goal.

But with deaf kids, signing is all about filling in the lack of

verbal communication. Among children with autism, using signs is about emotional communication, a challenge for those afflicted with the spectrum disorder.

Hess described her work with a young boy with autism who'd been hitting his twin sister and had been thrown out of three nursery schools. With speech underscoring her use of baby sign language, Hess asked the boy to describe his emotional state.

``He stopped and looked at me and said `I'm squeaky,'" Hess recalled. ``Then we had a place to go.

``Children do negative behaviors because their body doesn't feel good. So signing permits them to have a validation and feel they are understood."

Special schools for autistic children, like The Help Group, with locations in Sherman Oaks and Culver City, and the Academy for the Advancement of Children with Autism in Northridge, have long used standard American Sign Language in their curriculum and as part of their treatment therapy.

But Hess and Leit, who are working on a book on the subject, have adapted standard sign language to make it easier to use for special needs kids.

``The signs are all based on standard American Sign Language, but they simplify the grammar and sentence structure to the basic words," Leit said.

For instance she uses signs for fun, frustrated, worried and happy.

Demand for special services for children with autism is skyrocketing.

Leslie Michelle, administrator at the Academy for the Advancement of Children with Autism, said there are 80 children on the school's waiting list.

Hess is opening a new, larger office close to the 10-405 Freeway interchange so she can see more kids coming from the South Bay, San Fernando Valley and Ventura.

``There is an explosion of children coming in for services," she said.

Dr. Julie Gerberding, the CDC director, has said that it is still unclear whether there is a true increase in autism or there is simply a greater awareness of the disorder.

Several factors may be responsible for an increase in autism spectrum

disorders -- among them, genetics, the growing number of older parents, the widespread use of childhood vaccinations and environmental hazards. But there's no definitive agreement on any of these within the medical research community.

Autism also can be difficult to diagnose, in part because no parent wants to consider there could be something wrong with their child.

``We were in denial for a long time," said Michelle, the academy administrator and mother of a 17-year-old son.

Although the boy was eventually diagnosed with autism when he was 13, she said she knew for at least a decade that something wasn't right.

``He did not develop language. He didn't talk until he was 3, he didn't walk until very late," she said. ``It got worse as time went on."

Zhenya King, the mother of 5-year-old Daniel, said her son appeared to be developing normally, then started losing his speech capability around the age of 2 1/2.

She thought he just needed to learn to socialize and tried to enroll him in preschool. The school rejected him because he was nonverbal, so she went to a pediatrician, hoping a doctor's note would get her son into a different school.

The doctor took one look at Daniel and told her the boy had autism.

``He interacted with toys, but not with kids," King said. ``He was in his own world."

Hess has been working since last summer with Daniel, who was easily upset by noise and confusion, couldn't tolerate getting dirty and was always washing his hands.

During a recent session, Daniel knelt on the floor, working with his brother to create a Christmas tree out of a wire hanger and tinsel. He also painted and pasted glitter on paper.

He didn't say much, but he used the ``help" sign and gave Hess and Leit a high-five when he was done.

Hess is encouraged by every little step of progress in her young patient.

``When he started therapy," she said, ``he couldn't even touch the glitter."

AUTISM WARNING SIGNS

The CDC and autism experts encourage parents to carefully monitor their child's development and to be alert for potential symptoms of autism. These include:

Losing speech or other skills

Problems relating or a disinterest in others

Avoiding eye contact or physical contact; wanting to be alone

Repeating actions, words or phrases over and over again

Having trouble adapting to changes in routine

Having unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel or sound

-- Source: National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Caption: Photo:

(1 -- 2 -- color) Psychologist Esther Hess and language specialist Etel Leit use a special form of sign language with Daniel King, 5, of Los Angeles who is autistic. In an effort to get autistic children to express their emotions, Leit and Hess have adapted standard American Sign Language into a form that is easier for autistic children to use.

(3 -- 4 -- color) Etel Leit, above and at right with child psychologist Esther Hess, runs signing workshops for babies and toddlers and helped Hess adapt signing into her work with autistic children, including Daniel King, 5, of Los Angeles.

David Crane/Staff Photographer

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